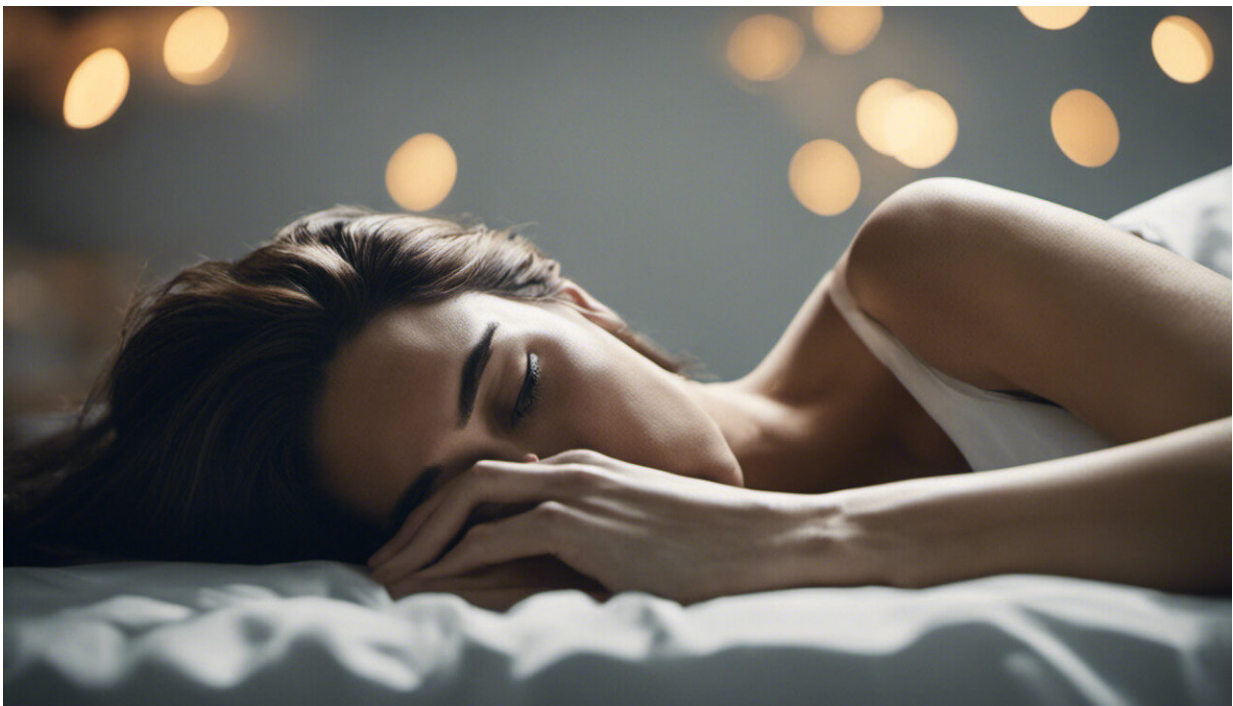


What's insomnia like for most people who can't sleep? You'd never know from the movies

October 11 2023, by Aaron Schokman and Nick Glozier



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Hollywood appears fascinated by sleep's impact on the mind and body. Blockbuster movies featuring someone living with insomnia include "[Sleepless in Seattle](#)" (1993), "[Fight Club](#)" (1999) and "[Insomnia](#)" (2002).

But how well do these and other portrayals compare with what it's really like to live with insomnia?

As we'll see, most movies tend to either minimize or exaggerate symptoms. Insomnia is rarely depicted as a treatable illness. And these portrayals have implications for the estimated [1 in 3](#) of us with at least one insomnia symptom.

Back in the real world

Insomnia is a common [sleep disorder](#) where a person struggles to fall asleep, stay asleep, or wakes up too early—despite having adequate opportunity for sleep.

[Around 5%](#) of adults experience significant insomnia to the degree that it causes distress or impairs daily life.

It's a common misconception that insomnia is only a night-time issue. [Insomnia](#) can impact your ability to stay awake and alert during the day. It can also affect your [mental health](#).

