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## Wellbeing



# Nod of approval

Warm milk and meditation can be more effective than counting sheep, writes **Richard Jinman**.

**L**ike many shift workers, Michael has trouble sleeping. Four years of alternating day and night shifts have left him with head-splitting migraines and insomnia.

"I can go for days without sleep," he says. "I lie in bed with my eyes closed but I'm not even close to sleep."

His story draws sympathetic nods from the 14 people sitting in a warm, windowless room in central Sydney. A young designer says his search for a good night's sleep has led him to meditation tapes and remedies such as valerian and melatonin.

"I strain myself trying to sleep," he says.

A middle-aged woman tells the group she has woken every night for the past 10 years. She makes her way downstairs and eats bread and Vegemite. The 3am snacks haven't helped her waistline, but they do seem to get her back to sleep.

"My father was a chronic insomniac," she says. "And I'm driving my husband bonkers."

Brenda Doherty, the tall, slender woman standing at the head of the class, nods intently. A sleep counsellor and the leader of a one-day workshop designed to help people conquer insomnia, she's heard many similar tales of pre-dawn torture. The Buddhist and former yoga instructor tells us she has fought and won her own battle with sleeplessness.

"Everything I teach, I practise," she says.

The Elizabethan poet Sir Philip Sidney called sleep "the certain knot of peace". But in modern societies strung out on caffeine, adrenaline and anxiety, the knot is frayed and far from certain.

Research suggests the average adult needs seven to eight hours of slumber a night. Sleep allows the body to rejuvenate and repair itself and when we burn the candle at both ends - or, like Michael, we find it impossible to fall under its spell - we run up a sleep debt that eventually will have to be repaid.

Doherty says this debt can be deadly. NRMA statistics suggest one in five road accidents are linked to fatigue. Lack of sleep and the resultant poor decision-making also

played its part in disasters such as Chernobyl, the Exxon Valdez and the Challenger Shuttle.

Doherty's workshop doesn't offer a silver bullet to slay sleeplessness. It explains the normal sleep cycle in scientific detail - why, for example, we often feel an energy slump at 3pm and are more likely to wake with a start at 3am - and provides a plan of action that includes nutritional advice as well as practical breathing and relaxation techniques. She's a compassionate, no-nonsense tutor who has little time for visualisations involving "soft white clouds".

Stress, Doherty says, is the No. 1 enemy of sleep as well as the cause of ailments ranging from peptic ulcers to high blood pressure. If we can reduce stress, we stand a much better chance of a good night's sleep.

She gets us to lie on yoga mats - they're provided as part of the \$86 workshop - and leads us through a simple practice designed to correct breathing patterns, improve oxygen absorption and enhance the parasympathetic system's function, the part of the nervous system that slows the body down.

Afterwards, I find myself stretching and yawning, just as Doherty predicted. She tells us we need to make this kind of practice a part of our daily routine.

On the subject of nutrition, it appears grandmother was right: warm milk and honey is conducive to sleep. Doherty recommends a quarter of a mug of milk and hot water about 20 minutes before bed time. She also speaks highly of foods rich in vitamin B such as nuts, wholegrains and fish. "Lettuce opium", the white latex sap in the stem of a dark, fresh cos lettuce has a sedative effect.

The class culminates with Doherty leading us through a 15-minute technique that helps bring the busy mind into focus and quieten the body ready for deep sleep. It's so effective, I pass out within five minutes and wake with a start to the sound of chairs being cleared away.

For details about the SleepEasy workshops, phone 9977 0213 or email [info@sleepeasy.com.au](mailto:info@sleepeasy.com.au)