



# Doctor Debug™

Ron Sterling, M.D.

## Really Sleepless in Seattle

### Dear Doc

I never thought I would have a sleep problem. During high school and college, I could fall asleep on command. Now, at 26 years old and three years out of college, I feel like a total mess.

I manage the writing of technical manuals for a software company. It is a good-paying job and I don't have to work that much overtime but there are different deadlines and a bunch of people to negotiate with. It is bugging me, big time. I think that

is why I started having a sleep problem. I am always upset about something.

After tossing and turning for several nights in a row, I decided to start using alcohol to "knock me out." That worked okay for a while. Then, I started waking up early in the morning and I couldn't get back to sleep. I feel depressed and tired and short-tempered. For about a month, I have been using Unisom when I wake up early in the morning and it helps put me back to sleep. Now, I am in a cycle of alcohol to sleep, and lots of coffee to keep going all day. There has to be some better way. What can I do? -- Really Sleepless in Seattle!

### Dear Really Sleepless

Thank you for writing! You are not alone on the sleepless thing, believe me. Ten to 15 percent of adults experience chronic and severe insomnia. And, given our work-driven society, the percentage may get larger. That is part of the problem. Americans have almost completely accepted that sleep difficulties are just part of life. We have bought into Margaret Thatcher's way of thinking -- "Sleep is for wimps."

However, the facts are clear. Every single study done on human sleep shows that adults require about eight to nine hours of sleep a day for maximum functioning. The most telling study I've seen was done with a group of folks who claimed they only needed five hours of sleep. When allowed to sleep in a sleep lab, that group averaged 9.5 hours of sleep. According to Dr. William Dement, author of *The Promise of Sleep*, sleep deprivation played a role in the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the Challenger explosion, and the Chernobyl and Three Mile Island nuclear power plant meltdowns.

### Debugging Insomnia

There are many types of sleep problems from sleep apnea to jet lag, but there is not enough space to write about all of them

this month. So, I will focus only on insomnia, which can be acute (recent) or chronic (long-term) and consists of difficulty falling asleep, frequent awakening, or waking up too early in the morning and not being able to get back to sleep. Check [www.SleepFoundation.org](http://www.SleepFoundation.org) for much more information.

As you know, not getting sleep can lead to tiredness, lack of energy, difficulty concentrating, and irritability. In other words, it is *no fun*.

So we try to find solutions. Alcohol for sleep is one of those "solutions" that just makes things worse. Alcohol consumed close to bedtime disrupts the second half of the sleep period. That is why you started having problems with early-morning awakening.

Adding Unisom to get back to sleep is another short-term fix that led to even more problems. Antihistamines contribute to grogginess and confusion in the morning. And fixing that grogginess with caffeine just puts another biological stress on brain tissue. Over time, the combination you came up with can lead to symptoms of depression and "burn-out."

Consistent early-morning awakening and difficulty returning to sleep is a common symptom of moderate depression. Even if you do not have any other signs

of moderate to severe depression such as feeling sad, decreased sex drive, lack of interest in life, overeating or loss of appetite, or suicidal thoughts, you should get an appointment soon with a health care professional. From what you have said, the cure for your sleep difficulty may involve appropriate antidepressant medication.

### ***Your Place of Relaxation***

Even when we are doing everything right, we can still experience trouble sleeping. Thoughts and worries can intrude. Here is my most useful exercise for inducing sleep. And,

no, it does *not* involve counting sheep.

List a few relaxing or pleasant places that you have actually been to that you can visualize now. If you have photographs of the places, even better. Real places work better than fantasized places. It could be a place in a park or a spot near a waterfall. It could be a meadow you camped in. The more solitary and serene the situation was, the better it will be for blocking intrusive thoughts.

Pick the most relaxing scene. When you are in bed, use that scene. The goal is to keep your focus on the scene as if it were on a screen right in front of your eyes. If an intrusive thought starts to creep into the picture, refocus on the scene. It helps even more to focus on details of the scene, like the light or wind in

the leaves or the sound of the waves or the river.

Some people are not able to come up with a real place that they have been to that was relaxing or pleasant. In that case, I ask them to buy a couple of larger, color posters of real places they find relaxing. The more detailed the picture, the better. Then, the exercise becomes one of memorizing the photo and using it as their place of relaxation for inducing sleep.

As researchers at Oxford University reported in the *New Scientist* this year, "Picturing an engaging scene takes up more brain space than the same dirty old sheep."

You just gotta agree with that.

—*Doctor Debug*  
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**Feeling bugged?** Write to Doctor Debug, a psychiatrist with 27 years of counseling experience. Ask him about mental wellness, or send questions regarding personal, social, relationship, medication or sexual concerns.

E-mail sent to Doctor Debug is read only by Ron Sterling, M.D. No identities, whatsoever, will be revealed in any published answers.

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