



# *Sweet*

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## Back to school and sleeping better: Homeopathic help for insomnia

# EAMS!

by AMY ROTHENBERG, ND

**S**leep is a magical activity. It looks like not much is happening, but in fact, your body is tidying up inside, laying down new brain pathways, adjusting immune function, overseeing hormonal balance, getting rid of wayward cells, and more! Sleep is essential for good physical, cognitive, and emotional health. When you have adequate sleep, your problem-solving skills improve, you learn more efficiently, you make better decisions, and you are more creative. Suboptimal sleep, both in quantity and quality, is a risk factor for many chronic ailments, from cardiovascular disease to diabetes to cancer, as well as for acute illnesses. Not only that, but without adequate sleep, you're more accident-prone.

Yet, more than 40% of Americans are not logging in enough hours of sleep, either by choice or because of insomnia. Plenty of my patients do many good things for their health; they eat well, they exercise, they don't smoke, they avoid excessive alcohol intake, yet they have not been able to stick to a seven- or eight-hour-a-night sleep schedule. Many have challenges falling or staying asleep. Personal computers and smartphones are partly to blame: The constant access to work, social media, and information drives many people across the age spectrum to simply never turn off. To deal with this chronic lack of sleep, a galloping number of people (and at younger and younger ages) turn to pharmaceutical sleep aids, which come with a host of side effects and can be difficult to discontinue.

it could take hours to fall back to sleep. If by chance she slept through the early part of the night, she would find herself wide awake in the wee hours, well before she needed to wake up for school. "Some idea will pop into my head, and then it just zips around my mind," she explained. "That thought might grow to encompass other ideas ... then some worry might creep in, and before I know it, another hour or two has passed."

Raisa found herself at school in a swirl of grogginess. She especially dragged through the mornings. She would pick up a bit in the afternoons, but by the time she got home from school, she was pretty much done for the day. Out went preparing healthy food, out went exercise, out went hobbies and time with friends. She

ing through every part of the blood and lymphatic system, even at the level of the capillaries), which will add to fatigue. If you do not eat well, you may feel sluggish and foggy-brained. If you don't spend time with people you enjoy or do activities you relish, you may fall toward depression. Likewise, you can break this pattern at any point in the cycle; that's why I encourage my patients to make *any* positive habit change, as this can help get everything going in the right direction.

### **Chatty, energetic, impulsive**

As I sat with Raisa during the homeopathic interview, it became clear to me that although she was clearly describing exhaustion, with many examples of feeling "flat and deflated," in fact, she had a tremendous amount of energy pouring forth. She was chatty and leaned in toward me while she talked. She was enthusiastic as she described her work and her love of children, both her own and those she taught. "I'm an impulsive kind of person," she said. "If I have a thought, I want to share it, and if I have an idea, I want to do it." People loved her for this outgoing, get-things-done nature, and she liked being that way.

Raisa's sleep habits were good enough. She knew to not use caffeinated food or drinks in the afternoon or evening. She had a set schedule of when she prepared to go to sleep. She practiced deep-breathing exercises when she got into bed. But her mind was her enemy. She could not quiet her thoughts, her worries, her ongoing to-do lists. She felt she was going a little crazy because of lack of sleep, and she was worried that things could get even worse.

In general, Raisa described herself as a catastrophizer, especially as related to her health or the welfare of her family. She spoke with colorful language, often punctuated with laughter and incredulousness at the absurdity of life. She gesticulated freely, took up a lot of space in the room, and was fun to be around.

### **Trust that feeling**

When Paul Herscu, ND, MPH, and I teach our homeopathy course, we often describe the kinesthetic feeling you have with patients and how, oftentimes, that reflects

**When you have adequate sleep, your problem-solving skills improve, you learn more efficiently, you make better decisions, and you are more creative.**

### **A tired teacher**

When 44-year-old Raisa first came to see me, this middle school art teacher was at her wit's end. She hadn't been sleeping well for years, but recently things had gotten even worse. She was a 20-year veteran of the teaching profession who prided herself on being organized, punctual, creative, and fun. But her chronic lack of sleep was affecting her ability to do her job.

