



3900 WEST BROWN DEER ROAD, SUITE 200  
BROWN DEER, WI 53209  
PHONE: 414.540.2170 • FAX: 414.540.2171  
WWW.SHOREHAVENBHI.COM

## Mindfulness Can Help You Sleep© Overcoming Insomnia

Don Rosenberg  
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*This article on how Mindfulness exercises can improve sleep is the third article in a series on sleep. Check out the first two, **10 Solutions for Better Sleep** and **The Underestimated, But Crucial Role of Sleep in Mental Health**. Future articles will present more psychological help for better sleep.*

- ✓Sleep is a vital foundation of health.
- ✓Millions suffer from insomnia and sleep disturbances.
- ✓Poor sleep quality erodes quality of life.
- ✓Mental health clinicians have developed many effective approaches for sleep.
- ✓Mindfulness meditation has emerged as a scientifically-supported method.

Let's discuss mindfulness for sleep. Let's include how a lack of mindfulness can exacerbate sleep disturbances.

### About Mindfulness

*There is nothing mystical or mysterious about Mindfulness. It is the practice of focusing one's attention on the present moment. We do that with openness and acceptance for whatever comes up. We are curious and do not judge our sensations and thoughts. They are just there, passing through us. We do not attach energy - consciousness - to any of them.* Mindfulness



cultivates awareness of thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations without reacting to them. The idea is to be purposefully mindful of the present moment. That's all it is. And it's remarkable.

It's rooted in ancient Buddhist traditions. Scientific research over 45 years. It's been adapted into secular practices, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which aim to enhance psychological and physical well-being.

Mindfulness works by helping individuals break free from habitual patterns of thinking and feeling – the ones that often drive stress, anxiety, insomnia, and discomfort. Intentionally being present in the NOW, without worrying about the past or future, counterbalances all the overstimulation and mental over-activity that are common in modern life. Mindfulness creates a space for rest and recovery—both of which are essential for healthy sleep.

### **Sleep Disturbance and the Role of Mindfulness**

Sleep disturbances, such as insomnia, often result from hyperarousal (feeling keyed-up), excessive rumination (obsessing), intrusive memories, and heightened emotional reactivity. Because all of these mean over-thinking the past or worrying about the future, all are examples of a lack of mindfulness. When individuals are not present in the moment, their minds are prone to racing thoughts about past events or future worries. That triggers stress responses that interfere with the body's natural sleep mechanisms. For example:

**Stress and Anxiety:** Persistent worry activates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, the stress response system, increasing cortisol levels (the stress hormone) and making it difficult to relax.

**Intrusive Thoughts:** Just when we put our heads down on the pillow, painful memories often intrude on the mind. Letting the business of the day aside, we find the background intrusive thoughts come through. They are arousing and that is the opposite of sleep.

**Rumination:** Obsessional rumination means going over and over the same thoughts. It's not problem-solving. Rather, the worries, doubts, or fearful thoughts keep repeating. That is arousing, increasing mental activity, the opposite of processes that lead to sleep.

**Catastrophic Thinking:** Anticipating the negative consequences of insufficient sleep can amplify anxiety and create a vicious cycle of sleeplessness.

**Over-identification with Thoughts:** Without mindfulness, individuals often fuse with negative or intrusive thoughts, allowing them to dominate their mental space and disrupt their ability to wind down.

## How Mindfulness Can Overcome Sleep Disturbances

Mindfulness addresses the root causes of sleep disturbances by calming the mind and body, reducing hyper-arousal, and fostering a sense of acceptance. By learning to observe thoughts and feelings without judgment, individuals interrupt patterns of rumination and anxiety that fuel insomnia.

**Lower Arousal:** By activating the parasympathetic nervous system, the calming system, mindfulness induces a state of relaxation that counteracts stress.

**Reduce Cognitive Load:** Mindful awareness reduces mental clutter, allowing the mind to transition more easily into a state conducive to sleep.

**Promote Emotional Regulation:** Mindfulness fosters a greater ability to tolerate and manage difficult emotions, reducing the likelihood of sleep-disruptive emotional reactivity.

