

BROKEN DREAMS

ELLEN BURNEY hasn't slept. For a while. As she investigates the sleep industry's tech, tricks and trackers, she discovers that the answer to real rest might have been there all along.

Good morning Sarah. Sending you this idea at 2.20 a.m. because I can't sleep...

I should go to slumber school, I tell 72's editorial director, Sarah Harris. For years I've suffered from nocturnal panic attacks. Every night, my mind becomes the stage for an endless parade of existential fears. Even when I do manage to sleep, I'm visited by nightmares and hallucinations so lifelike and extreme I was once investigated by neurologists for potential epilepsy. (Their cause was eventually dismissed as "psychological".) Sometimes I wake up with unexplainable nervous energy. Other times I don't sleep at all. But really, I'm just your average anxiety-ridden insomniac. According to a 2024 survey by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, 74% of Americans say they sometimes, often or always experience disrupted sleep due to stress, followed by 68% and 55% due to anxiety and depression, respectively.

The sleep story is assigned to me but I'm too tired to start writing. So tired, in fact, that I am scammed online the same night. Zombie-like, I hand my card details to digital bandits, then, with a horrible lurch of realization, immediately call my bank in tears.

"It should come as no surprise that sleep is fundamental for longevity," Dr Oliver Bernath, consultant neurologist and sleep physician at London's Reborne Longevity clinic, tells me. "Not just for extending our natural lifespan, but even for avoiding premature death." Oh God, I think. "Sleep is one of the three pillars of healthy life, together with healthy nutrition and exercise."

The same foundation paves the Ayurvedic approach to sleep. "In Ayurveda, sleep is one of the three essential pillars of health, alongside nourishment and mindful living," explains Sandeep Uniyal, wellness practitioner and yoga instructor at Six Senses Con Dao in Vietnam, where new curated programs focus on sleep optimization. "It's vital for restoring physical strength, emotional balance, and mental clarity." The quality of sleep is shaped by the three doshas: *vata*, *pitta* and *kapha*. "When balanced, they invite deep, restorative rest. When out of balance, they can disturb sleep in distinct ways: *Vata* imbalance often brings restlessness and trouble falling asleep; *pitta* imbalance may lead to light or interrupted sleep;



PATRIZIO DI MASSIMO, COVER UP, 2022

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and more likely to run a red light.” PROFESSOR RUSSELL FOSTER

and excess *kapha* can make sleep feel heavy, with difficulty waking in the morning.”

Bernath explains that all aspects of recovery — healing, adaptation, development, growth — from our daily demands happens in sleep. “Sleep has been neglected for a long time and has even been actively reframed as weakness in a culture of over-achievement,” he says. “It’s driven by the myth that four to five hours of sleep is sufficient and anything longer is a sign of laziness. Sensible people now recognize that healthy and sufficient sleep is essential, and we know that performance of any task — physical or mental — declines sharply with chronic sleep deprivation.”

The near-\$70billion sleep market relies upon the suffering of people like me — the great unsleepables. We might go up the wooden hill to Bedfordshire but we never get to Sleepsville. While you have a healthy sleep relationship, we are permanently twilight-zoned. We count beeps, not sheep, investing in data-driven sleep tech including vagus nerve stimulators (devices and wearables that trick the brain to sleep via electrical pulses), sleep headbands that use acoustic stimulation to slow down brain activity, and neuro-acoustic apps. Even longevity entrepreneur Bryan Johnson — a self-proclaimed “professional sleeper” who goes to bed at 8.30 p.m. and won’t eat after 11 a.m. — uses the Pulsetto Vagus Nerve Stimulator to calm his nervous system before bed. Wellness clinics offer dedicated sleep programs with nocturnal polygraph diagnosis (at-home wearables to study sleep), EEG tests that record the brain’s electrical activity to detect abnormalities such as seizures, and intravenous laser serum therapy. Laser light is thought to stimulate melatonin production and regulate the circadian rhythm.

Now it’s all about AI smart beds embedded with sensors, soundscapes and cooling systems — even Mark Zuckerberg tracks his “very instrumented” sleep cycles via an Oura Ring. Last year saw the launch of The Sleep Lab suites at Equinox Hotel New York. Designed by Dr Matthew Walker, a professor of neuroscience and psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and founder and director of the Center for Human Sleep Science, the sleep chambers feature ice showers, high-tech mattresses and curated rituals to align with your body’s circadian rhythm.