It could take Raisa an hour or two to fall asleep, and when she woke in the middle of the night to use the bathroom,

and her husband would often just watch TV for a few hours before turning in. Raisa arrived at my office worn out, frustrated, and feeling down.

### **This cycle can be broken**

People suffering from sleep deprivation—or any health problem, for that matter—can find themselves in a negative spiral like Raisa's, with everything they do or don't do drawn into that downward trajectory. For example, if you don't exercise, you will not be well perfused (i.e., fluids flow-





# A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP, *Naturally*

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*Treatment for sleep difficulties works best when we can identify and address the underlying causes of inadequate sleep. Sometimes, the cause is obvious, such as a caregiver losing sleep caring for a loved one, and then we might explore ways to get them support. Other times, simple changes in lifestyle can make big improvements in sleep. For example, getting physically active outdoors in the morning helps balance your body clock and gives you a better night's sleep because of the exercise, the timing, and the exposure to light. Removing glowing lights and screens from the bedroom at night, installing light-blocking curtains, and keeping nighttime temperatures cool also help. Practicing some form of stress reduction such as meditation, journaling, or deep breathing before bed can help shake off the day's stress and get you ready for sleep. Reducing daytime caffeine, alcohol, and sugar consumption can help, as well. If a person with good sleep habits still has sleep troubles, I do a complete physical and blood workup to rule out underlying conditions.*

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Sometimes, I will offer a patient one or more supplements from my doctor's bag to help with sleep. These are always individualized for the person and their overlying ailments. Some possibilities are:

**Ashwagandha.** This Ayurvedic herb has a 2500-year history of use in India. An adaptogen, it acts as a natural stress reliever and benefits many bodily systems. A typical dose for sleep support may start at 300 mg once or twice a day and may need to be taken for 30 to 60 days before effects are fully realized.

**Passion flower.** This botanical medicine helps relax the nervous system but doesn't cause drowsiness like many sleep aids or supplements. It can be taken in tea form or capsules. A typical dose is 500 mg before bed.

**Melatonin.** This hormone is best used on a short-term basis to promote sleep, such as for jet lag, rather than long term. A typical dose is 1 to 3 grams at night, taken 30 to 60 minutes before bed. Do not take melatonin if you wake in the middle of the night because it can change your sleep-wake cycle and make you drowsy in the daytime.

**L-tryptophan.** This essential amino acid is a natural mood regulator, helping increase feelings of well-being and improving sleep quality. Tryptophan can be obtained through food (nuts, seeds, meats, turkey), but the best results for improving sleep are through supplements. A typical dose is 1 to 2 grams, taken at bedtime.

**L-theanine.** This amino acid is considered nonessential, but it can have beneficial effects, promoting a calm, relaxed state; improving attention span; and supporting restful sleep. L-theanine is most concentrated in green tea but is also available as a supplement. A typical dose is 100 to 200 mg per day. (A cup of green tea may include 20 to 60 mg of L-theanine, but because tea also contains caffeine, it's best to drink it early in the day.)

**Glycine.** This amino acid is essential for the body's muscle, metabolic, and cognitive function. It can calm the nervous system and improve sleep quality. Glycine is most abundant in collagen and gelatin, so adding high-quality bone broth to your diet is an excellent way to increase glycine intake. Supplements are also available; a typical dose is 3 grams taken at bedtime.

**GABA.** This neurotransmitter's full name is gamma-aminobutyric acid. It has a calming effect and is thought to induce sleep by reducing the excitability of nerve cells (neurons). Dosage varies and is best overseen by a health practitioner because GABA can interfere with other medications and cause side effects at high doses.

the type of remedy a person needs. If you are with, say, someone who is pessimistic, negative, fault finding, and complaining, you may feel yourself a bit annoyed or irritated. With patients who need the remedy I gave Raisa, it's just the opposite. You may feel upbeat, engaged, and interested, if not a bit overwhelmed by the descriptions, the detail, the emotion, the energy. Of course, your experience of another human being, in the practice setting or otherwise, plays out over your own underlying nature, constitutional type, and particular mood that day, but some patients/people have a similar impact on most people around them. We don't prescribe only on that observation and feeling, but neither do we ignore it.

