

6. Sleep

In my line of work I have many clients who suffer from insomnia. The story always seems to be just about the same: I just can't sleep - and I am exhausted. Most have tried just about everything - adjusting schedules, practicing 'good sleep hygiene', changes in diet, and even medication. Unfortunately nothing seems to be working. Despite their best efforts, they find themselves lying in bed at night, wide awake, thinking..., and thinking..., and thinking. The longer they lie there, the more frustrated they get. And the more frustrated they get, the farther away from sleep they seem to be. Some will claim that they haven't slept a wink. Many will finally 'call it a night' and get up, going about their day on little to no sleep and feeling exhausted. It's a vicious cycle.

A former insomniac myself, I can fully relate to their story. I used to spend many nights that way and many subsequent days exhausted. That is until I began applying **cognitive-behavioral strategies** to the problem of insomnia - then everything changed.

My Story

As far back as I can remember in my life, I had the belief that I needed to get 8 hours of sleep - good sleep. As a kid I don't think I ever thought that much about it. I am sure that my parents drilled that into me. They were adamant that I get enough sleep so that I could be alert, and healthy. I never questioned the validity of that belief, I just accepted that as fact. When I didn't get 8 hours of uninterrupted sleep, I just accepted the 'fact' that I was going to be tired - period.

Through childhood and up until I graduated from high school, I truly don't remember having much of an issue with sleep. When I got into college, however, that was a different story. I got a job as a bartender my sophomore year, which meant working until 3am, not getting home until 4am most nights, and then getting up for class at 8am. I was tired a lot, but I could catch naps in the afternoon and do it all over again the next night. I kept this schedule until I graduated from college.

When I graduated and got my first job as a teacher/coach/administrator/principal I first began to notice my insomnia. I was no longer working crazy hours, but instead of being able to go to bed and fall right to sleep, I would lay awake, thinking about everything I had to get done for the next day. Eventually I would fall asleep, but then I would wake up feeling pretty tired and have a pretty hard time staying awake and alert. I would get through the day, thinking 'I can't wait to get a good night's sleep tonight' and then it would happen all over again. The harder I tried to 'get to sleep' the more frustrated I would get. I was thinking about everything I had to get done, plus I was thinking about how tired I was going to be if I didn't fall asleep - and that just compounded the problem. I discovered that a 'few beers' would make me quite sleepy and tried that for a while. I would fall asleep, no problem, but I would wake up in the middle of the night and start the cycle again.

Every now and again I would 'get a good night's sleep' (which in my belief at the time was 8 hours, unbroken, deep sleep), but it wasn't very often. Of course I would try 'to not think' about everything I had to get done, and I would 'try not to think' about trying to get to sleep, and I would try 'to not to think' about how tired I was going to feel the next day - but we all know how well that works - not very!

As life went on, and the pressures from more responsibilities (work, marriage, home, kids, money) mounted, my sleep became less sound, more broken. My brain would run on-and-on, trying to solve the 'world's problems', night after night when I knew I should be sleeping. Sleep aids didn't work. Sure, I could shut things down long enough to fall asleep, but my brain would wake back up and fire right back up in the middle of the night. My days were long and exhausting. I resigned myself to being tired and just simply living with it. I tried everything I knew to shut down my brain at night - meditation, mantras, counting sheep, getting up and reading until I was tired - nothing really worked until I discovered the powers of cognitive therapy.

CBT for Sleep

I had never before considered what my 'beliefs about sleep' might have to do with the problem. It wasn't so obvious at first, but the more familiar I got with CBT, the more I began to make the connection.

It all stemmed from my very firm 'belief' that I needed 8 hours of unbroken (or relatively unbroken) sleep in order to feel rested, alert and energized. Little did I know, but my brain was busy calculating the amount and kind of sleep I was getting and issuing the result - you didn't get enough, you will be tired. It wasn't a mystery as to why that belief was the 'cardinal rule' of sleep in my brain, it had been installed when I was a kid and had been reinforced by everything I had heard about sleep since.

My knowledge of CBT and my zest for using the strategy eventually led me to think about how this belief influenced my experience. I believed that 8 hours, of good sleep was necessary to feel rested and energized. I believed that when I didn't get that I would be tired and feel exhausted. I began to wonder what would happen if I *didn't* believe that? What if I believed something different about the quantity, depth and quality of sleep I got?

