

# RESILIENCE TOOLS FOR UNCERTAIN TIMES

## RESILIENCE TOOLS : SLEEP (PART 2)

In Part 1 on Sleep there was a focus on how sleep can be improved by a number of steps you can take before you even get into bed. But now we are going to focus on what can be done when we are actually in bed. A number of mental exercises will be suggested, but first, there are some basic assumptions to

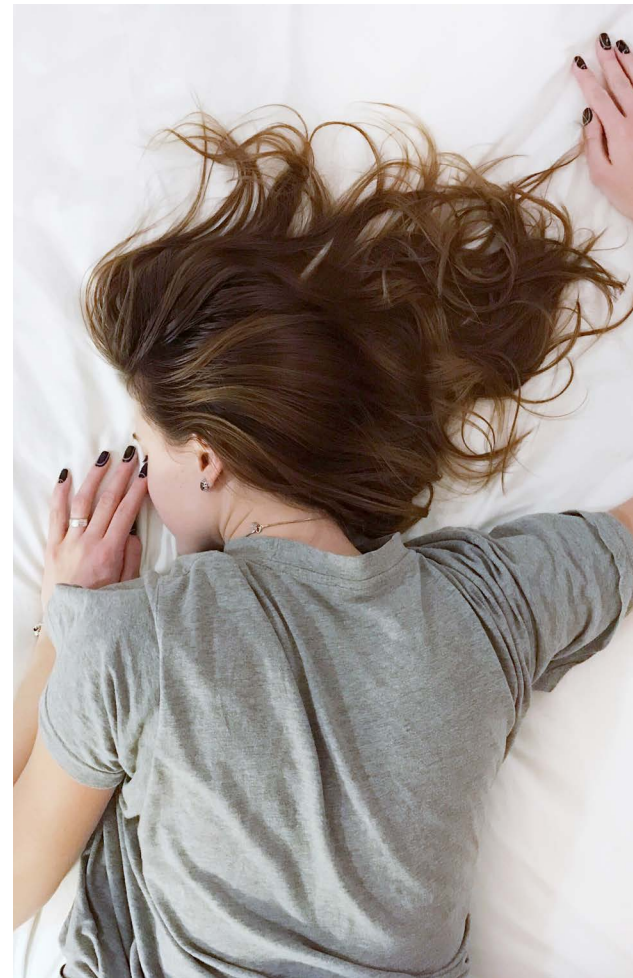
### GETTING CHILLED ABOUT SLEEP

Firstly, one of the main things that fuels insomnia is the anxiety and frustration that goes with not being able to sleep! People with sleep problems find that their bed becomes the scene of a dreaded conflict. As Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, “*The worst thing in the world is to try to sleep and not to.*” So, people worry and curse their lot when they cannot sleep. And they ‘try’ and ‘try’ and ‘try’ to sleep. And like sex, the more you try, the more it refuses to happen. Sleep is one of those human activities that does not work to order.

On the converse side of this, if your mind and body are in the right place, then sleep will happen. Trying to sleep won't work. Trying to sleep will keep us awake. Stop trying to sleep. And try to stop fretting about not sleeping. Then it's more likely that sleep will come. There are some fundamental mindsets that we need to cultivate.

**1 ACCEPTANCE:** We need to simultaneously recognise that sleep is important, but that it is also outside of our control. It is what it is. And everyone will have periods of time when they wake frequently and don't get the sleep they want to get. Can you accept that? If you can, you will be able to let sleep arrive in its own good time.

*It is also worth bearing in mind that we sleep in 90-minute cycles. We naturally wake after 90 minutes – most of the time we go straight back to sleep, but if you are a problem sleeper this might be a vulnerable moment.*



“ Poor sleep leads to worrying. Worrying leads to poor sleep. Worrying about sleep is like your mind trying to fight itself. That's a horrible place to be. ”

*Mind*



Acceptance is not something that is easy to achieve. When we are tired, yet can't sleep, and we know we aren't going to be at our best if we don't sleep, then this can be immensely frustrating. But learning to accept that you have no control of this process can be paradoxically helpful. The more you struggle, the less likely you are to sleep. The more you can accept not sleeping, the more likely it is to happen.

**2** **CURIOSITY AND PLAYFULNESS :** In trying to practice some of the exercises listed below, it will be important to approach them curiously and playfully. Sometimes they will work and sometimes they won't. Being curious and not demanding that sleep must happen is a tricky mindset to foster. Of course, sometimes you will forget this, and your mind will go racing off with thoughts "This isn't working" or "I should be sleeping by now". When you catch your mind doing this just try to gently bring it back to patiently waiting for whatever happens.