At work, you might be more prone to accidents, more forgetful, or make poorer decisions. At home, you might be irritable or short with your friends and family.

So what is it like living with insomnia? Apart from the effects of poor sleep quality, many people experience [anxiety or dread](#) about the night ahead from the moment they wake up. From early in the day, people plan how they can improve their sleep that night.

[A review](#) found people living with insomnia felt their sleep concerns were often trivialized or misunderstood by health-care professionals, and stigmatized by others.

Movies can minimize symptoms

Nicholas Galitzine's character in the recent romcom "[Red, White and Royal Blue](#)" (2023) has insomnia. We're briefly told he struggles to fall asleep at night. However, we never see any meaningful impact on his life or depiction of the difficulty living with insomnia entails.

That said, minimizing the impact of insomnia can have benefits. It shows insomnia is an invisible illness, doesn't have obvious visual symptoms and anyone can have it.

But this can perpetuate the expectation someone with insomnia should be able to function unencumbered. Or it can fuel the misconception having insomnia may be beneficial, as in "[Insomnia Is Good for You](#)" (1957).

Movies can also exaggerate symptoms

But most Hollywood portrayals of insomnia tend to depict the most extreme cases. These usually feature insomnia as a symptom of another condition rather than a disorder itself, as is commonly experienced.

These movies tend to be psychological thrillers. Here, insomnia is often used as an enigma to keep the audience guessing about which events are real or figments of a character's imagination.

Take "[The Machinist](#)" (2004), for example. The main character is emaciated, ostracized and plagued by paranoia, hallucinations and delusions. It's only towards the end of the movie we learn his insomnia may be the result of a [psychiatric disorder](#), such as [post-traumatic stress disorder](#).

Hollywood's focus on extreme cases of insomnia is a recurring pattern (for instance, "[Fight Club](#)" 1999, "[Lucid](#)" 2005).

It's understandable why Hollywood latches onto these extreme portrayals—to entertain us. Yet these portrayals of insomnia as something more severe or threatening, like psychosis, can increase anxiety or stigma among people living with insomnia.

While it's true other [medical conditions](#) including mental illnesses can lead to insomnia, insomnia often exists on its own. Insomnia is often caused by more mundane things like too much stress, lifestyle and habits, or longer daylight hours at [higher latitudes](#) (such as in "[Insomnia](#)", 2002).

Something these exaggerated portrayals do well is highlight the impact sleep deprivation can have on safety, albeit extremely dramatized. Regardless of profession, [not getting enough sleep](#) at night can substantially impact cognitive function, increasing the chance of making a mistake.

Movies rarely depict treatment

It is rare to see insomnia depicted as a health condition requiring medical care. Very few characters struggling with insomnia seek or receive help for it.

An exception is the narrator in "[Fight Club](#)." But he has to pretend to have other illnesses to receive therapy, again suggesting insomnia is not a legitimate condition.

Why does accurate representation matter?

Many people only learn about the symptoms and impact of sleep disorders through pop culture and film. These portrayals can affect how others think about these disorders and can impact how people living with these disorders think about themselves.

Uniform and stereotypical portrayals of insomnia can also impact people's [likelihood of seeking help](#).

Most of these films show young or middle-aged men experiencing insomnia. Yet women are [more likely](#) to have insomnia than men. Insomnia is also [more common](#) in [older adults](#), people with a lower socioeconomic background and those living alone. People at higher risk of developing insomnia might not recognize their risk or symptoms if their experience doesn't match what they've seen.

We can do better

While the reality of living with insomnia may not be particularly cinematic, filmmakers can surely do better than using it as a convenient plot point.

There are a number of main characters living with different health conditions across pop culture. For instance, the movie "[Manchester by the Sea](#)" (2016) features someone with [prolonged grief disorder](#) and the TV series "[Atypical](#)" (2017-2021) features someone's experience living with autism.

But if you're looking for an accurate portrayal of insomnia, Hollywood still has some way to go. It's about time [insomnia](#) is depicted in a way that accurately reflects people's experiences.

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