

Tips for a good night's sleep: Focus on good times, breathe deeply, get a foot massage

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Credit: Vera Kratochvil/public domain

Tony Reed believes in the power of sleep. He cherishes his nightly eight

hours; hardly ever has trouble achieving them.

"It's rare, very rare, when I have problems falling asleep," says Reed, 61, a Dallas business manager, professional speaker and marathon runner.

But when that does happen, he's ready.

"What I do is to focus on the most peaceful time I ever had in my life," he says. "For me, that was being on a camping trip for a week, just sleeping in tents and just really enjoying everything. We were only 15 or 16, had our whole lives ahead of us, and we would just go on hikes at night and talk and solve all the problems of the world."

Daniel Taylor, a [sleep](#) researcher and professor at the University of North Texas, identifies Reed's technique as "imagery."

"It's essentially relaxation," says Taylor, whose latest research project, conducted with fellow UNT psychologist Kimberly Kelly, will be on the effect sleep deprivation has on the way nurses respond to the flu vaccine.

"People use imagery any number of ways," Taylor says. "You hear them saying, 'Imagine yourself on the beach. Smell the smells.' It gets you out of the here and now, away from whatever things might be stressing you out."

Who knows what those might be for any one person? But in a world where 30 percent of the population has what's called transient - or short-term - [insomnia](#), apparently stressors abound. So do promising ways of dealing with them when they raise their annoying hands in the middle of the night.

We've all heard the basic tips: Restrict caffeine past early afternoon; limit bedroom activities to sleep and sex; turn off electronics an hour

before bed; don't eat a heavy meal or exercise within a few hours of turning out the lights; keep the same sleep hours, even on weekends.

Beyond those, Taylor says, "There are a lot of things you can do."

But, he warns, "a lot of people will just try them for a couple of nights and when they don't work, they quit. That's like me going to the gym and getting upset when all of a sudden I'm not buff."

"You've had years of insomnia. A couple of nights won't get rid of it."

Some of the techniques include imagery, like Reed uses; yoga methods such as deep breathing and focusing, meditation, distraction from what's on your mind; and massage.

First, though, a caveat: If you have chronic insomnia - that is, if it's been going on at least three nights a week for at least three months and disturbing your waking hours - you might want to seek professional help.

"We call some people treatment-resistant," Taylor says. "It's kind of like antibiotic-resistant; it takes a specialist to implement the interventions."

If your insomnia is sporadic, you might start with what these North Texans recommend. For Reed, who considers sleep "highly underrated," imagery is his go-to. He becomes absorbed in that camping trip, and remembers how deeply he and his buddies - two Steves, a Jerome and a Larry - slept in the wilderness.

He still has the journal, and sometimes he'll pull it out and read it. When he wants to sleep, though, the memory of that trip is plenty. "How ambitious we were," he says, "just being full of life."

Reed believes that what happens in life falls into three categories:

Something you can control. Something you can influence. Something you can observe.

"That makes it easier for me to sleep," he says, "because I'm not stressing over anything I can't control."

That's a good trick to realize, Taylor says. "A lot of people go to bed, wake up, have a to-do list and try to problem-solve. Nighttime isn't the time to do that. Some people can say, 'There's nothing I can do about it now,' but some can't."

Advises sound sleeper Jim Manning, who lives in Grapevine: "Focus on your breathing instead of your thoughts."

Sleep has hardly eluded Manning since his days as a student at Southern Methodist University. That's when he took yoga for a physical education requirement. He began practicing the corpse pose - traditionally the resting pose done at the end of class - to help him relax outside of class, then for falling asleep at night. He'd focus on his breathing as he tensed and then relaxed his muscles, one section of his body at a time, from his toes to his head.

"That was a lot of years ago," says Manning, 61. "But over time, I did it and it became a natural thing. I fall asleep and I stay asleep."

This progressive muscle relaxation, as it is called, has been used as an insomnia treatment for many years, Taylor says. "I think PMR is always a good addition," he says. "It's good for anxiety, good for your health. I think yoga is a good addition for all wellness purposes."

For Manning, like for most of us, there have been stressful times in his life when he had to consciously put his mind to falling asleep. If you can't sleep, he says, you're thinking too much.