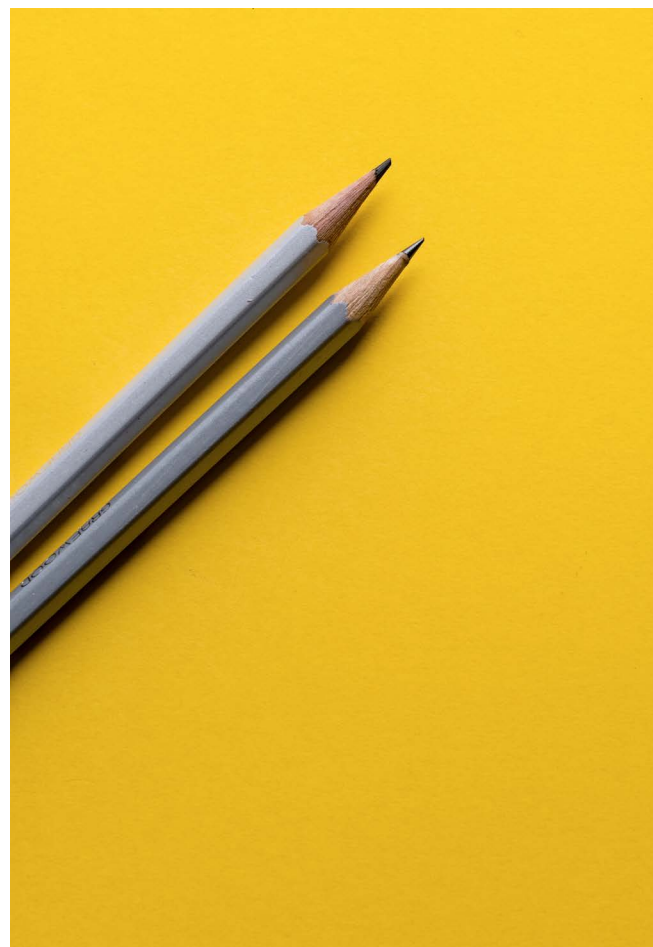
**3** **THE LONG GAME :** Remember that there are no quick fixes in improving your sleep. It is a 'long game' and you need to try to avoid getting sucked into the frustration of the early losses that you will inevitably make. Patience is required!

It is also worth bearing in mind that most people can get through their day quite well without a full night's sleep. They might not feel at their best, they might even be a little tetchy or grumpy. But they will be able to do what needs to be done. So, again, try to see improving your sleep as a longer term project, and not getting too stressed by occasional bad night.

## MANAGING THE RESTLESS MIND

Life can be so busy, that for many of us lying in bed is the first opportunity each day for us to be alone with our minds. So, perhaps not surprisingly this is the time the brain starts to reflect on the bad stuff that has happened the previous day, or the worrying possibilities that might be lying in wait on the next day. The brain starts to do its problem-solving and ramps into top gear, repetitively trying out different solutions, including the very worst ones you can imagine. What can we do about this?

**A** **PEN AND PAPER AT THE BEDSIDE :** A well-known strategy. And it works. If your brain is worrying itself about stuff, then briefly writing down thoughts down can be helpful. (Write, bullet points not essays!). In fact, the research says the important bit of writing down might be to identify the 'when' and 'where' of one action you can take in order to move the task forward. So, for example, if you are worried about a work-project, try to identify the first step you need to action to move it forward. This might be ringing someone, or







scheduling ten minutes to develop an action plan. Identify an action and a time you are doing it. The research suggests that when you formulate a plan, your brain is more likely to step down from worrying about the task.

**B GETTING UP AND DOING SOMETHING ELSE :** If we are lying in bed, tossing and turning, and we find that our brain has gone into hyper-drive, then we might consider actually getting up and doing something else instead. In fact, this idea has long been a part of traditional insomnia advice. The advice generally is that, if we've been awake for around 20 minutes or more, we should get up, go to another room, and then read, (or some other non-stimulating activity) until we start to feel sleepy again. This advice is based on the idea that i) our brain isn't likely to shift gear whilst we remain lying down, and ii) lying awake for long periods is likely to create an unhealthy association between lying in bed and being awake.

