

Can't Sleep? Try Sticking Your Head in the Freezer.

In a new book, a sleep scientist offers tips for better rest — without reaching for a pill.



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Published Nov. 1, 2022 Updated Nov. 2, 2022

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A good night's sleep can make us more empathetic, more creative, better parents and better partners, according to Aric Prather, a psychologist at the University of California, San Francisco who treats insomnia and is the author of the new book "The Sleep Prescription." Sleep can help us manage stress; it can make us competent and capable and better able to take on the day. But Dr. Prather says we too often view sleep as an afterthought — until we find ourselves frozen in the middle of the night, our thoughts racing, fumbling for rest or relief.

Some people might reach for a supplement or sleep aid. A 2013 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey found that one in eight adults with trouble sleeping reported using sleep aids. But Dr. Prather said there are simple steps we can take throughout the day and night to get better rest, which he outlines in the book, out Nov. 1 from Penguin Life. "It's not something you do," he added. "It's something that comes to you."

Here are some of his science-backed tips for sounder sleep.

During the day

Carve out time for "scheduled worry."

"No one ever says, 'I was awake in the middle of the night, and I was only thinking of good things,'" Dr. Prather said. Throughout the day, we might be too busy to linger on our thoughts, but at night, when we try to let our brains pause without distractions, "our thoughts can get very, very loud," Dr. Prather wrote.

To beat back nighttime rumination and anxiety, Dr. Prather recommended in an interview devoting part of your day to worry. Block out 10 to 20 minutes to write down what you're anxious about, or just think about it, without searching for a solution. If you do that consistently, he said, your worries won't seep into the night — and if they do, you can remind yourself that you have a dedicated time to address them the next day.

Instead of reaching for caffeine, plunge your head in the freezer.

If you regularly reach for coffee to get you through an afternoon slump, you'll still have caffeine in your system by bedtime, said Dr. Prather.

Instead, he recommends getting an energy boost elsewhere. You can go for a brisk walk in the afternoon, or spend five to 10 minutes taking a break from work and engaging your brain in a simple task — pull weeds in the garden, reorganize a bookshelf, turn on some music and really focus on a song. Focusing on a non-work task can energize our brains, Dr. Prather said, jolting us out of our routine. Or, for a more extreme option, stick your head in the freezer. That brief shock of cold activates your arousal system, Dr. Prather said, like jumper cables on a car battery to wake you up — no coffee run needed.

Declutter your bedroom

Your computer, a heap of laundry, the pile of sticky notes reminding you of all of your unfinished tasks — clear those all out of the room where you sleep. If that's not possible, at least move them so you can't see them from your bed, Dr. Prather advises. You want your sleeping area to calm you down, not remind you of everything you need to get done.

To further set yourself up for sleep, get blackout curtains to block out light, or invest in a comfortable sleep mask. And consider turning down the heat — or turning up the air conditioning — so that your sleeping area is between 60 and 68 degrees at night. You want your room to be dark and cool, Dr. Prather said, in order to prod the core temperature of our bodies to drop, which happens naturally as we sleep.

Before bed

Stop treating your brain like a laptop.

You can't expect your brain to instantly power down the way a laptop does when you close the lid, Dr. Prather said. Instead, you should plan a transition period that lets your brain wind down. Sometimes that's not possible, he acknowledged; work deadlines and parenting responsibilities might mean you're engaged right up until you turn off the lights. But ideally, you would give yourself a two hour period to "turn down the volume on your sympathetic nervous system," he said, cuing to your body and brain that you're gearing up to rest.

You should spend that time doing something pleasant and soothing, like listening to a favorite podcast, chatting on the couch with your partner or watching TV. Dr. Prather offers his patients what he calls a menu of options for that power-down period — they can take a luxurious bath, write in a gratitude journal or even sit outside, weather permitting, and look at the stars. The goal is to find "low arousal" activities that you enjoy, he said.

Rewatch your favorite show.

Many clinicians caution against screen time before bed, but Dr. Prather said he pays more attention to the content of what people consume as they settle down for the night, rather than whether they're looking at a laptop, a paperback or their phone. A thriller — whether it's a novel or a movie — can prompt you to stay awake a bit longer or to mull over the answer to a mystery as you're trying to fall asleep. Instead, he recommended watching something calming, and ideally, a show you've seen before. Dr. Prather turns to "The Office," which he said he's rewatched more times than he can count, because he already knows what happens next.

If you're struggling to stay asleep in the night

If you can't sleep, move.

As people age, especially in their fifties, sixties and seventies, sleep can become more fragmented, Dr. Prather said. People may need to urinate in the night more frequently, or pain might keep them awake. But it's essential that older adults get sufficient rest — a recent study found that adults over 50 who slept for five hours or less each night had a greater risk of developing chronic diseases than those who slept for at least seven hours.

In general, if you are struggling to fall or stay asleep you should get out of bed, Dr. Prather said. Give yourself 20 minutes or so to try to sleep, but if you're still wired, head to the couch or living room and do something quiet, Dr. Prather advised, like knitting or meditating. You only want to associate the position you sleep in with actually falling asleep; if your body gets used to staying awake, and struggling to sleep, in that position, you'll have a harder time conditioning yourself to sleep through the night.

If you don't want to move, or are unable to, even sitting up in the bed can help rewire your brain or flipping over and placing your head where your feet typically lay. While in that new position, you can read, listen to soft, gentle music or put on a soothing podcast — any activity that winds you down, until you feel sleepy again and are ready to get back into your sleeping position.

Don't beat yourself up about one night of bad sleep (or several).

When people are in the throes of a sleepless night, they often stress about how the lack of sleep will clobber them the next day, Dr. Prather said. But one or even a few nights of little rest won't ruin the way you sleep long-term, Dr. Prather said. "Any parent of small kids can tell you that you can survive on less sleep," he said. "You can have these off nights. Your body is resilient."

If you consistently find yourself unable to sleep, you might want to seek out a therapist or clinician trained in cognitive behavioral therapy, which Dr. Prather uses to treat insomnia. Even in chronic cases, he said, poor sleep is curable. A sleep specialist may also prescribe medication in extreme cases or treat underlying conditions that can lead to poor sleep, like sleep apnea.

"When people have insomnia, because it's so distressing, they're trying to figure out all the things they can do to allow sleep to work again, like, 'What can I fix?' And that kind of effort is actually incompatible with sleeping," he said.

"Sleeping's about letting go."

Dani Blum is an associate writer for Well at The Times.