

Balance with Grace

A monthly newsletter by Grace Durfee, personal coach

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What a difference a good night's sleep makes! It's much easier to feel balanced when I wake up refreshed and in good spirits. I find that enough hours of sound sleep fortify me with the resilience to meet whatever the day offers. When I haven't slept well, I'm apt to be cranky and impatient. My energy lags and it's difficult to get through the afternoon without a nap. Although I stick to herbal tea, when I'm sleep deprived, I can understand how "hi-test" coffee and tea drinkers rely on a boost from a few cups of their favorite brew.

As a light sleeper, I find it can be a challenge to always sleep well. In the warmer months when we sleep with the windows wide open, the birds make a ruckus at 4:30 a.m. or 5 a.m., waking me up long before my ideal eight hours of sleep. Sometimes I get back to sleep, but not always. Travel can also throw off my sleep schedule. It often takes me longer to fall asleep in a strange bed and noises I'm not accustomed to wake me up in the night.

If you seen TV commercials lately, you probably know that there are pills pharmaceutical companies would love you to take whenever you have trouble sleeping. But before asking your doctor for a prescription, I encourage you to explore other ways to get a sound sleep.

Create a soothing sleep environment

Choose calming colors and patterns when you decorate your bedroom. Minimize clutter to create a tranquil setting. Have something beautiful and uplifting—a lovely painting or a photo of your beloved--be the last thing you see before you shut your eyes.

Make a cozy bed

Everyone has their personal preference when it comes to firmness of mattress, type of pillow, thread count of sheets and weight of blankets. If you travel or are an overnight guest in someone's home, pay attention to how you sleep with different bedding. As you age your preferences may change. If you wake up feeling stiff, a softer mattress, or a feather bed or egg crate mattress pad may help.

Keep cool

I like fresh, cool air when I sleep and prefer to sleep with open windows in the warm months and a cracked window during the winter. Especially if you suffer from occasional hot flashes, sleeping in a room that's too warm may interrupt your sleep. A hot bath or a hot tub can be very relaxing before bed, but make sure you've given yourself plenty of time to cool down before going to bed.

Block out distractions

Ear plugs, a white noise machine, room darkening blinds, and a satin eye mask can all prevent light and noise from jarring your senses and disturbing your slumber.

Create boundaries around your bed

Don't worry, I'm not suggesting that you create a moat around your bed, but I do recommend keeping the TV out of the bedroom. Sleep experts recommend that you reserve your bed for sleeping and making love so that there's a conditioned (think Pavlov) relaxation response when you get into bed. You also don't want to associate your bed with tossing and turning, so if you wake up and can't get back to sleep after twenty minutes or so, get up and go into another room. You can read something (choose something dull, not an exciting novel) or fix some hot milk or chamomile tea.

Practice good sleep hygiene

Go to bed and get up at the same times. If you've ever experienced jet lag, you know what it's like to have your circadian rhythms disrupted. Do your best to stick to a regular bedtime, even on weekends or on vacation.

Treat the source, not the symptom

Identify what's interfering with a sound sleep and seek a relief for the root cause. Whether it pain, anxiety, over-stimulation, or your partner's snoring is the culprit, it's better to handle the issue than to only treat your sleeplessness.

Avoid stimulants and alcohol

Shy away from anything that's over stimulating or upsetting before bedtime. Caffeine, a heavy or spicy meal, vigorous exercise, and violent images may kick your body into a higher gear at a time when you want to downshift. Although alcohol does have a sedative effect, beware of the fallacy of the nightcap. After drinking alcohol, many people wake up a few hours after going to sleep because they are thirsty (alcohol dehydrates), they have to go to the bathroom, or because the sugar in the alcohol makes their blood sugar plummet.

Relax

Look for ways to wind down before retiring. Once you get into bed, there are numerous ways to promote relaxation. Sex is a wonderful sedative. You can do progressive relaxation exercises in which you relax one part of your body at a time. You can listen to soothing music or follow a guided relaxation or visualization. There are tonal recordings that help you access different brainwave states. I've found the Silva Ultramind System www.silvaultramind.com very effective for reaching the alpha, meditative state. Tom Kenyon's www.soundstrue.com ushers you into a low delta, deeply relaxed state.

Turn to a natural sleep aid when needed

If you occasionally need help falling asleep, there are a number of natural remedies that can help. Our whole family has found Bach Flower Rescue Sleep remedy to be effective. I've fallen asleep a few times during the final relaxation in yoga class after receiving a spritz from a lavender aromatherapy spray. The one time my back went out, my chiropractor gave me some tablets containing the herb valerian. Please be aware that

some herbs and supplements may interfere with medications or be contraindicated. Ask your doctor, a naturopath, or herbalist for recommendations.

Recognize the power of a nap

There are times that a nap can be lifesaving. One time my husband caught himself nodding off behind the wheel. After a short nap at the next rest stop he was then alert enough to drive himself and our then infant son safely home. A brief nap—twenty minutes is ideal--can help you deal with a sleep deficit. It can recharge you and make the rest of the day more productive and enjoyable. But naps can sometimes sabotage a good night's sleep. A rule of cognitive-behavioral therapy for insomnia, or CBT-I, is to stay awake, restricting sleep during the day so you can stay asleep at night. Discover how your body responds, and make smart choices about napping.

May these approaches help you easily fall and stay asleep so that you catch all the zzz's you need. If you have other tips for getting a good night's sleep, please email them to me and I'll share them in reader feedback section of the next issue.

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Resources:

www.cbtforinsomnia.com--learn more about short-term cognitive-behavioral therapy for insomnia

www.centers.sleepfoundation.org--for general information and to find a sleep center near you

www.womentowomen.com--take a short assessment to see if your sleep problems are hormonally related

www.silvaultramind.com--offers several fr*ee downloads of relaxations and alpha sound recordings

www.bachquiz.com Learn more about Bach flower remedies and find your personal remedy

Yoga Journal's August 2007 "Sweet Slumber" article has some great Ayurvedic approaches for sleeplessness.

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- Two 90-minute tele-seminars
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- A tool-kit of proven sales and marketing techniques

Kickoff Seminars

Tuesdays, July 24 and 31, 2007

12:30-2:00 PM Eastern, 9:30-11:00 PM PT

Group Sessions

Four Tuesdays, August 7-28th

12:30-1:15 PM Eastern, 9:30-10:15 AM PT

AND

One Thursday, August 30th

9:30-10:15 AM PT (12:30-1:15 PM Eastern, 5:30-6:15 BST)