However, many people find this step incredibly hard to do, (i.e. getting up out of a warm cosy bed!), and more recent psychological advice has suggested following this 'to the letter' can in fact make people more stressed and anxious about not sleeping. (For example, you might think, "I've really got to get to sleep now, otherwise I am going to have to get up!"). Maybe, this is an area for you to be your own 'best expert' in deciding how to play this. Sometimes, you might decide that enough is enough, and move to another room to read, or do the ironing, or anything that is not too stimulating. And other times you might choose to lie quietly and wait for sleep to happen in its own good time. You can decide.

**C GIVING YOURSELF PERMISSION TO LIE AWAKE :** If you do decide to stay in bed, then adopting a state of mind where you simply patiently wait and see what happens might be helpful. So you might tell yourself :

"OK, I am not asleep. I would prefer to be asleep but I'm not, so I'll just lie here until it happens. It is quiet and my body is recharging its energy. I have no pressures on me, so I will just enjoy the warmth and rest quietly".

"It took me ages to get off to sleep and now I've woken again. Maybe I came to the end of one of those ninety minute cycles. I'll focus on my breathing again and see what happens".

Paradoxically, giving yourself permission to just rest quietly in your bed can increase the odds that sleep will happen. In fact, if you do this you might want to try the next exercise.

**D BODY-SCAN PRACTICE :** This practice, mindfulness, is about slowly working from head to toe and noticing any sensations in your body. Most mindfulness apps have one of these in their resources. There are also lots of these if you search Youtube. A good place to start would be to find one around five minutes or less. The body scan practice is particularly helpful in helping your brain to switch channels from your worries to noticing relatively benign things occurring in the present moment. Interestingly, advice given to certain armed forces, such as the Navy Seals, in America, follow a variation of body scan practice.

### THE NAVY SEALS BODY SCAN SLEEP TECHNIQUE

1. Relax the muscles in your face, including tongue, jaw and the muscles around the eyes
2. Drop your shoulders as far down as they'll go, followed by your upper and lower arm, one side at a time
3. Breathe out, relaxing your chest followed by your legs, starting from the thighs and working down
4. You then spend 10 seconds trying to clear your mind before thinking about one of the three following images:
  - You're lying in a canoe on a calm lake with nothing but a clear blue sky above you.
  - You're lying in a black velvet hammock in a pitch-black room.
  - You say "don't think, don't think, don't think" to yourself over and over for about 10 seconds.



“ You can avoid fretting by taking the attitude that you are in bed to rest deeply and not necessarily to sleep. Make sleep a non-issue. That means no tossing and turning in exasperation - just notice your breathing and the warmth of the bed and accept that you are there to rest. There is now a good chance that you will drift back to sleep but remember it doesn't matter so long as you can rest deeply. ”

*Padraig O'Morain*





## **E** VISUALISATION EXERCISES FOR REPETITIVE OR INTRUSIVE WORRIES

Visualisation exercises can be really powerful and helpful. Again, this must be approached with a curious mindset. If it works it works, if it doesn't you haven't lost anything. Again, have a go.

### VISUALISATION: PUTTING YOUR WORRIES AWAY

In your imagination try to identify all of the things that are currently on your mind.

Now, try to imagine putting each thing in front of you, on the floor of your bedroom. You could imagine each one being a box, with a label describing the worry contents.

Now, imagine that you are gathering up the boxes, either all at once, or one at a time, and walking towards an area of your house where you store things. (Maybe a chest of drawers, or broom cupboard, or filing cabinet). Imagine yourself carrying the things and moving through the house, down the stairs if appropriate.

Imagine that you put each item in the storage space. And then close the door, (or drawer, or whatever). You have put the box(es) away now.

Finally, imagine you are moving yourself back to bed, and getting ready for sleep. Notice what you would see as you take yourself back to your bedroom. Imagine getting into bed and preparing to sleep.

If any of the items reappear in your mind, keep repeating the process.

## PREPARING YOUR BODY FOR SLEEP

Daylight and Exercise both will improve sleep levels. But sometimes excess stress can linger in the body. You might try the following two exercises to help your body be in a better place for sleep to happen, (if it is going to happen).

### 4-7-8 BREATHING

This is a yoga exercise that takes about a minute. It can be really useful as a fast-track calming exercise, which can either help sleep, or can quickly reduce any strong emotional reactions, such as shock, fear or anger. Basically, it involves **four complete breaths**, made to the following timings. (You will find plenty of videos on Youtube describing this process).

