

6 Sleep *mantras* for the insomniacs

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I have been suffering from insomnia for almost two decades now. While in college, I remember sleeping like a log. Even if an earthquake shook the house or the sound of tsunami, or a storm pounded my hostel room all night, nothing, absolutely nothing could wake me up. Only my alarm, which sounded more like the Big Ben clock, and which I deliberately kept close to the door, so I had to get out of bed to shut it up, could wake me. And if I slept through for an extra one minute, there would be banging outside my door, as other girls nearby would wake up. While some girls were happy to listen to my alarm as then they did not worry about being late for class themselves and mostly relied on me, others hated me for owning that thunderous piece of equipment.

But then was then, many years ago. It makes me feel it never happened to me, that never in my life I ever had sound sleep. Since I was let loose into the world, leaving those dreamy days behind, my sleep took wings. To where, I am still trying to locate.

At one point in my life when I had deadlines to meet for the publications I was working for or the TV station where I produced the first morning news, I organized my thoughts during the time I could not sleep and so by the time I reached the news station, I had half the program in my head. Most of my writing ideas I get at night when I can't sleep, even today. Therefore, I mostly sleep with a little diary besides me as otherwise, the idea vanishes by morning. This article too, I wrote last night when I couldn't sleep – in my head though, not on my computer.

As I took up a job, got married and had kids, I turned into an insomniac. I couldn't sleep. No matter what I did, I just couldn't. True, when the children were little and we moved to Canada from India, the thought of not having a nanny and a housemaid to help with the kids and housework, was the biggest shock of my life, and kept me awake. Never, since my children were born, I have had to take care of two little ones by myself. I always had extra help either a nanny or my mother-in-law or my own mom. Just little things like having to wake up and get the children ready for school, make them their breakfast, snacks, drop them to school, come home to get lunch ready, laundry, cleaning house, making the bed etc etc..kept me awake. Yes, I admit, that was the time I was stressed, had anxiety

issues and always looked forward to a day off. I prayed for just that extra day in my life when I could curl up on the couch and not worry about little things in life, which if not taken care of, had the tendency of becoming enormous tasks.

But not anymore. I am a free bird now. Both children finished college, are working and I don't have the stress of waking them up and making their breakfast or any meal for that matter. After thirty years of cooking, my family has realized that they don't like my cooking. I am not good at it. They prefer to order in from any restaurant than eat a meal cooked by me. Really! I ask. "Which restaurant has a cook with thirty years of experience?" Maybe instead of doing a Ph.D in Forensic Science, which I did in 3 years, in 30 years, I could have done 10 Post Doctorates in cooking! Cooking for toddlers, cooking for babies, trying to fill up teenagers tummies, cooking for diabetics, baking for diabetics, cooking for the elderly, cooking for the toothless, two week packaged food for the hostlers or two week diabetic packaged food for the husband! This is one of my biggest regrets in life – wasting an opportunity of earning a couple of post-Doctorates!

Pre—pandemic when I had friends over, they would relish my delicacies, making it a point to carry doggy bags too, which I would gladly distribute. For I don't want my labour of love to stink in the fridge. But I am happy about it. Takes the stress off me because I continue to cook healthy meals for myself anyways. Not averse to sharing with anyone who cares.

So life is easy. With all the time I save from not cooking for ungrateful people, I took to my childhood hobby of oil painting and finished and published my first book, something that has been on my mind for 15 years – 1971: A War Story. The fact that I owed something to those families of 1971 India Pakistan Prisoners of War, with who I had become friends with as I had been writing about their problems for a long time, played on my mind like a movie. After moving to Canada, I lost touch with them and was guilty about it. I decided to pen their pain. A few months after I published the book, my sleep was better. I was able to fall asleep faster than I did before publishing the book and thought, maybe I have resolved my insomnia. It was the guilt that was plaguing me.

