

Mindfulness & Sleep.

'I feel totally exhausted, my head's on the pillow, my eyes are closed but sleep won't come - my mind won't shut up.'

We all know how important it is that we get a good night's sleep but unfortunately sometimes we just can't get our mind to slow down enough to allow us to drop off. Our mind wants to mull over the things that happened today or the things we mustn't forget to do tomorrow. We can toss and turn for hours constantly running through those often mundane things, time and time again. During those dark times, when we realise that sleep isn't happening, our muscles tense and our body seizes up. Our breathing and heart rate can quicken and so falling sleep becomes even more difficult. When we do eventually doze off it seems like we get five minutes and then the alarm goes off!

Sometimes, when we get to sleep early, our frantic mind wakes us up at 3am demanding we pay attention to yesterday's mistakes or tomorrow's problems. No matter what we do we can't get back to sleep and the result is we spend our days feeling tired and listless, achieving only half of what we meant to do. Sleep is a huge problem for many people, especially when they are stressed or struggling with anxiety or depression.

Here's the good news. Good sleep is more under your control than you might think. Lots of research has shown that **mindful sleep habits** are a major key to restful slumber.

But here's the bad news. If you're in the middle of a period of insomnia right now, you've probably already switched off or even stopped reading this altogether. Once we are in a sleep deprived state it's much harder to accept help and advice on how to sleep better. We ignore or dismiss the ideas, telling ourselves that they are *too hard* or they *won't work for me*.

If that's your situation right now, before reading any further, please take yourself aside and give yourself a good talking to. *You are a capable person and able to solve this situation but only when you're prepared to listen to, and apply, the advice given to you. You have what it takes to fix this problem but you have to commit to applying each of the ideas for at least a week before making judgment.* If you can't agree to that then I suggest you sell your bed and go back to being tired all day!

Mindful sleep habits.

One hour before bedtime, start your preparation. Get your bed, your bedroom and yourself ready, so that you can go to sleep immediately you feel relaxed and sleepy:

1. Dim the lights. Start winding down the brain and body early by dimming the lights. Engage in activities that will relax you and pass the time quietly. Relaxing activities include quiet reading, listening to soft music, having a massage or taking a hot bath. Relaxing, low-impact exercises such as yoga or gentle stretching in the evening can also help promote sleep.

2. Avoid screens. Stow away your tablet, phone, computer, and TV for the night. The blue light emitted by most screens is especially disruptive and although you can minimise the impact by turning the brightness down, the better option is to turn them off completely. Don't read with backlit devices. Tablets that are backlit are more disruptive than e-readers that don't have their own light source.

3. Meditate. Ten minutes before bedtime, begin a mindful meditation session. Sit upright in a comfortable chair, close your eyes and take 3 or 4 slow, deep breaths. On each exhale feel as

though you're sinking deeper and deeper into your chair. Slowly scan your body from head to toe looking for areas of tension and then spend some time relaxing those areas. When you're feeling quiet and relaxed start to pay attention to your breathing. Focus on the movement of your chest or the feeling of the air passing through your nose. Stay focused on your breath and notice when your mind begins to wander. As soon as you realise that you've wandered off, gently bring your mind back to the breath. No matter what people tell you, the simple truth is that you can't control what your mind does, you can only *notice it* and then bring it back to the breath.

If you've never meditated before then download my booklet **How To Meditate** from www.johnshack.com/pause. Meditation is simple and easy, and the booklet is a ten minute read and it's free!

4. Stay in the meditative state. Make sure you don't fall asleep in the chair and as soon as you feel deeply relaxed get into bed and resume focusing on the breath. If after 10 minutes you're still unable to fall asleep, get up, sit in the comfortable chair again and repeat the meditation exercise. Don't get back into bed until you feel sleepy, and don't sleep in the chair!

If you wake up during the night with your mind buzzing and you can't get back to sleep, work with the breath meditation exercise until you can feel your mind slowing down.

How does mindfulness help us to sleep?

The brain is excellent at task-based problems or challenges and this is often what it's doing when we can't sleep. When you're solving a problem, or deciding how to fix something, your mind is in **doing mode**. This is when your brain tries to work out the

logical steps required to solve a problem. In doing mode your mind is continually searching your memories for previous events or knowledge which it believes might help you complete the current task.

Example: If you're trying to sleep but find yourself thinking about tomorrow's job interview, your brain will default to the doing mode. It will recall your past interviews trying to help you *solve the problem* by presenting previous examples for you to consider. But it can't 'solve' the problem of ensuring tomorrow's interview goes well. And by presenting past examples of when things didn't go well, it'll make you more concerned. You probably find yourself asking questions like:

- *Why do I always do badly in interviews?*
- *I'm don't seem able to impress an interviewer, what's wrong with me?*

And then the worry spirals out of control and our over-thinking leads to other questions:

- *Why am I always tired and seldom happy?*
- *Why can't my relationships go more smoothly?*

These emotional issues can't be fixed by the doing mind but it will have a go at fixing them anyway, even though you're trying to go to sleep! Your brain thinks it's helping you but it isn't! You're now into the spiral of increasing stress and sleep disturbance.