## How and Why Mindfulness Works

- Mindfulness meditation can increase *alpha* and *theta* brainwave activity, which are associated with states of relaxation and light sleep. All that high arousal thinking is associated with fast *beta* waves. Those are associated with being awake.
- Mindfulness impacts key brain regions, such as the *prefrontal cortex* and *amygdala*, so as to enhance self-regulation and to reduce stress responses.
- Over time, consistent mindfulness practice rewires neural pathways, making it easier for individuals to disengage from unhelpful thought patterns that interfere with sleep.
- Mindfulness enhances awareness of bodily sensations. That lets one detect early signs of tension or restlessness. So, then you can reduce them before they escalate into major sleep disruptions.
- A nonjudgmental attitude – just accepting what flows through the mind – leads to a healthier relationship with sleep. That reduces the pressure to "force" it, which actually would work against sleep. We are creating conditions for natural sleep to emerge.

*In a way, mindfulness is a natural process for sleep.* When we lie down and focus on the cool bed, the soft, supportive pillow, relaxing our limbs -- all those are mindfulness – we are focusing on the sensations of the present moment. Slowing the breathing and closing the eyes further slows the mind, moving towards sleep. Mindfulness does this purposefully.

## Best Mindfulness Methods to Improve Sleep

Here are some mindfulness-based exercises that have proven effective for improving sleep. You will want a quiet place, though it can have soothing sounds or music. Keep bringing your awareness back to what you are sensing in your body. The tendency to focus on the

environment around us is natural, so bring your awareness back to your present breathing. Fill the mind with the focus of the mindfulness exercise.



Remember that mindfulness is not like a sleeping pill. It's a practice. That means repetition improves your response.

**Calm focus.** Choose a calm way to focus. You may stay calm by taking a deep breath, saying a positive word or phrase (like "relax" or "I am relaxed" or "I am at ease"), or making a sound ("om"). You may do these calming actions repeatedly (silently or aloud) while inhaling and exhaling.

Gently tapping on your thighs or biceps helps; tap them in an alternating, slow pattern, left-right, left-right, and so on.

**Relax.** After focusing on what you're feeling, let go and don't worry about how you're doing. When you notice your mind wander, take a deep breath and return to what you chose for your calm focus.

**Emotional mindfulness.** Allow yourself to feel all emotions, name them, and let them pass without judgment.

### **Body Scan Meditation**

Purpose: To increase awareness of physical sensations and release tension.

Exercise:

Lie down in a comfortable position with your arms at your sides and your legs uncrossed.

Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths, focusing on the sensation of the air entering and leaving your body – sensations in your nose, the back of your nasal cavity, your chest, your belly, your shoulders rising and falling.

Begin by directing your attention to the toes of your left foot, noticing any sensations without trying to change them.

Gradually move your attention upward through your body – to your right foot, to your ankle, calf, knee, thigh, groin, buttocks, lower back, abdomen, upper back, and so on—pausing at each part to observe sensations.

If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the body part you are focusing on.

Continue until you have scanned your entire body, ending with the top of your head.

### **Mindful Breathing**

Purpose: To calm the mind and activate the relaxation response.

Exercise:

Sit or lie down in a comfortable position.

Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths, allowing your body to relax with each exhale.

Bring your attention to the natural rhythm of your breath as it flows in and out of your nostrils.

If your mind begins to wander, gently guide it back to the breath, using it as an anchor.

It may help to hold the inner edge of your index fingers lightly against the middle of each thumb. After a while, you may feel your pulse there. You may also place one or both palms on your chest or abdomen and feel the rise and fall of your breathing.

Continue for 5-10 minutes, or until you feel a sense of calm.

### **Loving-Kindness Meditation (for Nighttime Anxiety)**

Purpose: To cultivate positive emotions and reduce stress.

Exercise:

Sit or lie in a comfortable position and close your eyes.

Take a few deep breaths and focus on your heart area.

Silently repeat phrases such as, "May I be safe. May I be happy. May I be at ease. May I live in peace."

After a few minutes, extend these wishes to others, visualizing them, silently saying, "May you be safe. May you be happy. May you be at ease. May you live in peace."

You may repeat this with each loved one, the wider group of people you know, your community, animals.

Continue for 10-15 minutes, allowing the feelings of kindness and compassion to grow.

## Conclusion

Mindfulness meditation offers a powerful, evidence-based approach to overcoming insomnia and improving sleep. By addressing the psychological and physiological factors that disrupt rest, mindfulness fosters a state of relaxation, reduces hyper-arousal, and promotes a healthier relationship with sleep. Through techniques such as body scans, mindful breathing, and loving-kindness meditation, individuals can build a sustainable practice that enhances their sleep quality and overall well-being. As the body and mind learn to rest, the path to restorative sleep becomes a natural and achievable goal.

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