"It's kind of natural to think of things that happened during the day, and the brain begins to process it and files it away into long-term memory storage," Manning says. "Sometimes you get caught up and think about it and worry about it, and that keeps you from falling asleep properly."

But, he says, let the brain do its work. If you do that and focus on your breathing, "you don't pay attention to those random thoughts coming through."

Robin Plotkin, 47, sleeps well now. But, says the Dallas registered dietitian, who "relishes" sleep, "There have been times in my life when sleep evaded me and proved to be so damaging to every aspect of my life. Probably the largest came after my mother died."

That was 18 years ago. She had no trouble falling asleep, but then she'd awaken at 2 a.m., at 2:08, at 2:09, at 2:10. Her anxiety increased when she began anticipating those wee-hours' wake-ups. Then she'd lie in bed focusing on her insomnia and thinking, "If I fall asleep now, I'll still get two-and-a-half hours." Or ... "If I fall asleep now, I'll still get an hour."

"It's the mind games you play with yourself," she says. "This went on for a couple of months. I could see how it affected my everyday life in terms of mood, energy level. Even my eating habits changed."

People told her to take a warm bath. To put lavender on her pillow. To make her room dark. They'd say, "Don't think about it," which, she says, "is impossible."

Eventually, she took control of her health, got into a routine and practiced more self-care. One way she continues is by having regular foot massages.

"I've always loved massage, but thought of it as a treat, not something

that was more of a wellness opportunity," says Plotkin. "I look at it now as almost a mandatory part of my health care."

She goes to Joy Foot in Far North Dallas, usually after dinner or for a girls' night out with friends.

"My first foot, I decompress," Plotkin says. "With the second, I take a good nap." Once she gets home, "I just feel like I melt into my bed. When it's a stressful day or I have a lot going on or things aren't going the right way, that's what I do. I've never really thought about it this in-depth, but it's true.

"I'm sure some people don't equate massage to sleep," she says, "but it definitely helps me."

Here are some tips from experts on how to get a good night's sleep.

Find a portfolio of ways to help you relax. "It's what works for you," says UNT sleep researcher Daniel Taylor. "Some nights one thing won't work and another will. If your thing distracts you from whatever else is stressing you out, great."

Use the bedroom as a stimulus for sleep. No reading in bed. No talking to your spouse about other things, Taylor says. "The linkage between the bedroom and sleep gets broken by all the other things people are doing in the bedroom."

Change your mind about sleep. Develop realistic beliefs, he says. If you don't get eight hours, maybe your body doesn't need eight hours.

Meditate. Research published in JAMA Internal Medicine found middle-age and older adults who practiced mindful meditation showed less insomnia, depression and fatigue. How to do it? Focus on a positive

word or phrase. When your mind drifts (which it probably will), take a deep breath and bring it back.

Practice deep breathing throughout the day. Then when it's bedtime, you know how to take those deep diaphragmatic breaths. "It takes practice to get good at it," Taylor says. "The idea has two factors: Trying to reduce ongoing muscular tension, and it's a distraction technique. You're focusing on this rather than the thoughts going on."

This can be as simple, says yoga instructor Debbi Levy-Rothschild, as making your inhale longer than your exhale. For instance, inhale to the count of six; exhale to the count of four.

Relax your body, one section at a time. "Get heavy," Levy-Rothschild says. "Start at the crown of the head and begin to review all the body parts as they sink deeper into the mattress. Be sure to roll the tongue in the mouth a bit; believe it or not, you can keep body tension in your lips, jaw and even your tongue."

Think of sleep as a gift to yourself. Say this out loud, she suggests: "It is time for me to quiet the mind and allow my body the gift of sleep so that I can be refreshed to do my best tomorrow." Turn your palms upward, she says, to help you remember to receive.

Bore yourself. Shawna Seed of Dallas recites state capitals or thinks of "a famous person for every letter of the alphabet, that sort of thing. If I'm not asleep in 20 minutes or so, I get up and read a book."

If you can't sleep, don't panic. "People have weird thoughts about sleep: 'If I don't sleep, I won't be able to do my job and my boss will get mad and I'll lose my job,'" Taylor says. "Those things don't help you fall asleep." It's the cumulative effects of not being able to sleep that can affect your health. Often, he says, "insomnia isn't every night."

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