

Are you an insomniac? About one in five of us suffers from sleep disrupt

Chance to dream

With sleep, we can cope. Without it, we're barely human. Yet about a fifth of us suffer from sleep disruption and the problem may be getting worse. Although joint pain and medical conditions are two of the most important contributors to insomnia, sleep scientists believe that our irregular, 24-hour-a-day lifestyles are preventing us from establishing the day-night routines so essential for sound sleep.

Researchers at the University of Surrey have monitored brain activity over 24 hours and found that there is a narrow window where we are ready for sleep — on a graph it looks like a valley between mountain ranges. If we miss the right time, we must climb over a mountain range to get there.

This week, a new study demonstrated that we are prey to yet another common sleep disruptor — our partners. Two thirds of people say that their partners' snoring keeps them awake. The consequences are far-reaching. When the brain is deprived of sleep it closes down the parts that allow us to perform complex tasks, and relies more on the primitive part, the amygdala, which acts on instinct and emotion. This means we get clumsy and less able to make fine judgments. Studies have shown that sleep-deprived people are ten times more likely to cause road accidents than drink-drivers.

Apart from ditching our partners, or living by the strict routines of our ancestors, is there anything we can do? More and more people don't want to boost the 16 million sleeping pill prescriptions already issued annually, and are turning to complementary therapies to help them sleep. Research into whether they work or not is thin on the ground, but our guinea pigs found that they had much to offer.

SIMON CROMPTON

ACUPUNCTURE



'AS THE NEEDLE SLID IN, I FELT A SENSE OF RELEASE'

Insomniac: Francesca Lebens, 24

Method: Acupuncture

Problem: I love reading in bed but am never able to put the book down when I feel sleepy. Last year, as an aspiring actress at drama school, I tore a disc in my lower spine. Since then the pain has stopped me sleeping altogether.

Treatment: I had six sessions with Gerad Kite, who is also a trained psychotherapist. I had to promise to be in bed by 11pm and to stop reading in bed and drinking coffee in the day. The acupuncture needles went pretty much everywhere, including my eye sockets, which was terrifying but painless. As the needle slid in I felt a warm ache and then a sense of radiation and release.

Result: I felt an immediate sense of wellbeing and one week later was sleeping through the entire night. I was incredibly impressed.

Therapist: "Francesca has a weakness in the water elements. I treated the meridian pathways related to her kidney and bladder to restore the natural balance of active during the day; inactive at night."

Price: £80 for initial consultation and £50 for follow-up. Normally six sessions are sufficient.

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