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DITCH THE AMBIEN: ANNE UNDERWOOD EXPLORES THE SECRET TO QUALITY SLEEP

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NEWS

Losing sleep? You're not alone. According to the National Sleep Foundation, a third of Americans are losing zzz's over the state of the economy, personal financial woes and stress on the job—assuming they still have a job. Drugs are the fastest, surest way to a night's shuteye. But many people don't like sleeping pills or, well, don't have the insurance to pay for them.

If that's you, sleep consultant Michael Krugman, founder of the Sounder Sleep System, may be able to help. Krugman holds "sleep sominars" in which he teaches drug-free approaches to shaking insomnia. More than 200 instructors in 12 countries are now teaching his method, which includes 50 different techniques. And in July, he will be issuing a set of three CD's called "Rest Assured."

NEWSWEEK's **Anne Underwood** spoke with him recently in New York. Excerpts:

Aside from the economic situation, why is sleep such an issue today?

We're hurried, worried and harried. We work long hours and commute long hours. A study of commuters on the Long Island Railroad showed that the more time you spend commuting, the less time you sleep. Another study showed the more you work over 40 hours a week, the less you sleep. These extra hours come out of sleep time.

Why do we need sleep?

Sleep deprivation is torture—literally. Sleep is necessary for the healthy function of every organ system in the body. For a long time scientists had no idea why we sleep. Lately, we've gotten two very good answers. Sleep regulates emotional wellbeing. It's also needed for learning and memory formation. Different types of learning are consolidated in the brain during different stages of sleep. I think of these different stages as "sleep nutrients." You must get some of all them in order to have a balanced diet of sleep. But when we have poor sleep, we don't get enough of some of them.

Why did you decide to research this topic?

About 10 years ago I had a period of terrible insomnia. My doctor prescribed a drug. I tried it once. It left me feeling dopey and dizzy. I couldn't function. I decided that medication wasn't the right path for me. My whole professional life had been oriented toward movement education—using movement, breath and self-awareness for healing. So I drew on principles common to movement-based systems like yoga, qigong, Sufi meditation, and the Feldenkrais Method [a modern method for improving the efficiency of movement] in order to improve my own sleep.

It seems paradoxical to use movement to induce sleep.

I grew up in a Jewish family, but not religious. At the age of 3 or 4, I went to the synagogue in Newark with my grandfather. There were all these old men wearing prayer shawls and phylacteries and rocking as they prayed. Later when I learned meditation and studied with a Sufi master, I saw the same type of movement. It's profoundly calming, especially if you slow it down to an almost dreamlike pace, as in tai chi. And, of course, mothers everywhere have used rocking for eons to help their children sleep. If you wake up in the night and can't get back to sleep, try this for ten minutes. Sit on the edge of your bed and very gently raise your head each time you breathe in, and lower your head each time you breathe out. Then get back in bed. See what the effect is.

You give people techniques to practice during the day. Why?

Most people with insomnia exhibit symptoms of hyper-arousal—a chronic over-activation of the body's innate stress-response mechanism. It's like being in fight-or-flight,

emergency-response mode non-stop. You can't just switch that off at bedtime. If you want to get a handle on insomnia, you need to do something about hyper-arousal not just at bedtime, but during the day, too.

What kind of techniques do you practice during the day?

Try this. Fold your hands in your lap, lacing the fingers and thumbs. Then straighten your index fingers, so the pads of the two fingers rest against each other. Sit quietly like that for five to ten minutes. A huge amount of real estate in the brain is devoted to the hands. When you're awake and active, the hands are very busy, and so is your brain. When you stabilize your hands like that, your brain slows down, and you become calm and tranquil. That's one reason why Christians fold their hands when they pray. Hindus and Buddhists have static hand positions called mudras that help produce meditative states. I add very subtle movements that make the effect more powerful—in this case, very lightly pressing downward with the thumbs on exhalation and relaxing the thumbs on inhalation.

How does adding micro-movements help?

Large, vigorous, powerful movements are stimulating to the brain. Slow, soft, infrequent movements are tranquilizing. When you make very small movements—as small as you can, so small they're barely perceptible—they quiet the body and mind.

Do people fall asleep while you're teaching them the techniques?

Yes. I led a 6-day retreat in Costa Rica. It was in an open-air building on the beach. The sound of the waves was hypnotic. Everyone fell into a deep sleep. It was like a fairy tale, where people go to sleep for 100 years. I thought, how am I going to wake them up? Just then an iguana ran into the room, chased by a dog. The dog cornered the iguana, which was whacking its tail against the wooden walls, making an awful clatter. People slowly opened their eyes and gradually turned to see what all the fuss was about. No one even seemed startled.

What about the role of sleep hygiene?

I always include the basics of sleep hygiene in my classes—go to bed and get up at a regular time, dim the lights for an hour or so before sleep, avoid stimulating activities just before bed, limit caffeine.

Have you done any studies to prove that your system works?

There has been a pilot study at the University of Oldenburg in Germany with very promising results. We're getting ready to do a study at a sleep lab in New Mexico. Scientists at Harvard figured out that in good sleep, when you breathe in, the heart speeds up. When you breathe out, it slows down. This is called cardiopulmonary

coupling. But in people with troubled sleep this coupling is much reduced. We want to test whether my techniques help improve cardiopulmonary coupling.

But at the moment, you have no scientific proof that your method works?

No. My discoveries are based on experience and observation, not laboratory studies. But I've seen clear results in my practice, and so have my students. Yoga was practiced for thousands of years before anyone did scientific studies on it. I don't think we can wait for science to catch up. We need a safe, practical insomnia solution now.

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