

From Panic to Peace

- Natural ways to soothe your nervous system and help you sleep

The effects of a fast-paced life are evident throughout North America. Without daily practices of emptying the mind, your head can become full of thoughts, worries and anxieties; in this mental state, it's challenging for the body to simply be calm. No wonder so many people suffer from insomnia.

There are a number of factors that can lead to insomnia: constant thoughts, pain, low blood glucose, the overuse of stimulants, certain medications, and underlying anxiety or depression. Anxiety occurs when your thoughts rest on the pains of the past and indulge in fears about the future. By bringing attention to your mind and identifying what thoughts you're fixating on, you can realize that you can choose positive, joyful thoughts. That creates a space for your anxiety to dissolve.

Depression and low spirits can be aggravated by a lack of nutrients. Junk food is a common cause of depression. Brain chemicals or neurotransmitters that regulate behaviour are greatly affected by the foods we eat. Take steps to avoid processed fast food, artificial colourings, sugar, fried foods, and caffeine—they all wreak havoc with the nervous system, contribute to scattered thinking and nervous energy. They also cause blood sugar fluctuations, which can further aggravate your emotional state.

Focus on whole grains such as brown rice, millet, and oatmeal. Porridge is one of the best foods for the nervous system. Choose steel-cut or Scottish oats for the highest nutritional value (avoid instant flavoured oatmeal, which is processed and often high in sugar). Choose proteins that offer important amino acids for the brain and nervous system function. Turkey, bananas, tuna, and nut butters are food sources of the amino acid *tryptophan*; tryptophan is involved in raising serotonin levels, which helps promote sleep and instill a calm, peaceful feeling in your body.

Calcium and magnesium deficiencies are also causes of frequent waking and difficulties in falling asleep. Supplements of these minerals can help calm tense muscles and relieve anxiety. Calcium citrate is one of the most absorbable forms of calcium on the market. Magnesium is a mineral used for restless leg syndrome, and it acts as a natural laxative to minimize the possible constipating effects of certain medications (if you're experiencing diarrhea, decrease the dose of this mineral).

There are also a number of herbal remedies that can relieve tension and stress:

- Passionflower (*Passiflora incarnate*): A nervine used to quiet the mind from constant mental thoughts and over-excitability.
- Scullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*): A nervous system restorative and relaxant herb used for stress, headache, anxiety, and insomnia.
- Chamomile (*Chamomilla recutita*): A gentle remedy for stress, mild inflammation, and digestive cramping. It promotes sleep and calms a nervous stomach.
- Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*): It is used for an upset stomach, to soothe digestion, brighten the spirits, and lift melancholy and sadness. This herb also contains antiviral properties of benefit to people with HIV.

Combine the above herbs together in equal portions and use as a tea (3 – 4 cups a day): use one heaping teaspoon of the herb mix per cup of water and steep 15 minutes before drinking. The herbs can also be used in tincture or capsule form (tea or tincture are best).

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Another remedy for insomnia is lavender essential oil, a balancing oil used for lack of energy during the day and to promote sleep at night. Add 5 – 6 drops to a hot bath at night to promote sleep.

Herbs are a mild, gentle, and non-habit forming option to prescription medications. It's possible to wean off prescriptions and use herbs in place of medication, however you should always do this under the clinical care of a medical herbalist, who can monitor your progress and make changes to your protocol as needed.

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