Mindfulness takes a very different approach by suggesting you use the alternative **being mode** for your mind. In the being mode your aim is to take more notice of your body and of your surroundings. You still have the same thoughts swirling around your mind, but rather than focusing on solving them, you learn to

acknowledge them in a compassionate way, whilst recognising they are no more than just thoughts. Mindfulness teaches us how to develop this **being** approach when faced with situations or thoughts which are worrying us and it can be particularly helpful when trying to get to sleep.

The first hurdle is to recognise that your thoughts are only thoughts. They are not reality, nor are they accurate predictors of the future. They are just thoughts and they have little or no value. We don't need to get angry with them or try to dismiss them, we just need to acknowledge the thoughts and revert back to being mode.

To help get you into the being mode you can do the meditation exercises as described in my **How To Meditate** booklet. This should help you relax, as well as move the focus of your thinking from your future problems and your past mistakes, towards your body and your surroundings as they are right NOW.

Other sleeping habits that can help:

Try to go to sleep and get up at the same time every day. This helps set your body's internal clock and optimises the quality of your sleep.

Avoid sleeping in on weekends. The more your weekend/weekday sleep schedules differ, the worse the jet-lag like symptoms you'll experience.

Plan your naps. While napping is a good way to make up for lost sleep if you have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep at night napping can make things worse. Limit them to 15 to 20 minutes at or before lunchtime.

Fight after dinner drowsiness. If you get sleepy way before your bedtime, get off the couch and do something mildly stimulating, such as washing the dishes, calling a friend, or getting clothes ready for the next day. If you give in to the drowsiness, you may wake up later in the night and have trouble getting back to sleep.

Get as much natural light as possible during the day. Keep curtains and blinds open during the day, and try to sit closer to the window. Take your work breaks outside in sunlight, exercise outside, or walk your dog during the day instead of in the dark.

Avoid late-night television. Not only does the light from a TV suppress melatonin, but many programmes are stimulating rather than relaxing. Try listening to music or audio books instead.

Make your bedroom dark. Use heavy curtains or shades to block light from windows, or try a sleep mask. Also consider covering up electronics that emit bright light.

If you get up during the night, keep the light off. If you need some light to move around safely, try installing a dim nightlight in the hall or bathroom or use a small flashlight. This will make it easier for you to fall back to sleep.

Take regular exercise early in the day. Exercisers sleep better and feel less sleepy during the day. The more vigorously you exercise, the more powerful the sleep benefits. But even light exercise, such as walking for 10 minutes can improve sleep quality. It can take several months of regular activity before you experience the full sleep-promoting effects. So be patient and focus on building an exercise habit that sticks.

Exercise speeds up your metabolism, elevates body

temperature, and stimulates hormones such as cortisol. This isn't a problem if you're working out in the morning or afternoon, but exercising too close to bedtime can interfere with sleep. Try to finish moderate to vigorous workouts at least three hours before bedtime.

Limit caffeine and nicotine. Caffeine can cause sleep problems even ten to twelve hours after drinking it! Similarly, smoking is another stimulant that can disrupt sleep, especially if you smoke close to bedtime.

Avoid big meals at night. Try to make dinnertime earlier in the evening, and avoid heavy, rich foods within two hours of bed. Spicy or acidic foods can cause stomach trouble and heartburn, which can interrupt sleep.

Avoid alcohol before bed. While a nightcap may help you to relax, it can interfere with your sleep cycle once you've fallen asleep.

The final word.

Most of us go through times when we find it difficult to sleep but almost everyone comes through it and finds a way of coping. You are strong and capable and you have everything you need to solve this problem. There is no quick fix but with dedication and determination you will find the path that works for you.

Mindfulness is well known as a relaxation technique. When used consistently it becomes a powerful habit that you can use to calm your mind when it's racing or worrying. If you study these techniques and use them every day for 2 to 3 weeks you will find your path to great sleep.

About John Shackleton.

With a background in sports psychology John has been a motivational speaker and success coach to the corporate world for more than 30 years. He has spoken in more than 25 different countries to hundreds of Blue Chip companies like Coca Cola, BMW and Hewlett Packard. Teaching Leadership strategies and Success techniques to help staff to achieve more from their business and personal lives.



A top achiever in both sport and business for most of his life, John experienced a serious bout of anxiety and depression in his late 50's. After a lot of confusion, embarrassment and soul searching he started to look for causes and solutions so that he could help others to cope with their stress related problems. Since 2013 John has turned his attention to **mindfulness** as a way of helping people to cope with the huge increase in stress levels we are all experiencing in our frantic world.

For more information call **+64 9 294 8570** or go to **www.johnshack.com**