According to the theory, a belief is simply a collection of thoughts that I have 'thought the most' about a topic or subject. In keeping with the tenets of CBT, then, I could change what I believed by simply generating a greater magnitude of 'alternative thought' about that topic or subject. It seemed a bit radical at that time, but I decided to test the theory.

In keeping with that idea I set about creating a different belief about sleep. I knew, of course, that sleep is necessary (no doubt about that), but I also knew that other people seemed to 'do just fine on 4-5 hours of sleep. So I started to do a bit of research on sleep. I learned that in the animal world, the amount of sleep required by large mammals varied greatly - giraffes, for instance, sleep only 3-4 hours. I also learned that during sleep, the neural activity in the brain slows down greatly. So could it be that the 'slowing down' of neural activity that occurs from closing our eyes, shutting down any sound to process, and lying still would be sufficient to 'recharge' the brain and body? I further reasoned that the thoughts themselves could play a big part in how much 're-charging' happens in bed at night. In other words, if I trained myself to think only about really exciting and wonderful things in bed at night, I would be 're-charging' my brain, as opposed to the energy I was spending by thinking about problems and things that needed to be done. Finally I

reasoned that my brain was fully capable of getting all of the sleep it really needed and that if I just let my brain do that on its own it would get the sleep I needed.

So after careful thought I began developing a new belief about 'sleep'. My new belief was going to be that the act of shutting down the visual cortex and auditory cortex and lying still horizontally was a large part of the re-charging process. Since I hadn't had much luck 'shutting down the brain' I would simply *re-boot* my thinking to energy-producing thoughts - thoughts that excited me - which I call 'night dreams', different from 'sleep dreams' (that happen while actually asleep), and more like 'day dreaming', but only at night, in bed, with my eyes closed.

So I went to work creating a 'library' of 'night dream' topics made up of all the things I love to think about - vacations, achievements, cool projects I am working on, things I am proud of, fun things I have done in life and even re-living some really cool 'sleep dreams' that I have had in the past. I found it very fun and stimulating to put together this fantastic collection of fabulous things to think about. They were exciting things, and wouldn't make me sleepy (which is why I had been afraid to think about them before, because they would keep me awake), but my new belief was that they were re-charging my battery, so it was going to be *fun and productive* to lie awake 'night dreaming' as long as I wanted to.

Finally, I was going to install the belief that when my brain actually needed the sleep, it would shut down and grab as much as it needed. If my brain grabbed a few hours toward the beginning of my 'in-bed-head-on-pillow' time and then woke up, I would relax, pick a 'night dream' topic and enjoy the quiet, peaceful time, until my brain decided to grab another hour or two. I wasn't going to count or fret, it would grab what it needed and I would feel refreshed - because my brain knew what is needed to balance out the rest of the re-charging process.

I can't control whether or not my brain 'sleeps' or how deeply, but I can control the time my head is on the pillow, the environment of the room (no light, no sound) and very importantly the thoughts I choose to think. I would leave *actual sleep time* up to my brain. I didn't have to worry about that at all.

Infusing a Belief

So now I had my 'new' belief about 'sleeping' ready to test drive. This brings one to the starting point of really installing a new belief. Again, in keeping with CBT theory, my brain wasn't going to embrace this new belief about the 'time-in-bed' process until I had 'loaded' the thinking enough times to create the new belief. The thoughts remain only ideas until they are 'up-loaded' enough times to create the signal strength necessary to get the brain's attention - this is the physics of neuro-biology.

So I began the *infusing* process by simply loading the new beliefs. I wrote them down, read them, said them out-load, recorded myself saying them and listened to myself saying them out loud. If I had had the technology and the fore-thought to video-tape myself saying them and watch myself saying them I would have done that too, but that technique (*CAVT*) was a few years away from being invented.

My reasoning went something like this: If a belief is truly just a collection of ideas that is used the most in the brain, then I have to repeat these new ideas to elevate them to the 'most used' collection. If CBT works according to theory, then when these new beliefs become prominent, then my brain will accept them as fact. At that point I will believe these to be true and my system will respond by making these new beliefs truly be a refreshing and satisfying 'night's sleep'. It seemed simple enough, and what did I have to lose? If it didn't work, I would *not* be getting a 'worse' nights sleep than I already was - right? I was still going to have my head on the pillow from 11p-6a, regardless. But if it worked??