I video call Professor Russell Foster, director of the Sleep and Circadian Neuroscience Institute at Oxford University. “Sleep was once likened to an upgrade from economy to business class,” he said in his 2013 TED talk, *Why Do We Sleep?* “It’s not even an upgrade from economy to first class. If you don’t sleep, you don’t fly.” Foster is the author of *Life Time: The New Science of the Body Clock, and How It Can Revolutionize Your Sleep and Health*. “Many of us think of sleep as this kind of naughty monster to beat into submission, rather than a wonderful cuddly teddy bear that you can embrace,” he tells me optimistically. I neglect to tell him that when I opened my post earlier, my sleep-deprived brain opted that I put it straight in the freezer. He stresses the importance of not worrying about “one bad night in general” and reassures me

that lots of people actually wake up a lot in the night. Equally, however: “Tired people are more likely to remember negative experiences than positive ones,” and “if you’re not getting enough sleep you will be less empathetic, more impulsive and more likely to run a red light.”

Quality sleep also supports mental health by enhancing emotional resilience, reducing anxiety, and aiding the brain’s ability to manage stress and mood disorders. It’s a catch-22: anxiety equals insomnia. Insomnia equals anxiety. In the months prior to experiencing psychosis in 2013, I averaged four hours of sleep per night. For a decade after, I slept solely due to sleeping pills or the sedative effects of medication. When I came off my medication two years ago, I rolled straight back to my unable-to-sleep state. But, for me at least, turning to a tech-aided solution would only be another crutch to obsess over. I am hoping to find out why my human body is not able to do the most basic of tasks. I already meditate for at least 20 minutes daily, walk a lot and rarely drink caffeine after midday, or alcohol at all. I am scared of sleep masks — they make me feel too vulnerable.

And, look, I’ll admit it, I’m also a little scared about the long-term effect on my face. Insomnia is aging. “Persistently elevated cortisol increases collagen breakdown, weakens elastin fibers and reduces fibroblast activity,” confirms facialist Annee de Mamiel. “The skin becomes slower to recover from environmental stress. This contributes to loss of firmness, reduced elasticity, thinner, more fragile skin and diminished resilience. Sleep deprivation also disrupts circadian gene expression — the internal clock that tells skin when to repair. When that rhythm becomes inconsistent, regeneration becomes less efficient. Over years, this can contribute to structural aging.”

The closest I ever got to having facial filler was the closest I got to a good night’s sleep. Watching a YouTube video of a session the day before my appointment, the comments told me pineapple juice was good for bruising and recommended drinking large amounts the day before. I went straight to the shop, consumed three cartons, and have never slept better. I also saw the size of the needle and canceled the appointment, but I did, at least temporarily, find my sleep cure. Even if consuming so much sugar was unsustainable. And, so, I continued to ebb and flow through an assortment of supplements, from magnesium to melatonin — combinations that always left me foggy the next day.

Could I eat my way to sleep instead? Try a tryptophan diet? What even is that? “Tryptophan is found in whole-food sources like turkey, fish, dairy, legumes, seeds and nuts,” explains April Morgan, head of nutrition at Artah, a supplement brand. “Tryptophan itself is not a sedative, but it is a biochemical precursor for critical sleep and mood regulators.” The body converts tryptophan into serotonin, a neurotransmitter involved in mood, appetite and circadian rhythms. “Serotonin is further converted into melatonin, the hormone that helps regulate the sleep-wake cycle.” Morgan advises

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introducing tryptophan-rich foods gradually over a week or two, adding sources across meals, rather than switching overnight. “It’s important to note the effect is indirect; tryptophan supports the biochemistry of sleep regulation rather than putting you to sleep instantly.” And realistically: “Tryptophan does influence sleep biology, but it’s unlikely that a large proportion of real-world poor sleep is primarily driven by low tryptophan intake compared with more common factors like stress or circadian disruption.”

That evening, the doorbell rings. I open it to see a man, on one knee, with a ring in his hands. A courier is trying to push a small box containing my petal-pink Oura Ring through the letterbox. The tracking device is meant to measure my sleep quality and quantity, but I’m too tired to set it up. I fall asleep only to wake to see a man standing in my bedroom doorway. That hallucination disappears, but I don’t get back to sleep until it’s light outside.

