- Sleep

Good Health NEWS EXPLAINED

FOUND:

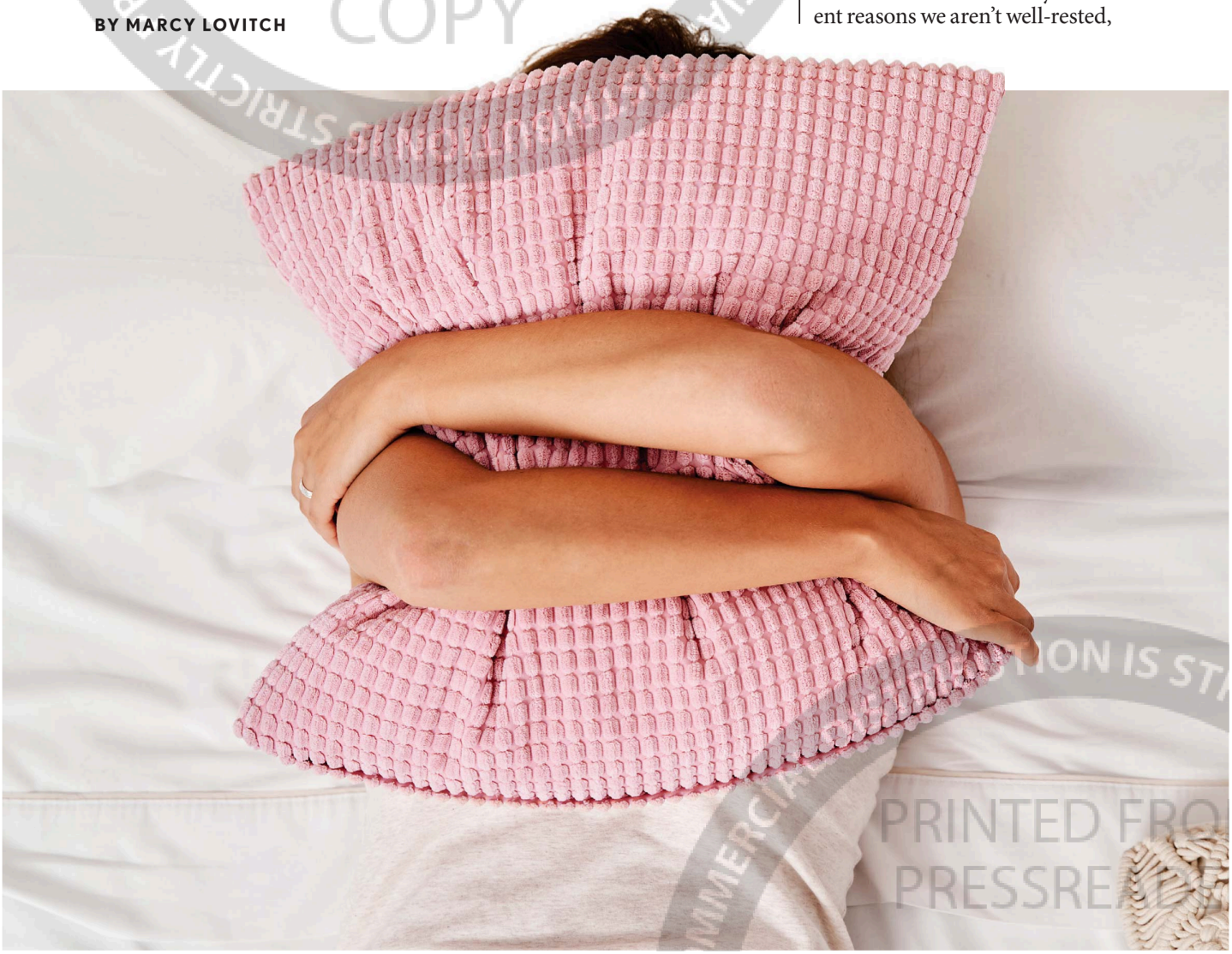
THE REAL REASON YOU CAN'T SLEEP

You might be losing Zzzs because you're too worried about tossing and turning. Here, strategies to help quell your anxiety so you can successfully drift off

BY MARCY LOVITCH

YOU LIKELY KNOW the countless benefits of sleep, from improving immunity to boosting brainpower to easing stress. And you're not alone: According to the American Sleep Apnea Association, 55% of adults say a good night's sleep is a "major priority," ranking it higher than other lifestyle factors such as spending time with family and friends and eating healthfully.

