

SLEEP EASY

words SUE WHITE photography PHOTOLIBRARY

SUE WHITE FINDS THERE ARE PLENTY OF WAYS TO BEAT THE TRIALS OF INSOMNIA

Asking others about their experiences of sleep deprivation typically invokes such weighty language that even the listener begins feeling a little woozy. "Life becomes heavier and harder," says Sydneysider Michele McDonald. "I can see why they use it as a torture method."

With up to 50 per cent of Australian adults claiming they don't get the sleep they would like, McDonald's recent battle with sleeplessness will be a familiar story to many people.

"I just stayed in bed and kept tossing and turning, but my mind was racing," she recalls. "I knew I had to get up early the next morning so that made me try even harder to fall asleep. I refused to get up and simply lay there for hours."

While a late-night coffee got the blame for McDonald's one-off incident, what happens when sleep doesn't come easily night after night? And how can we fix it?

Most of us know from experience that lack of sleep affects our ability to function well the following day. But we may not know how serious the repercussions can be. After 17 hours

without sleep, our ability to focus, concentrate and co-ordinate is the same as having a 0.05 per cent blood alcohol reading.

Getting enough rest is also unquestionably green. Lack of sleep was proven to have played a role in disasters including the ExxonValdez oil spill and Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident. According to the experts, however, we're all individuals in terms of the amount of sleep we need.

"For most people there's an optimum range of sleep they need to function normally," says Professor Ron Grunstein from the Woolcock Institute in Sydney, one of Australia's leading sleep research organisations. "But there are also people genetically determined to function on a little bit less and others who need more than that to feel refreshed."

When it comes to sleep, the Goldilocks principle reigns: aim for an amount that is "just right". "On average, it probably works out to 8.2 hours per night," Grunstein says.

For Professor Leon Lack of Adelaide's Flinders University, author of *Insomnia: How to Sleep Easy* (ACP Publishing), it's important not to be unrealistic about what constitutes a good night of Zs.

"We think a long period of seven to eight hours of concentrated sleep is the goal," he says. "But every 90 minutes we come to a light sleep. When it happens later in the night it is usually associated with awakening and that's normal for all of us."

So, while waking briefly throughout the night is OK, for the 5-10 per cent of Australians affected by insomnia (an ongoing lack of sleep), getting a good night's sleep can seem impossible.

"The causes of insomnia vary greatly," Lack says. "Almost anything that gets us alert, stressed or upset will generally reduce sleep."

But our typical response — tossing, turning and simply hoping we'll fall asleep — trains our brain in the wrong direction. "Bed should be associated with sleep, not frustration," he adds. "Insomniacs, feeling fatigued and exhausted, say, 'Well, at least I'm lying down,' but it means the bed environment becomes associated with agitation and anxiety, not sleep."

Lack's research with insomnia has shown a better approach. "The most effective tactic is to restrict time in bed to a bit less than you would like for a few weeks," he observes, adding that if insomniacs say they are only getting five hours' sleep they should only spend five hours in bed (rather than, say, nine hours in bed — five hours sleeping and four hours tossing and turning).

"After a while, the conditioned response will change, so five hours in bed will equal five hours' sleep," he explains. He suggests keeping this up for two to three weeks before expanding the time in bed by half-hour increments. Eventually, the insomnia should subside.

While Eastern and Western thought often differs on solutions for our wellbeing, in the case of sleep there is quite a lot of overlap. Katie Manitsas, yoga teacher and author of *Spiritual Survival and the City* (Hardie Grant Publishing), agrees we can do a lot to help cure insomnia, noting that traditionally people slept when it was dark and rose with the sun.

"But we've moved away from that to accommodate our busy lives," she says. "One of the problems with

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INHALE counting silently to 4.

EXHALE counting silently to 4, 6 or 8.

REPEAT for up to five minutes and feel a sense of calm pervade.

STILL CAN'T RELAX? Yoga nidra (guided relaxation) CDs are available from www.adyar.com.au.



HIGH LEVELS OF ANXIETY AFFECT SLEEP QUALITY. MANITSAS BELIEVES MANY OF US HAVE LOST THE ABILITY TO RELAX. THE WHOLE OF YOGA PRACTICE IS ABOUT WORKING WITH YOUR MENTAL STATES AND MOVING THEM TOWARDS MORE POSITIVE AND PEACEFUL MENTAL STATES.

insomnia is that it leads to an erratic routine, as you never know what time you're going fall asleep."

Her study of Ayurveda, the Indian medicine model, has taught her that bringing back routine is a vital first step. "Ayurveda is about rituals that set up associations in your mind," she explains. "These become very powerful the more you do them." Finding positive patterns to support sleep, such as making a chamomile tea or reading a light-hearted book before bed, can help.

"But definitely never do things like work on a laptop or watch television

to help you sleep, as these will simply activate the logical side of your brain and stop you from winding down properly," she adds.

Agreeing with the researchers that high levels of anxiety affect sleep quality, Manitsas believes many of us have lost the ability to relax. "The whole of yoga practice is about working with your mental states and moving them towards more positive and peaceful mental states," she says.

Meditation, journal writing or calming breathing techniques just before bed (see box) are all tools she recommends, as are practices that

help us relax at other times.

"Yoga nidra (yogic 'sleep') is an ancient tradition that has been popularised and well researched," she says. "It's not actually about dealing with insomnia as you're not supposed to sleep, but it trains us to be able to relax deeply. Through guided relaxation, we come to a state that is physically akin to sleep, but where we remain aware.

"There are a lot of people in our culture who don't actually relax. To train your body to do so is a huge step towards training yourself to enjoy proper sleep." ☐