

"How I Finally Got to Sleep"

Leslie Goldman *tried everything to cure her sleep troubles. And nothing worked—until she learned a few simple biofeedback tricks.*



"LAST NIGHT, I SLEPT." Those four words might not seem like a big deal to some people. But for women who have trouble sleeping—40 million Americans are thought to suffer from a sleep disorder, and women are twice as likely to struggle with insomnia as men—those words signify a minor miracle.

For the past eight years, my life between midnight and 8 a.m. has been an excruciating stream of intensely vivid nightmares and sheet-soaking night sweats. I've sought out neurologists, psychiatrists, and acupuncturists, and have

undergone sleep studies, unloaded my deepest fears in therapy, and popped any sleep aid a doctor would give me. Fed up with costly medications, nasty side effects, and no success, I was ready to give up on a good night's sleep and simply accept the few choppy, interrupted hours I was getting per night—until I heard about biofeedback from a friend.

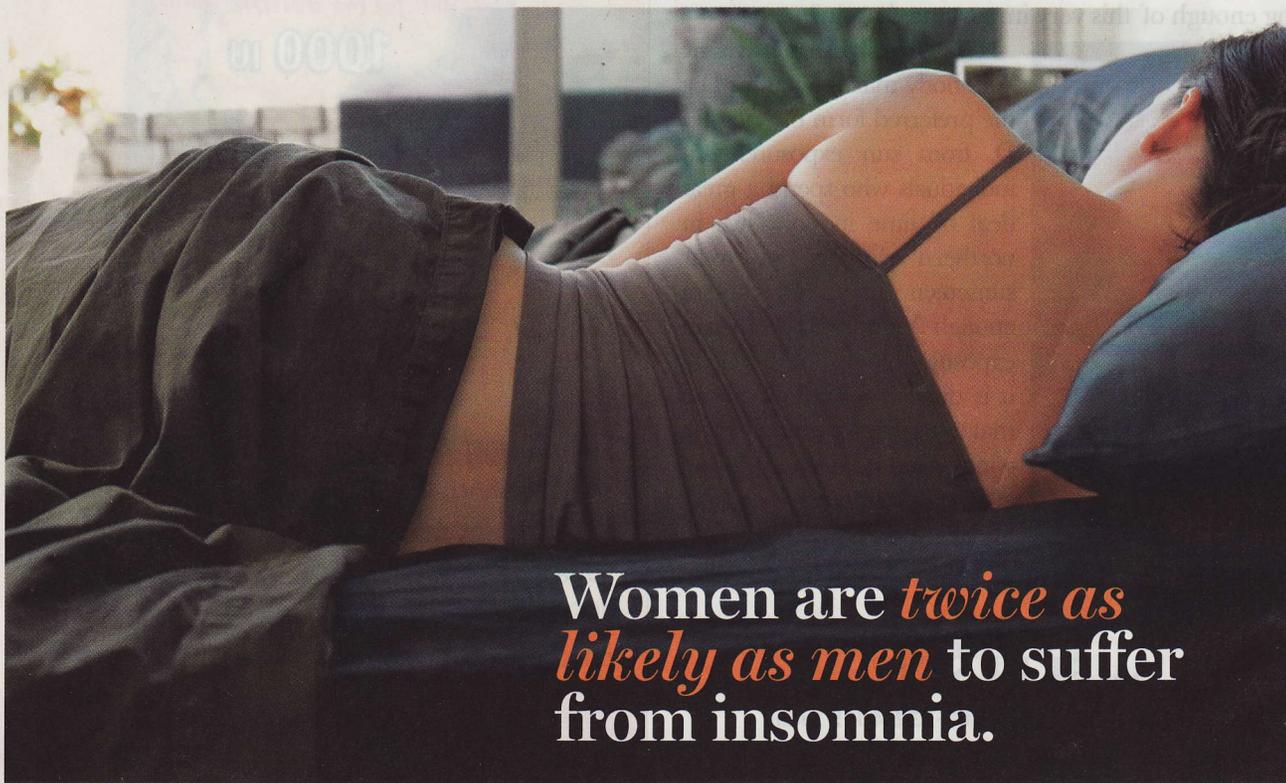
This mind-body therapy, introduced in the 1960s, helps you tune in to body signals (heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, skin temperature), and then teaches you to control the ones that may contrib-

ute to insomnia (or panic attacks, migraines, and other problems). You learn to work with your body, not against it, and studies show it can be effective. I thought it was worth a try.

