

Steve Lindsay's Sleep Tips
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There is no shortage of expert advice on sleep. Exercise. Be regular in when you go to bed. Reserve bed for sleep. Limit alcohol and stimulants. Blah blah blah. That's all well and good, but not so helpful when it's too late to be wise and you're tossing and turning. What then?

The trick, in my experience, is to find some mental activity that is just barely engaging enough to hold your attention for a decent stretch of time. The specifics are likely to vary a lot from person to person and within a person over time.

None of my sleep-inducing tricks would have a chance the moment I put my head on the pillow. Some quieting and settling in must happen first. So, for the first while that I'm in bed I don't even think about going to sleep, I just settle in. Let my motor slow down a bit. Sometimes I just drift off... But sometimes not. Or I sleep for a cycle or two and then awaken and have trouble getting back to sleep. Then I use tricks.

Some of the tricks that work for me involve paying attention to my breathing. Not trying to change my breathing, just paying attention to it (as in meditation).

One that works quite often is trying to figure out what it is I do to breath. The mechanics of it. I don't understand how intercostal muscles work, how they are used to expand the rib cage, while simultaneously the diaphragm presses down, increasing the spatial volume of the lungs which in turn lowers the air pressure within the lungs, causing air to rush in through whichever apertures are available, popping out the tiny alveolae, where the oxygen bonds to hemoglobin. So I try to attend to the muscular/mechanical activity and figure out how I am doing it. I find that oddly relaxing.

As in meditation, I sometimes combine some sort of verbalization with monitoring of breathing. I don't think it matters what it is – it's just a way of reducing worry-related verbalizing via interference. So I might repeat "in" while inhaling and then repeat "out" while exhaling.

Adding just a smidgen of cognitive effort can be helpful. I've had good luck with repeating "in" while inhaling and then "one" while exhaling and then "in" while inhaling and "two" while exhaling and so forth up to "four" and then backwards to three, then two, then one, then two etc. 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 2, 1, 2, 3, 4 etc.

If feeling clever, I try thinking of a prime number in sequence with each exhalation (or, as the primes get bigger, with ever other exhalation).

A non-breathing-related one is to mentally review a recent positive event in as minute a level of detail as I can manage. E.g., remembering every detail of yesterday's lunch. Sort of Cognitive

interview style, trying to remember as many fine-grained details as I can (e.g., noticing that some of the escargot were more deeply covered in garlic butter than were others).

I am a word person, so these are all pretty wordy. I often use alphabetical exercises. E.g., try to think of a music instrument (or an animal or fruit) for each letter of the alphabet in order (accordion, banjo, clarinet...). If I can't get an exemplar for a particular letter within a few breaths I just skip to the next letter. Even better is just to bring to mind, for each letter in the alphabet, some word I think is cool for reason (ameliorate, bacchanalian concertina, duodenum). I have composed poems or little stories of alphabetical words (Alfred bought chocolate dinosaurs every Friday.) Or lists of words that in my secret heart I would like to describe me even if they don't, aspirational and pleasing words (amiable, benevolent, considerate, dependable...).

My latest is crafting sentences of words that all (or mostly) start with a given letter. "After an asparagus and Armagnac aperitif, Amanda ate an appetizer of air-dried armadillo ankles" or "Bored breathless, Bjorn began basting batard with bacon."

Moving away from alphabetical word games, I have had very good luck with imagining making cooking videos. E.g., I would like at some future time to make a video on how to prepare handmade pasta; step by step I imagine how would I go about doing that. How to set up the camera, how to set the stage, what to say, etc..

These things don't always get me to sleep, but they pretty consistently move me in the right direction. I believe that often when I am doing them I enter Stage-1 sleep even though I think I am still awake.

When nothing avails, I listen to something on my phone. Usually classical music. Sometimes a podcast. There is one on The History of the English Language, for example, that is interesting but not exciting or provoking.

Finally, keep in mind that one can get quite a bit of the restorative value of sleep by just resting quietly. Freaking out about not being asleep is not helpful.