



sound

before you hit
the pillow, go
to the mat

sleep

by robin westen

It's like a scene from *Sex and the City*. Kinda. When I get together with my pals for our weekly shoot-the-breeze fest, our conversation inevitably turns to longing. "I haven't had enough in months," complains Dede, a willowy 43-year-old mother of three and busy graphic designer. The others nod forlornly then add their own heart-breaking stories of frustration and loss. "When I don't get any, I feel drained, hopeless and old," moans 38-year-old Beth, a hyper-scheduled physical therapist and mother of twins.

Naturally, if anyone overheard us, they would assume my companions were kvetching about their sex lives. Not so. The source of their collective desire is Somnus—not Eros—the god of sleep, the deep, long, uninterrupted kind; the stuff dreams are made on.

Turns out we're not the only ones losing sleep. According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), insomnia afflicts more than 70 million Americans. Fifty-eight percent of adults—twice as many women as men—complain of having trouble getting to sleep, staying asleep or waking too early. But how much shut-eye do you need? A Japanese study followed the sleeping patterns of 100,000 people for 10 years. The scientists concluded that subjects who slept an average of seven hours a night lived healthier and longer lives than those who slept fewer hours.

My most powerful sleep solution is my Pilates practice. Often medical practitioners overlook the ability of certain exercises to restore relaxation and harmony to the body as

well as ease muscle tension. But Pilates pros across the country share a wonderful secret: If you take classes regularly, you'll reap deep relaxation and sleep-enhancing benefits.

AHHHH, PILATEZZZZZZ

You may have personally experienced the deep, restful sleep that often comes after a particularly invigorating workout. And it's not all in your head. As 30-year-veteran instructor Julian Littleford, the owner of J.L. Body Conditioning in Del Mar, CA, explains, "Pilates' meditative breath pattern during the Hundred can reduce anxiety by promoting so-called 'feel good' serotonin, a neurotransmitter released in the brain." Serotonin plays a major role in the sleep-wake cycle as well as contributing to our overall feelings of well-being.

Along with meditative breathing, Littleford recommends practicing spinal stretches. "They help eliminate stress in the body by easing muscle tension," he says. (See "Pilatezzz's Sleepytime Practice," page 67.)

Pilates instructor Ebba Legaspi, owner of the ENL Studio in Watertown, MA, also sees sleep-inducing results in her clients who focus on breathing—in particular, one client who suffers from restless sleep and nightmares. "On the days she takes my class, she reports sleeping throughout the night, uninterrupted," says Legaspi. "The deep breathing sends the breath into the lower lobes of her lungs, which stretches the ribs laterally. Her whole body relaxes from the diaphragm throughout. It's a form of calming meditation."

Relaxation has long been known to help induce sleep, but many don't connect this with Pilates. "Exercise and breathing have the ability to interrupt the vicious cycle in which mental strain and physical tension create exhaustion and interfere with sleep," says 20-year veteran Pilates instructor Elizabeth Larkam, director of Pilates & Beyond at Western Athletic Clubs in San Francisco. "To reduce the resting tension values of your musculature as well as deepen and slow your breath rhythms, practice your mat exercises slowly and patiently, minimizing force and honing precision." Larkam suggests doing the following sequence prior to a warm bath and bed: Assisted Roll-up, Spine Stretch, Spine Twist, Saw, Side Kick (with head supported on a pillow) and Swan I.

"There are no studies specifically correlating Pilates to improved sleep," notes Michele S. Olson, Ph.D., FACSM, professor of exercise science at Auburn University Montgomery, in Alabama. "But there's plenty of research to link exercise in general—moderate intensity and heart-rate elevating—to reducing stress and benefiting sleep." Olson has personally tested and found Bridging, the Side Lift (Side Bridge) and Pilates Push-ups to increase heart rate and burn energy. On top of that, she points to the meditative qualities of breathwork, flow and focus as great ways to unwind.

My local Brattleboro Pilates instructor Jane LoMonaco, who works out of the Brattleboro School of Dance, adds: "Taking classes helps flush toxins from the muscles, gives you a general

sense of well-being and helps you relax." But, she cautions, "it's not a good idea to pump up your body right before sleep." The best time to take a class is at least five to six hours before bedtime. "It takes several hours to completely relax after a high-intensity workout."

Still, LoMonaco makes this suggestion when turning in for the night: "When you're in bed, tune in to Pilates deep abdominal breathing and count your breath for around three minutes, until you feel your body and mind become relaxed and centered. The sound of one's own breath can be as sweet and soothing as any good lullaby. It certainly helps me sleep like a baby."