But now, I am back to where I started from. No stress, no worries and working from home, with no extra stress of missing the train in the morning, thanks to the pandemic, my insomnia is back. Every person or doctor I talked to suggested I was

too stressed; I suffered from anxiety and depression or did not have good sleeping habits etc. Not true. I am more relaxed than ever now. Common suggestions from family and friends came like stop drinking tea or coffee late in the evening, read before going to bed, create sleep ambience in your bedroom – shut off lights, computers, TV or any other equipment that displayed those tiny lil blue, green or red lights blah!blah!blah. I tried everything, even taking sleeping pills, but nothing worked.

Eventually, I designed my own sleep solution after trying out a few common suggestions received from family, friends and doctors. Though I am no sleep expert, but for more than 20 years, I have tried various tricks of the trade that has helped me sleep better. And twenty years is a long time! Boy! Makes me feel so old!

I am sharing a few of my tips, which have worked for me. Out of the six tricks below, sometimes just one trick works, sometimes more than one and at times I don't need any of these. Of course sleep depends on a variety of personal factors, they are too boring to be listed here and can be googled, but how you deal with your situation, is a mere personal factor.

1. **Meditation:** This one you would have heard nth times that mediation immediately makes you drowsy. In a yoga class, I once attended, mediation would be the last *asna* – lie down on your back, palms facing up, eyes closed and follow the instructor. While I would hear my neighbours snoring away, nothing happened to my state till I discovered my own method.

So on those insomniac nights, I lie in bed on my left side (I can never sleep on my back) and put one finger in the center of my forehead. Or if I have access to a sticky *bindi* (a colorful dot which basically signifies a married woman in Hindu culture but more used as fashion statement these days), I stick it right in the center of my forehead, in between the eyebrows and breathe with my focus there. Try it, pretty sure, this trick will work for a lot of you.

2. **Chanting:** When I say chanting, I don't mean to chant like the monks and wake up the whole house! They say it is auspicious to chant the *gayatri*

manta 108 times. Try to focus on the center of your forehead and chant this *mantra*. Since this mantra relaxes the mind, chances are you are asleep before you reach 108th. Or you can even create your own chant or a poem.

3. **Pillow Talk**: This is something my grandmother taught me when I would visit her during summer vacations. Her *mantra* was to talk to your pillow, whisper about your day – whether good or bad – or you were angry at someone but could not talk back and still were fuming inside. Just take it out on the pillow. It helps to relieve stress. (*Be careful not to be too loud for if you are talking about your husband or wife, he or she is just a snore away! You don't want more stress*).
4. **Affirmations**: There are ample articles and evidence that affirmations make you a better person. And these are what you believe in, have trust and confidence at yourself to accomplish tasks you never thought you could. At this point, you can use all the tricks above – lie down in a meditative pose, keep your finger on the center of your forehead and chant your affirmations to your pillow. You can also rhyme words and sing in your head. Eventually, you will start believing in them. But remember, no negative thoughts.
5. Yet another trick you can try is when doing one or all of the above, roll your eyes inside your head. They say, that is how the army men are trained to sleep when in rough conditions.
6. **Massage**: The latest I learnt from my mother is to massage the soles of my feet with oil or cream before going to bed for at least 3 minutes. There are as many as 200,000 nerve endings per sole and they are connected to various organs of your body – eyes, kidneys, sciatica etc. By massaging your feet, you are relaxing them after a hard day's work. I remember my grandfather used to get his feet massaged every day before he went to bed. Though I never asked, now I know as this trick has worked wonders for me.

There are other options like reverse counting or counting sheep. That trick stresses me out as I get paranoid, when I am closing in and still wide awake.

Or you can do all of the above together – lie down in your favourite sleeping pose, close your eyes with a finger on the centre of your forehead and chant to your pillow. You can make up your own *mantra*, something like

Beep beep beep

Sweet pillow put me to sleep.

I will be a great writer,

Tomorrow shall eat more fiber.

Now don't be a creep, and

Make me count sheep.

Beep beep beep!

If just one of you out there is able to benefit from any of these tricks, my mission is accomplished.

Sweet dreams!

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