I’m feeling very sleepy now, so check in with Harley Street hypnotherapist and sleep specialist Malminder Gill. She doesn’t do suggestion-based sleep hypnosis, she tells me. “Mine is all wrapped up in a story. The subconscious learns with symbols and imagery, so I use storytelling and analogies.” As suspected, prior psychosis means I’m not a suitable candidate for hypnosis, but Gill gives me some soporific advice. “Quality sleep begins in the deliberate wind-down of the 90 minutes that precede it,” she explains. “The aim is to mute the senses and signal to the brain that the day is over.” She advises a “multi-sensory de-stimulation” of your environment: replacing bright overhead lights with softer lamps instead, cooling the room temperature and ideally avoiding phones entirely a couple of hours before bed. Alternatively: “I strongly recommend switching your phone to gray scale at night. When your screen is black and white, it becomes dull and boring for the brain so you’re less likely to scroll for long.”

The first night I wear my Oura Ring feels like Christmas: I reach for my phone in the morning to check my results and am almost affronted when it tells me I’ve had “truly restorative sleep”. Really? I tell myself it wasn’t a real test since it’s the weekend. On the second night I go to bed an hour early just to make my ring proud. “Sharp as a tack,” it tells me the next day. On the third night the ring records three hours, 45 minutes of “insufficient sleep”. Finally, I think, she’s meeting the real me.

I learn about sleep latency: the time it takes to fall asleep. My pattern is short latency, meaning I usually fall asleep within 10 minutes (getting to sleep has rarely been the problem). My resting heart rate stays elevated for the first four hours, which shows signs of stress, but can also come from eating. In contrast, a low nocturnal heart rate would suggest that a person has entered a state of deep rest and repair, which puts less strain on the heart. The app shows me how much light sleep, rapid-eye movement (REM) sleep and deep (or slow-wave) sleep I get, and I am astonished that I am hitting the right amount of deep sleep. Even more astounded that we only need 90 minutes to two hours of

deep sleep a night. I had always known deep sleep was important for general rejuvenation, but had been under the illusion that we needed a lot of it. It’s the sole reason I thought I must surely be breaking from lack of sleep.

I soon find that once my Oura Ring tells me I am essentially getting the right amount of deep sleep, and that my resilience (qualified as the ability to bounce back from high stress and little sleep) is high, I’m not panicking so much about what I perceive as a lack of sleep. In fact, I am feeling empowered by my data. I don’t have an inability to sleep. I am not broken. When I wake up — and can’t get back to sleep — it’s because of angst and worry in my mind and no supplement will help me there. But my body is doing what it’s supposed to do.

Foster warns me that sleep-tracking apps can come with caveats. “They can be inaccurate, as the algorithm is based on one type of person,” he says. “And they can be addictive.” He tells me about a man who would set his alarm at dawn just to check that he got enough deep sleep. “But as AI advances they will become more sophisticated.”

I realize I’ve been living a lie — and I love it. New studies coming out of California show that our perception of sleep may matter more than the actual amount of sleep we are getting. Could it be that I have an “insomnia identity”? Someone who identifies as an insomniac, but actually gets marginally less sleep than the normies? Last year, researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that more than a third of people who consider themselves insomniacs are, in fact, getting enough sleep.

“Some patients swear to me that they have not slept in weeks,” says Bernath, referencing “paradoxical insomnia”. “This is biologically not possible, but these patients simply do not perceive sleep. The giveaway is that they are also unable to sleep during the day, and none of the sleeping medications work.”

Interestingly, during light sleep — which makes up about 50% of our total sleep and plays a crucial role in memory consolidation and creativity — we often think we are awake. “To some extent, such a mis-perception of sleep becomes increasingly common in chronic insomnia,” continues Bernath. “Hence, most insomnia patients actually get substantially more sleep than they estimate themselves. This does not make insomnia less miserable, it still requires treatment, but the extent of chronic sleep deprivation in chronic insomnia is usually far milder than patients estimate.”

So-called placebo sleep, featured in an earlier 2014 study published in the Journal of Experimental Psychology, showed that when participants were told they had a higher amount of REM sleep than they actually did, they performed better on cognitive tests and alertness drills.

Just when I am beginning to, even, perhaps, *miss* the high wire act of adrenalized exhaustion, I get a truly crappy night of sleep. (What my Oura Ring euphemistically calls, “short but sweet.”) She’s lying, but I’m buying. Because, maybe, it’s the mindset that counts.