Yet one-third of Americans aren't getting the proper amount of sleep needed to protect their health, according to the National Institutes of Health. There are many different reasons we aren't well-rested,



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but more and more of us are missing out on our Zzzs because we're stressing about the quantity and the quality of our sleep. In fact, a recent survey by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine found that 81% of Americans say worry about sleep leads them to toss and turn—a phenomenon sleep researchers have dubbed orthosomnia, or the obsessive pursuit of optimal sleep.

One driver of orthosomnia is the increased reliance on sleep tracking devices such as smartwatches, rings, headbands, sleep masks and mattress sensors.

"I've seen an increase in anxiety with patients coming to see me with their sleep issues and telling me what their technology is telling them about their sleep," says Mandana Mahmoudi, M.D., MPH, Ph.D., an assistant professor of medicine and the clinical director of sleep medicine in the division of pulmonary, critical care and sleep medicine at New York University's Grossman School of Medicine. "But this technology isn't scientifically proven, and you can't rely on it for the most accurate sleep information," she says. For example, a tracker can't differentiate between stages of sleep.

Trying to follow strict sleep rules, such as making sure you get 7 to 8 hours every night, may also increase sleep anxiety. But it's important to remember that sleep is not one-size-fits-all. "While most people need this amount of sleep, there are some individuals who may only need 6 hours a night and will wake up feeling well-rested," Dr. Mahmoudi says.

Letting go of any excessive worry about sleep is key in stopping the vicious cycle of sleep anxiety.

"The harder you try to control your sleep, the more difficulty you may have in getting to sleep," says sleep psychologist James K. Wyatt, Ph.D., a professor in the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Rush University and the director of behavioral sleep medicine at the Sleep Disorders Service and Research Center at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago. "It's like anything else. You don't want to be so overly stressed about the activity that you can't do the activity itself."

Read on to discover how to ease anxiety so you can sleep like a baby.

Tips to ease slumber

Make two lists. Before bed, grab a pen and paper and write down all the things you're worried about, then toss it in the trash, says Dr. Mahmoudi. Listing your worries can help clear your head, cutting down on thoughts that may be keeping you awake. And "physically throwing it away can help diminish those thoughts that circulate in your brain," she explains.

Next, jot down a simple to-do list for the next day so you can let go of worrying about them too. Proof it works: A study in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* found that people who took 5 minutes to compose a to-do list fell asleep faster compared to those who simply wrote down their completed tasks for the day.

Cue up bedtime music. Playing calming music can help you fall asleep faster, says Dr. Mahmoudi. "If you're in bed and start worrying, listening to something relaxing can distract you and help you refocus on yourself," she notes. The secret to music that will help you drift off? Opting for a song with a tempo of 60 beats per minute, like "Weightless" by Marconi Union (find it on YouTube).

In a study from Mindlab International, this song was deemed the most relaxing of all the tunes tested. Turns out this tempo is the average person's approximate heart rate before falling asleep, and when you listen, your heart rate slows to match it. Find more soothing songs in that range at GetSongBPM.com.

Take time to unwind. An hour or two before bedtime, allow yourself some time to wind down so your brain can decompress from the day's activities, says Wyatt. "We need certain times to switch off from anything stressful, whether it's related to work, school, family issues or the state of the economy or politics," Wyatt says. "This is the time to compartmentalize and focus on something else; otherwise you're going to take these topics to bed with you."

Dr. Mahmoudi agrees. "You need time in the evening to relax and give your mind and body some space before bed," she says. "This can be a good time to take a walk, watch a movie, read a book or take a hot bath or shower."

Tip: Make that shower or bath extra hot to drift off faster. In a study in *Sleep Medicine Reviews,* people who took a 100- to 104-degree bath or shower an hour or two before bed fell asleep an average of 10 minutes faster.

81%
Americans who say worrying about sleep keeps them up

20%
People who get less than 5 hours of sleep each night

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