### Sweet tooth and heart palpitations

Besides having insomnia, Raisa was fairly healthy, blessed with a strong constitution and good family health history. She experienced mild gastrointestinal issues from time to time—gastroesophageal reflux if

she ate too quickly and loose stools if she was nervous or overly excited.

She could find herself feeling a bit off balance when her sleep was worse, but otherwise, she had good body coordination. Raisa was well nourished and generally disciplined about her diet, though she had a robust sweet tooth. She attributed her mouth full of fillings to her diet and less-than-stellar oral hygiene, but added: "I've been taking better care of my teeth now and have not had any new cavities in years."

When Raisa was especially tired or excited, she could feel her heart pounding. This worried her, so she'd had a full cardiac workup and was told, "Whatever you have, it ain't your ticker." (Raisa often used colorful or funny language like this, with lots of adjectives and metaphors in her speech.) It was after that medical experience that Raisa had turned to deep-breathing exercises, and she felt better for it. She practiced it every night before bed and whenever she felt her heart going fast or otherwise "too zippy."

Raisa had chronic cold sores on the inside of her mouth—on the gum line or inside her lips—and used the amino acid lysine to help prevent sores. She limited nuts and chocolate, which are high in arginine, an amino acid that the herpes virus needs in order to reproduce.

Beyond that, Raisa did not complain of lung, urinary, skin, or musculoskeletal problems. On the emotional level, she did not tend toward depression or irritability but could be anxious, as already mentioned.

On a cognitive level, if she was overwhelmed with too much to do or very tired, she felt her focus and concentration worsen. Her ability to multitask, an essential skill for any teacher, suffered. As her fatigue worsened, Raisa felt her capacity to handle a group of 25 kids got worse. She found herself lowering her standards and not asking as much of the students, which she felt terrible about. She dreaded completing all the paperwork and sitting through meetings, while prior to the insomnia, she would have just done these things without a second thought.

### Covering all the bases

Whenever I have a patient with deep fatigue, whether from not sleeping or other reasons, I make sure to do a complete medical workup to rule out problems such as thyroid disease, anemia, and other chronic ailments. We start with screening blood work and a complete physical exam. In Raisa's case, she had enviable blood work and a normal physical exam. Once that information was gleaned, we could conclude that her fatigue was a product of poor and inconsistent sleep.

I was curious whether anything had changed around the time she stopped "sleeping like a baby," as she described her past sleep habits. Raisa said, "Well, it was the year my younger son was applying to college. He was not an easy kid, not a stellar student, and we had some struggles. Everything worked out in the end, but I was so worked up and feared he'd be that kid who never got out of the basement." She felt like that was a turning point for her. Maybe it had to do with perimenopause, too, which may well have been a contributing factor, though she was still menstruating regularly.





Raisa was warm blooded and preferred the cooler weather. She craved sweets, but they did not agree with her. She would become gassy and bloated after eating treats, but that didn't stop her! She was tidy enough and organized, though some of that was slipping with the sleep challenges.

### The right remedy for Raisa

Raisa wanted to try homeopathy alone rather than any of the naturopathic approaches known to help with insomnia that I sometimes recommend (see "A Good Night's Sleep, Naturally," on page 39). So, I went to work finding a homeopathic remedy. I needed a remedy that would cover insomnia caused by an overactive mind. I needed a remedy for a person who was extroverted and chatty, who wanted to connect, and who enjoyed people. I needed a remedy that could have an impact on palpitations, diarrhea, and cold sores in a warm-blooded individual. A few remedies came to mind: *Lachesis*, *Belladonna*, *Phosphorus*, and *Argentum nitricum*.

With *Lachesis*, there is certainly the tendency to be warm blooded, to sleep into an aggravation, and to have a sweet tooth, as was true for Raisa, but there is often more aggressiveness and a tendency for jealousy and not trusting others, which Raisa did not have at all.