THE ABC'S OF ZZZ'S

Along with incorporating relaxation moves into your practice, examine everyday habits that might be preventing you from easily drifting off. Sleep experts say there are several basic reasons that Americans aren't getting enough sleep. The most common is stress, which suppresses the hormones secreted by the hypothalamus—one of the brain's sleep centers. Michael Breus, Ph.D., the "Sleep Expert" for WebMD and author of *Good Night: The Sleep Doctor's 4-Week Program to Better Sleep and Better Health* (Dutton, 2006), agrees. "Anxiety and stress—whether from job loss, relationship problems, money issues or feelings of being overwhelmed—lead to being hyper-scheduled and out of control, which is the number one reason people lose sleep." Breus emphasizes that there are many ways to reduce stress, including deep breathing, exercising, listening to music, taking a warm bath or removing yourself from the source of your anxiety.

He also fingers caffeine as a major culprit, and he's not just talking about an after-dinner cup of joe. "Most people don't know caffeine has a half-life of up to 12 hours," he says. "If you have a cup at 2 p.m. and you're still tossing and turning at midnight,

there's a good chance caffeine is keeping you awake." He considers decaf to be an acceptable alternative since there are only five milligrams of caffeine in an eight-ounce cup. If you must consume caffeinated drinks—including teas and sodas—he recommends fueling up before 3 p.m. if you don't have sleep problems and at least 12 hours before bedtime if you do.

If caffeine's not problematic, look into your physiology. According to the NIH, sleep apnea, a disorder that triggers

pilatezzz's sleepytime practice

Julian Littleford recommends a slow, seated body stretch before bedtime to prepare for restful sleep. "This allows the body to stretch and release tight back muscles and overall tension, while deepening breath and easing your body and mind," he says.

Sit on your mat with your legs extended a little wider than shoulder-width apart and feet flexed. Lift your arms parallel to your thighs.

Inhale, pull abs in deeply and extend your spine, reaching the top of your head toward the ceiling. Exhale as you round over, dropping your chin toward your chest. Keep the spine rounded, as if it were draped over a large beach ball. Repeat 5 times, fewer if you experience discomfort.

brief interruptions in breathing during sleep (associated with shake-the-walls snoring) is jolting awake upwards of 18 million Americans.

Additionally, some 12 million of us have Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS), a sensory motor disorder characterized by such sensations in the legs as tingling, crawling or pulling. According to the RLS Foundation, some cases have been associated with low

iron levels or vitamin deficiencies. If you suspect RLS is keeping you up, try taking supplemental iron along with vitamin E, the B vitamins—including folic acid—and magnesium to relieve symptoms. Reducing or eliminating caffeine and alcohol consumption, as well as getting regular exercise and massage, may also work. For more intractable cases, physicians sometimes prescribe dopamine-receptor agonists—pharmaceuticals similar to those used to treat Parkinson's disease. And it's not just the afflicted who suffer. Even sharing a bed with a restless sleeper, or someone suffering with RLS or sleep apnea, can disrupt your own good night. In these cases, the only answer may be to sleep in separate beds—or even different rooms.

Sometimes it's the feng shui of our everyday setup that can cause sleepless nights. Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D., author of *From Fatigued to Fantastic!* (Avery, 2001), says that not setting the stage for slumber can be a major factor. "If you use your bed as a workstation, when you're ready to shut down for the night, your brain will probably still be charging." For a similar reason, Teitelbaum says, "TV viewing in the hour before bedtime, especially of exciting or disturbing shows—or reading a heart-pounding or emotionally engaging book—will also keep you awake because it engages busy brain activity or can cause stress. It's best to engage in low-key reading material right before you want to nod off."

Sometimes, you just can't avoid putting your body in a place or situation that unintentionally deters your slumber. When you're on schedule and the sun goes down, the hormone melatonin is naturally secreted by the pineal gland, a pea-size structure near the center of the brain. But when you're on a trip that crosses several time zones, your internal clock may get



out of synch. The result is jet lag—feeling excessively groggy during the day and wide-eyed and bushy-tailed at bedtime. To help regulate sleep-wake cycles on a long-distance trip, try melatonin supplements. Start at a low dose such as 1.5 mg and build from there as needed. Check the package for instructions. Melatonin is available without a prescription.

But be careful when using commonly recommended remedies—what works for others may not work for you. Although many resort to a night-cap to do the trick, according to the National Sleep Foundation (NSF) even though alcohol may help you fall asleep thanks to its temporary sedating effect, it can disrupt the second half of slumber and make returning to deep sleep even more difficult.

The NSF also reports that medications can lead to insomnia, including some of those taken for colds and

allergies, high blood pressure, heart disease, thyroid disease, birth control, asthma, pain and depression. If you must take these medications, make a point of speaking to your doctor about how you can counteract any insomniac side effects they may be causing.