How it works

A child learning to wink by looking in the mirror is using biofeedback, says psychophysicist L. John Mason, PhD, founder of Stress Education Center in Oak Harbor, Washington. After practicing, she sees the way it's done and eventually can do it without the mirror.

Now imagine that, rather than a mirror, you're looking at a computer monitor with two undulating lines; one tracks your current breathing pattern (via soft straps around your chest and tummy), while the other shows what breathing at a relaxation-inducing pace looks like. By consciously trying to match up the two lines—in short, by breathing deeper and slower—you're applying basic biofeedback principles. The payoff: a way to



Women are *twice as likely as men* to suffer from insomnia.

Problem Solved

quickly decelerate your heart rate and calm down. Using this method, I soon learned to slow my pace from my harried 15 to 25 breaths per minute to 8 per minute. The biofeedback expert I consulted, Chicago psychologist Michael Merrill, PhD, also discovered that I was a chronic breath-holder—a common symptom of anxiety. When I did breathe, I didn't use my diaphragm, the main muscle of respiration. Merrill taught me to draw air in as if I were filling my belly, not my upper chest.

Thanks to biofeedback, slow breathing now helps me calm my baseline anxiety level. And I periodically check in with myself throughout the day and while lying in bed at night. I say to myself: "Am I holding my breath? Yes? Then breathe!"

Other biofeedback techniques use an EMG (electromyograph) to measure muscle tension (in the forehead, for instance) or silently repeated phrases—such as "My eyes are quiet"—to help you relax (called autogenic training). I've had success zoning out to a "My eyes are quiet" CD that my doctor made. After a few minutes, it gives me leaden legs

and twilight consciousness, a perfect setup for a night of deep sleep.

Relaxation imagery has also helped me. I've learned to visualize a pleasant place, like my childhood backyard, and walk myself through various sensory experiences associated with it—the sun warming my body, the wind rustling in the trees. Once deeply relaxed, I imagine transferring that tranquil feeling from the therapist's office to my bedroom. The result: "You climb into bed the way you want—calm, relaxed, ready for sleep," Merrill says.

My happy ending

For so long, I've approached bedtime with a sense of dread. Biofeedback has helped me change the script, and the change has been dramatic. After nearly a decade of sleeping for no longer than two hours at a time, I can sleep for four hours straight and doze off again after I wake up. And it's so empowering to realize that the positive change has come from *within me*. 

IS BIOFEEDBACK FOR YOU? Learn more about how it can help you and find a practitioner at Health.com/biofeedback. Health.com

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Mindfulness Training Learning to be mindful helps you acknowledge but not react to anxious thoughts that occur at bedtime. Women who spent eight weeks in a mindfulness-based stress-reduction (MBSR) course saw a 20 percent improvement in sleep disturbances, according to Duke Integrative Medicine researchers. The study subjects reported better sleep quality, less waking up at night, less use of sleeping pills, and less sleepiness during the day. To find an MBSR course, go to Health.com/mbsr.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Up to 60 percent of people with chronic insomnia may get relief from just a handful of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) sessions, according to research presented at the annual meeting of the Associated Professional Sleep Societies. CBT includes an evaluation of your habits, attitudes, and knowledge about sleep and then helps you to change how you think about it. Many people who try it are able to stop using sleeping pills. To find a certified behavioral-sleep therapist, check with the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. (Find a link to the site at Health.com/sleep-therapist.)

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