With *Belladonna*, there is a tendency to be robust, lively, entertaining, and warm blooded, as Raisa was. But, I would have wanted to see some inflammatory symptoms or conditions, with a tendency for fever and redness, if I were to choose it for Raisa. People who need *Belladonna* tend to have easy tempers, which did not apply to Raisa, either.

*Phosphorus* was my second choice, with its affability and desire to connect with others, the propensity to have loose stools, and the tendency for heart palpitations. There is often a kind of sweetness in a person who benefits from *Phosphorus* constitutionally, and what drives them is the need for attention and love. For Raisa, however, what was driving her imbalance, to my assessment, was her mind, the way an idea would come in, develop a life of its own, and then keep on going, around and around. Her chattiness was an extension

of her mind connecting one thought to the next to the next. When things were in balance, this could work okay, and she was very productive. But when there was not enough energy to fuel that tendency, not enough sleep, the whole operation fell apart.

*Argentum nitricum* was the best choice for Raisa. The main focus of this remedy is the nervous system and some lack of ability to control mental or emotional impulses. Raisa's ongoing, unstoppable thoughts that kept her awake as well as her general impulsive nature fit *Argentum nitricum* well. People who need this remedy tend to be cheerful and extroverted like Raisa. They are also warm blooded, crave sweets, and have heart palpitations, as was true for Raisa. Her strong desire for sweets, even when they didn't agree with her system, and her tendency for gastrointestinal complaints also pointed to *Argentum nitricum*. Interestingly, *Argentum nitricum* is a remedy strongly correlated with anticipatory anxiety, and Raisa traced the start of her insomnia to a time when she was experiencing extreme anxiety in anticipation of her son applying to colleges.

### An enthusiastic thumbs-up

I prescribed one dose of *Argentum nitricum* 200c. When Raisa returned to see me one month later, she was overjoyed. "You hit the nail on the head," she said. "I LOVE this remedy." Of course, in someone who is very enthusiastic by nature, you have to drill down a little deeper and find out exactly what they mean. She told me that she had started sleeping better right away. She would just drift off easily, and if she had to wake to use the bathroom, she would fall back to sleep without a hitch. She had had a few nights of disturbed sleep over the month, but she basically "felt like a million bucks."

Because Raisa was more rested now, she felt that her work in the classroom was better. She started to do some of her own artwork on the weekends, something she had not done "in a coon's age." She had a cold sore at the time of our visit but otherwise had felt well in her gastrointestinal tract. She had also begun walking in the neighborhood with her husband after dinner, as I had urged her to do. Because

## I needed a remedy that would cover insomnia caused by an overactive mind.

Raisa appeared to be responding well to *Argentum nitricum*, I did not give her another dose at that visit.

When I saw Raisa two months later, she was still doing well. Her sleep was "heavenly" she said, though in the previous two weeks it had not been quite as good. She'd had stress at work with another teacher that kept her up at night—not as bad as before but still troublesome. Raisa felt that her heart was racing again at night, and she again felt unable to shut off her mind. Because of these setbacks, I gave her another dose of *Argentum nitricum* 200c. Raisa again responded well to the remedy.

### Heavenly sleep

Over the following three years, I would see Raisa from time to time when she felt the need. We repeated the *Argentum nitricum* 200c and increased the dose to *Argentum nitricum* 1M a few times, and she has remained well for the past eight years. She knows to come in when the stress is high, the sleep is worse, or she has an acute illness or injury. She has sent me many patients over the years: I treat a fair number of teachers at that school, which I enjoy!

Helping a patient sleep better is especially gratifying because adequate, high-quality sleep helps in so many ways—physically, cognitively, and emotionally. Good sleep is one of the greatest healers of all!

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Amy Rothenberg, ND, practices in Northampton, Massachusetts, where she spearheaded the effort to license naturopathic physicians (NDs) in the state. She is a founder and principal teacher for the New England School of Homeopathy, [www.nesh.com](http://www.nesh.com). You can find her writing in the *Huffington Post*, *Elephant Journal*, *Thrive Global*, and *Medium*.