

Insomnia

Why you can't sleep and what works

Sleep is a drive you can build and an alarm you can quiet.

HOW SLEEP WORKS

Think of a car. The gas is your sleep drive, the only thing that produces sleep. The brake is hyperarousal, and in insomnia your brain treats being awake as the threat.

Every treatment that works adds gas or releases the brake. No human has a broken sleep system.

HOW A BAD WEEK BECOMES A BAD YEAR

A stress stretch leads to fixes that backfire: napping, early bed, lying in, canceling plans. Dread follows ("I'm screwed for tomorrow"), and your bed becomes a wide-awake struggle.

Chronic insomnia runs on what you think, feel and do about not sleeping.

TREATMENT HAS THREE PARTS, AND MOST PEOPLE DO BEST WITH ALL THREE

Habits

A fixed wake time every day, the phone out of the bedroom, and morning light.

CBT-I

The first-line treatment. Learn it from a therapist, a workbook, an app, or piece by piece.

Medication

A bridge while habits take hold, not a permanent fix. Benzodiazepines and Z-drugs bring memory problems, dependence and tolerance.

RETRAIN THE BED

- Use the bed for sleep and sex only
- Get in only when sleepy, with heavy eyelids
- If awake for 15 to 30 minutes, get up, dim the lights and do something calm and boring
- Go back only when sleepy

AIM FOR SILVER

When you wake at night, gold is sleep. Silver is calm, quiet wakefulness: eyes closed, thoughts drifting. No medal is the struggle: tossing, checking the clock, doing sleep math, trying to force it.

Aim for silver and you are more likely to fall asleep. Struggling in bed is the one wrong answer.

Habits that help. Check one or two to start with.

- ☐ Get up at the same time every day, after bad nights too
- ☐ Charge your phone outside the bedroom
- ☐ Turn the clock face away
- ☐ Get morning light within the first hour
- ☐ Finish exercise at least 3 hours before bed

- ☐ Keep caffeine to the morning
- ☐ Keep the room cool, dark and comfortable
- ☐ Plan a calm wind-down with no screens
- ☐ After a bad night, do the day you planned
- ☐ Don't rely on alcohol or cannabis to sleep

RULE OUT OTHER CAUSES

- Sleep apnea: loud snoring, gasping, tired despite enough hours
- Restless legs or other sleep disorders (sleephealthscreen.com)
- A late body clock or shift work
- Depression: waking around 3 am for several nights
- Medicines, alcohol, cannabis and caffeine

BOOKS AND RESOURCES

The Sleep Book by Guy Meadows. ACT-based; the medal system comes from it.

How to Break Up with Your Phone by Catherine Price.

Free CBT-I apps: CBT-i Coach and Insomnia Coach.

MEDICATION, BRIEFLY

If a medicine is part of the plan, ask about low-dose doxepin or trazodone. Benzodiazepines and Z-drugs like zolpidem are the least favored. Melatonin helps a late body clock more than ordinary insomnia. Pair any pill with the habits above.

Source. Adapted from Dr. Malzberg's Insomnia Basics guide and Psychofarm podcast conversations on sleep medications with Dr. Fu.

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