With all these enemies of slumber on the march, you might ask if a solid night's sleep is just a dream. Not according to many experts, who offer these practical and proven techniques.

Listen to music. University of Nevada, Reno, researchers found women fall asleep faster, experience fewer nighttime awakenings and feel more satisfied with their overall quality of sleep after listening to music. To quiet your mind and relax your body before tuning in, try listening to some soft music that you enjoy.

Nix naps. The Mayo Clinic recommends avoiding or limiting daytime naps, since taking one can make it more difficult to fall asleep at night. If you can't get

along without one, limit it to less than an hour and take it before 3 p.m.

Be cool. Your body's temperature and the brain's sleep-wake cycle are closely linked, reports the National Sleep Research Project. And the NSF says that in most cases, temperatures above 75°F and below 54° will disrupt sleep, yet even researchers fail to agree on the ideal temperature for sleep. Still, most believe that a slightly cool room contributes to good sleep because it mimics what occurs inside the body when its internal temperature drops to its lowest level during the night.

Make your bedroom a sleep and sex sanctuary. Leave stress out of your bedroom and create a serene sanctuary with no work and no worries, experts concur. Decorate your sleeping space with soft lights or candles, hang a painting or photographs of a bucolic scene like a calm lake or

n a t u r a l a l t e r n a t i v e s

More than 1.6 million Americans are using complementary and alternative medicine instead of prescription medication to encourage sleep, according to a recent study by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Bethesda, MD. Herbal remedies can be especially effective because they work holistically by going after contributing factors, other issues such as anxiety or digestive discomfort. Barbara L. Heller, LCSW, a psychotherapist in Binghamton, NY, and author of *How to Sleep Soundly Tonight: 250 Simple and Natural Ways to Prevent Sleeplessness* (Storey, 2001), offers the following suggestions.

Drink milk. A study published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that a protein naturally occurring in milk may not only improve sleep

quality but also boost alertness the following day. Milton Erman, M.D., medical director of Pacific Sleep Medicine Services in La Jolla, CA,



says, "Milk contains the protein alpha-lactalbumin, rich in tryptophan, that tells the brain the message to sleep."

Love lavender.

David Stretch, Ph.D., of the Greenwood Institute of Child Health at the University of Leicester in

England, and his colleagues discovered that lavender oil could replace drug treatment for insomnia because it encourages drowsiness. Barbara Heller suggests relaxing in a warm tub with lavender bath salts, or put-

ting a lavender sachet between your pillow and pillowcase.

Cool off with black cohosh. If your sleep is disrupted by night sweats, this Native American herb (at health stores in capsule form) may provide help. "This perennial plant that is a member of the buttercup family has also been used to treat hot flashes and provide relief from other menopausal symptoms," notes Heller.

Sip herbal tea. Many combination teas are readily available in health stores. Look for words like "sleep" in the name and ingredients including valerian, chamomile, catnip, oats, mint, passionflower and hops. I like Willow Therapeutics' organic Counting Sheep tea (willowtherapeutics.com).

Try valerian. "This is the premier herb for stress and insomnia," says Heller. "The odoriferous herb is best taken in capsule or liquid form." —RW

vast sky, choose fabrics that are soft on your eyes, and be sure to wear comfy clothes to bed.

Stay in the dark. "Your brain associates light with being awake, so even a sliver from the window or your alarm clock display can push ahead your wake time," says Michael Breus. Try tight-fitting window shades or even an eye mask.

But brighten up. In a 1993 study conducted at School of Psychology at Flinders University, in Adelaide, Australia, subjects who suffered from early-morning insomnia underwent bright-light stimulation in the evening. Their phototherapy involved exposure to 2,500 lux light from 8 p.m. to midnight. The result: Subjects fell asleep at their normal times but stayed asleep an average of 72 minutes longer than usual. You can buy a fluorescent light box of at least 2,500 lux (a measurement equal to a fraction of natural sunlight) at lighttherapyproducts.com. To set your natural body clock, sit in front of the box for 20 to 30 minutes daily. Timing depends on the degree of insomnia. If you can't get to sleep at night, light therapy early in the morning is best. If you wake too early in the morning, have your dose of light therapy in the late afternoon or early evening.

Stay on schedule. "Try not to let your daily bed or wake-up times vary by more than two hours," suggests neurologist Frisca Yan-Go, M.D., medical director of the UCLA Sleep Disorders Center in Santa Monica, CA. Studies show changes in routine disrupt sleep.

Get out of bed. If you can't fall asleep within 15 to 20 minutes, the Food and Drug Administration recommends leaving your bed and reading a book or doing another relaxing activity for a while, rather than trying harder to fall asleep. When you start dozing, get back into bed.

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