INHALE  
4 SECONDS → HOLD  
7 SECONDS → INHALE  
8 SECONDS

## AUTOGENIC EXERCISE

This has been my exercise of choice for relaxing my body whilst lying in bed. It looks more complicated than it is – I would recommend giving it a try. It is loosely based on a practice called autogenic relaxation. There are the suggestions below. In this exercise you will need to imagine saying them (silently under your breath) and trying to connect with each suggestion as well as you can. (Again, just do as well as you can. That will be good enough!)

**Exercise: Repeat each line three times silently in your mind, before you move to the next line**

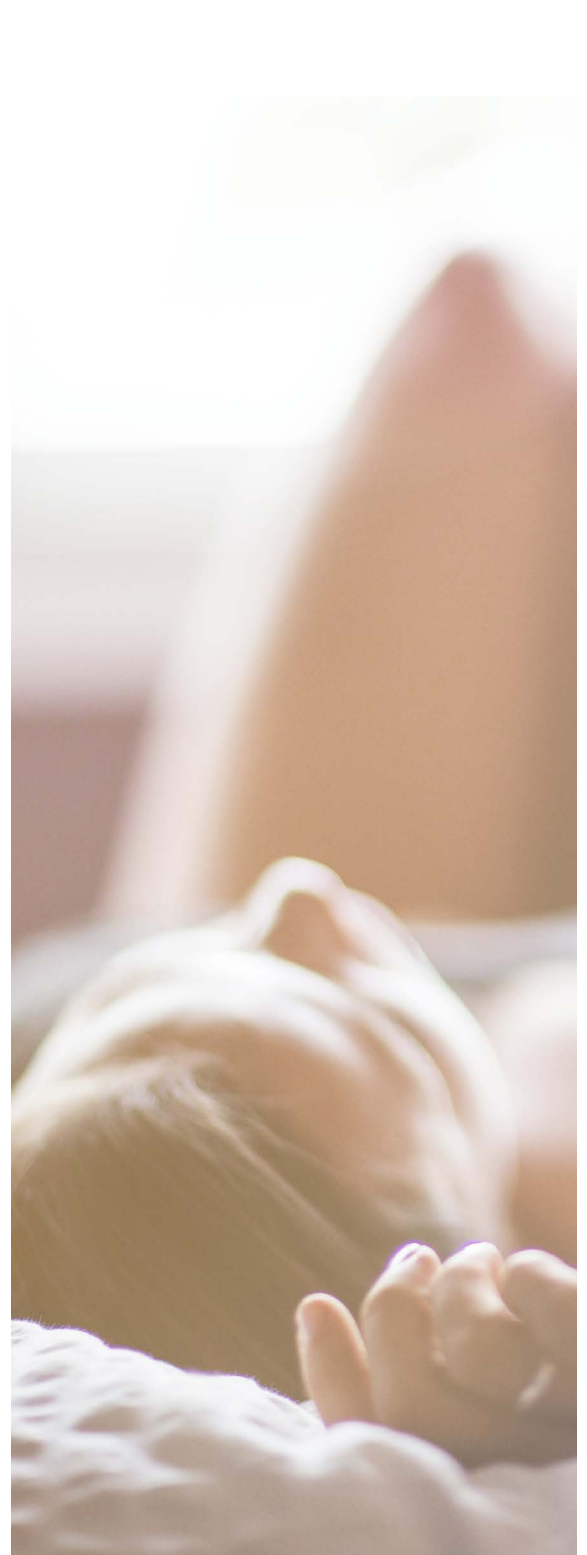
My left arm is heavy  
My right arm is heavy  
Both of my arms are heavy  
My left leg is heavy  
My right leg is heavy  
Both of my legs are heavy  
My arms and legs are heavy

My left arm is warm  
My right arm is warm  
Both of my arms are warm  
My left leg is warm  
My right leg is warm  
Both of my legs are warm  
My arms and legs are warm

My neck and shoulders are warm and heavy

My breathing is slow and regular

I am at peace.



In summary, try to accept that sleep is not under conscious control. It will often only get better over a long time period. (And most of the research says that the harmful effects of not sleeping happen over a longer time frame, and not in the short term of any sleepless periods). But most of all try to be optimistic about the prospect of change – the history of sleep psychology is full of long term insomniacs who have been able to improve their quality and quantity of sleep.

**Kevin Simpson, Chartered Clinical Psychologist,** has been delivering a number of resilience training sessions to police personnel in Cornwall, Devon and Dorset.