

- Sleep disorders

A dozen ways to banish insomnia in 21 days

THE WISDOM OF YOUR INNER CAVEMAN TO TRANSFORM YOUR SLEEP AND BOOST YOUR MOOD.

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WE have all known the misery of a night tossing and turning in bed, as panic mounts over how we'll cope with the exhaustion the next day. But help is at hand from an unexpected source: your inner caveman.

Through in-depth research into the nighttime habits of our prehistoric ancestors, psychologist and sleep scientist Dr Merijn van de Laar, author of *How to Sleep Like a Caveman: Ancient Wisdom for a Better Night's Rest*, has helped thousands of insomniacs rediscover the joys of a good night's sleep. And he can transform your sleeping habits in just 21 days. Modern sleep habits have been undermined by technology, artificial lighting, and indoor temperature control. But our bodies and minds haven't evolved at the same pace as our tech. We need to reconnect with our evolutionary origins.

Here, Dr van de Laar shares 12 steps for channelling your inner caveman and developing a gamechanging sleep routine.

1. Don't believe the sleep myths

It's often said that insomnia or sleeping problems lead to physical health problems. Sleep problems can mean sleep apnoea, sleeplessness or narcolepsy but, if you look specifically at insomnia, there's little evidence sleeplessness causes physical health problems. Untreated insomnia might lead to depression and anxiety disorders but not physical problems.

2. Let go of the eight-hour rule

A lot of people think eight hours is the magic number of hours' sleep. Any less will give you health problems. For a bad sleeper, that's not reassuring and can hamper sleep.

But a 2021 study of 1.1 million people showed an average sleep is between almost seven-and-a-half hours and under six hours.

Experiment to identify your optimum sleep length.

3. Use a sleep diary

Record your perception of how you slept every morning for three weeks to compare how you feel. Smartwatches and apps are not recommended for insomniacs who might focus too much on improving sleep scores.

I'm asked a lot: "How much sleep do I need?" There's such a lot of individual variation. I advise people to look at the second week of their holidays. What time of day do you get really sleepy, and what time do you wake up naturally? That way, you can find your biological rhythm.

You have morning people, evening people and everything in between, so this is about asking: "How much sleep do I need?"

The timing of sleep is also key. If you're an evening person, sometimes it's hard to wake up. But you can influence your biological clock.

It's very important for evening people to get enough light in the morning. By "enough light", I mean 10,000 lux, which is compared to being outside on a grey day. But in winter, when it's dark in the morning, you can use a light lamp of 10,000 lux to get going.

It makes no difference if the light comes from nature or a lamp. But getting outside means you are moving, and exercise has a positive effect on sleep.

A walk of 20 to 30 minutes, while exposed to light, would be best. It doesn't really matter what time you get daylight.

Also, lower the temperature a little in the evening. In the natural environment, the temperature usually cools down when it gets dark. It prepares the body for sleep and you have to be a little bit colder to sleep well.

4. Discover your sleep needs

For a lot of people, between six and eight hours is normal. But lots of factors influence how you feel when you wake. In periods when you are stressed, you might sleep at night but, in the morning, still feel tired. The tiredness people feel in the day is often not directly associated with sleep.

Look at your day and how you use your energy. Work stress or social stress impact energy levels, and sleep isn't enough to compensate.

Consider daytime factors that you might need to change to feel more energised. If you exercise, research shows that you feel less groggy the next morning. Eating carbs rather than a protein-rich breakfast, might also help you feel more energised.

Routine is very important, too. Some people shift their rhythm all the time and that can make you more sleepy in the morning.

5. Rethink lying awake

A lot of people think they have to sleep without interruption but lying awake at night for 20% of the time is within the normal range. In industrialised countries, we have higher sleep pressure because we have a shorter total bed time. If you're in bed for eight hours and sleep for six hours and 24 minutes, still within the normal you're range.

In traditional tribes, being awake at night was helpful because you could be alert to dangers.

Sometimes, lying awake is important. When we are stressed, the body wants more control and to know what is happening. So for people who are stressed or dealing with depression, lying awake is a natural thing. Influence this by shortening your total bed time.

6. Less 'bed time' may be better

Insomnia is not about lying awake but how you lie awake.

Sleep pressure affects the need for sleep. It's like sleep hunger. Sleep pressure builds, you feel more sleepy, you fall asleep more quickly and tend to sleep with fewer interruptions. Sleepiness is different to tiredness, which is a lack of energy.

Shortening total bed time gives the body more time to build up sleep pressure.

People with insomnia are often in bed for a long time which can decrease sleep pressure and it makes them more awake during the night. So it's about creating a situation where people sleep more quickly instead of lying there trying to sleep.

7. Focus on the reason for lying awake rather than not sleeping

Many people ask: "Why am I not sleeping?" But ask: "Why am I awake?" If you're awake and you're not tense, it might not be a problem.

If you're tense then ask yourself what the underlying problem is and what you might need to change in your life. Trying to control your sleep creates tension and sleep gets further away, so try to relax and look at the thoughts that come up.

8. Reduce stress levels

Mindfulness allows you to observe your thoughts with a little distance and that might be very helpful.

If you're stressed and don't have the capacity for mindfulness, get out of bed and do something relaxing before going back to bed.

9.

Our biological clock – or circadian clock – likes structure. If you change your rhythm every day, it might make you more sleepy in the morning.

If evening people have to get up at 6am and then at the weekend they lie in bed until 11am, they might have more problems during the week. So in the morning, don't shift your rhythm by more than 60 to 90 minutes before you get up.

Keep regular bedtimes 10. Follow the rules of nature

Reconnect with nature, seeking out natural light during the day and using less artificial light in the evening. Exercise and walk, preferably in nature. Even thinking about nature can help you to relax.

11.

Once you have a better understanding of your natural circadian rhythm, follow it as closely as possible. Skip the 6am exercise class if it doesn't fit your rhythm.

Respect your circadian rhythm

12.

Sleepwalking is treated easily by looking at lifestyle. Many sleepwalkers don't give themselves enough time to sleep, and sleep deprivation leads to more sleepwalking.

A rhythm is very important, as are reducing stress and avoiding alcohol or stimulants.

Alcohol is not good for anyone's sleep but problems usually occur when you drink more than two units during the evening.

Don't tempt night-time ghosts

How to Sleep Like a Caveman: Ancient Wisdom for a Better Night's Rest by Merijn van de Laar (William Collins, £20)