I was excited to try it out, so excited in fact that at first I didn't sleep much at all (or at least I didn't feel like I did). I spent hours assembling a robust 'night dream library' and practiced getting those topics in my head so I could access them at night in bed from memory. I made sure I had my head on the pillow at 11p and did not take it off the pillow until 6a. When my thoughts went negative (problem solving, worry, etc.) I would shift them right back on topic and 'boot-up' a great night dream. It took a lot of practice nights to get in the groove. I wish I could tell you how long it took, but I wasn't keeping great records back then - but it took awhile. Night after night I would repeat the process, thinking it through exactly as I had planned it out. Morning after morning I would wake up, not feeling a lot different than when I started. At one point I thought - this is ridiculous, nothing is changing! But I was determined.

And then, finally ... I noticed something happening. At first it was just a subtle change in my 'night dreaming' routine. I found myself looking forward to getting in bed and 'picking up where I had left off the night before' - almost like getting back to a good part of a good book I was reading. And then found myself feeling a bit happy or excited when I woke up ... I could get back to the good 'night dream' I had been in the middle of when I nodded off. I began to notice how peaceful 3am was, no sound, no sight, no phone to answer, no emails to reply to, no clients to listen to ... just me and my great thoughts that I had 3 more hours to think about them. I was actually looking forward to waking up and 'night dreaming' - it was super cool. In fact, I have to be honest and admit that sometimes I was disappointed when I fall asleep right in the middle of a great 'night dream', although more often than not it morphed right into a super-cool *sleep* dream as well.

But that wasn't all. I was also waking up feeling different. I was still groggy, of course, but I was excited about finishing my 'night-dream' in the form of a 'day-dream'. I would jump on my exercise bike in the morning and continue dreaming my dream. I was feeling more energized, more awake, more alive and that would last well into the morning and afternoon. I might have my usual afternoon lull, but by evening-time I was gathering steam. My new belief was starting to take hold and my whole system was responding in kind. It was becoming a bit surreal. The more I tried to 'stay awake' to enjoy a good 'night dream' the more readily I fell asleep. I am quite sure I was getting no more 'actual' sleep, but my day-time energy levels were on the rise - big time.

At the time of this writing I am 53 years old and I have more energy than I have ever had in my life. I love to go to bed at night and I could care less if I fall asleep. I get some of my best thinking done at 3am. I enjoy the heck out of waking up and launching an exciting 'night dream' in the peace and quiet of the night - it is pure fun and I have not worried about getting sleep for as long as I can remember. I am not even sure that I have changed the amount of sleep I get. I

couldn't tell you if it is 3 or 7, I don't count, it doesn't matter. I can tell you the energy is phenomenal and my days are super-productive.

I don't care what they say about 8 hours of sleep. I used to believe it was important, but now I don't care. My perspective is completely different. I don't believe for a minute that I am an anomaly. I have simply changed a belief and that has made all of the difference.

This is essentially what CBT is all about - exercising the ability to change a belief about something - virtually anything. My original belief about sleep was that I needed 8 hours, un-interrupted, in order to be energized, feel alert and be healthy. I now believe that it is much less than that - maybe 5 or 6, split up into as many chunks as my brain determines. Often times it will be 3 at the beginning of the night, an hour awake in the middle of the night, and 2-3 more before arising. I used to think I would be 'exhausted' if I didn't get 8. I now know that 5 can be a great night, as long as I am using my in-bed-awake-time in a positive and productive manner. I used to fret, and worry about waking up in the middle of the night and get frustrated as hell about not being able to get back to sleep. Now I actually look forward to waking up in the middle of the night - it is a rather enjoyable experience. I don't care how much or how little sleep I get - it doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is that my head is on the pillow for 7 hours, my eyes are closed, my ears are not processing information, and my brain is in a positive gear.

I have taught this way of thinking to many of my clients and have achieved great results. It is truly amazing what happens when you 'stop counting and start enjoying'.