How to cure insomnia

Last week the broadcaster Tom Bradby described how sleep deprivation led to his meltdown. Here’s how he got better...

I learnt one thing for sure in 2018: the run up to News at Ten is not a brilliant time to have the mental health equivalent of a heart attack.

It was April 23 last year and I had been struggling with near-total meltdown for several weeks already. I was barely sleeping. I would quite often go an entire night with no sleep at all, as if I was wired against my will to some hidden source pumping a constant stream of adrenaline into my veins. I had tried taking sleeping pills, which barely worked. Then I had tried to give them up. That was even worse.

I’d started to believe I would never sleep again. I was tired beyond logic, but reluctant to admit it. On the Monday my meltdown happened, I got out of my restless bed, determined to come in and present News at Ten, the show I’d been hosting for three years. In the afternoon, Ten, the show I'd been hosting, not the first time I did a live broadcast, not the first time I presented the News at Ten in 2015, or the all-night programme covering the EU referendum the following year.

My lack of nerves is odd, but I worked out later there is some kind of lesson in it. A studio is a closed environment in which I am in control. All I have to do is talk. And talking is easy. The rest of the world, life and death… Well, that is a lot more complicated.

That night’s News at Ten went fine. The following morning, though, the game was up. I could barely get out of bed, and when I did, I could hardly move. The psychiatrist I had just started to see was clear as day. I’d pushed myself into a state of total depletion and was consequently having the mental health equivalent of a heart attack. “I am signing you off for three months,”

Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. It was more frightening than getting shot in a riot in Indonesia in 1999. But then mental health crises are like that. It’s the ignorance, the sense you have no idea what on earth is happening, that really scares you.

It is still unclear to me how I made it through the next few hours. I finally felt just about human again when I went into the studio to start the programme. It has been a weird aspect of my life that I have never felt nervous doing live television. I mean, not at all. Not the first time I did a live broadcast, not the first time I presented the News at Ten in 2015, or the all-night programme covering the EU referendum the following year.

Anxiety or stress-driven insomnia is usually a symptom of a generalised anxiety disorder. If your mind is driving your body too hard, if your fight-or-flight mechanism is switched on too much of the time, if it is filling your body with adrenaline and cortisol and you keep pushing yourself past all the warning and stop signs, then of course you won’t sleep. Why would you?

My psychiatrist was of the view that there can be a genetic component to insomnia and that some people are more prone to worrying about threats presented by the future than others. One of the things I found myself recalling in our sessions was my mother’s extreme reaction to the death of my best friend (also...
called Tom, also an only child) at the age of eight.

If it is a gene that makes us hypersensitive to threat, there is nothing necessarily wrong with having it. Indeed, in the days when we were all trying to escape the sabre-toothed tiger out on the plains, those who spent a lot of time anticipating the dangers of tomorrow might have been the survivors. It is certainly true to say that people with this proclivity are often remarkably driven.

A MODERN PHENOMENON?
For those who wonder if anxiety or stress-driven insomnia is a modern phenomenon, the answer is both yes and no. These issues have of course existed (largely undiagnosed) as long as humans have been walking this earth. But our society is accelerating them.

Some of you will remember the days when leaving the office meant leaving work behind altogether. One of my earliest memories of being a trainee at ITN was of trying to get hold of people after office hours or at the weekend before mobile phones. But we allow ourselves now to carry every potential stress with us into our evenings and weekends.

PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS
If all or some of this threatens to drive us off a cliff, how do we get better, or avoid the fall altogether? I’d like to try to offer practical help to anyone who is suffering, either because you have reached crisis point or fear you are circling close to it. I should stress, I am evidently not a mental health professional. I list only what helped me get better in the hope some or all of it may be of use. Since I threw the kitchen sink at my recovery, it is hard to say which of these was the most effective, but I think any mental health professional would agree it is a disease best approached from many angles at once.

SLEEP HYGIENE
This is a basic start point for anyone with mild to serious insomnia. Put away your phone when you get home in the evening and do not look at it again until the morning. In the 90 minutes before bed, don’t watch TV. Spend that time instead listening to calming music (surprisingly effective) or doing yoga (more on that later). Avoid alcohol, which experts agree is terrible for sleep.
SLEEP ITSELF
I've read heaps of “how to sleep” books, but the most convincing one argued that good sleepers don’t have elaborate routines. They get into bed, turn over and go out like a light. So my advice, if you can’t sleep, is to lie there and concentrate on resting — which at least gives you some of the benefits of sleep. You may fall asleep, you may not, but there is nothing you can do about it and you are better off concentrating on rest rather than sleep. And if none of this is working, then you probably need to look at tackling the more serious underlying issues (see all points below).

PSYCHIATRIC HELP
The medical help I received saved my bacon. If you have fallen into unhelpful patterns of thinking, it takes a considerable amount of work to correct them. I was lucky enough to be treated by one of the country’s most outstanding psychiatrists, Dr Stephen Pereira, who has been publicly thanked by people including James Middleton, the brother of the Duchess of Cambridge, and Antonio Horta-Osorio, the chief executive of Lloyds Bank. But the more general lesson is that it is hard to get better without someone analysing the reasons for your modes of thinking and then confronting you with their impact.

One of Pereira’s pieces of advice is to recite the serenity prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference.” His point is that we are able to change patterns of thinking.

MEDITATION
One of the first things Pereira prescribed was the Calm app. In the early part of my time off, I spent a great deal of time on it. The app provides a clear, simple guide to breathing-based meditation, but it also gives you some of the re-education a psychiatrist would provide. If you can’t reach medical help, this is a great place to start. Once I went back to work, I sent myself off on a more in-depth meditation course with Beeja Meditation, which I would also recommend.

MEDICINE
I was prescribed mirtazapine, which is commonly called an antidepressant, to help me sleep in the early days of my time off. I was initially reluctant, but was advised by a friend who had been through a similar crisis to “for God’s sake do as you’re told”. In the first month, I slept 11 or 12 hours a night, which perhaps gives you some idea of the state I was in. I have heard a lot of things said about antidepressants, but all I can say is that they turned out to be a powerful tool in my recovery.

DIET
The link between the state of the stomach and the mind is now proven beyond doubt. I consulted a nutrition expert called Sam Murgatroyd to improve my diet and she particularly recommended I drink goat’s milk kefir every morning from a company called Chuckling Goat (yes, truly) to help restore the good bacteria to my stomach. I have been taking it ever since.

THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING
Pereira and his colleagues suggested various books to read, but one of the most influential was The Compassionate Mind by Paul Gilbert. It’s an interesting account of how the mind and body interact. I won’t try to summarise its arguments here, but safe to say I found that if you make a particular and conscious effort to think and act positively in the myriad of small everyday interactions, it is amazing how much better it can make you feel.

YOGA
About halfway through my time off, when I was sleeping well and feeling mentally calm, I could not understand why I still had a terrible knot in my stomach, so tight it felt as if a vice were closing around my chest throughout the day.

One of the analysts I was seeing advised by a friend who had been through a similar crisis to help me with a perfect psychology. He concluded that physical therapy can help to some kind of hinterland with which to process this unalterable fact. I have no spirituality at all, life’s quite hard.

If you are thinking that none of this has any relevance to you, then I would only say that not long ago I’d have described myself as just about the last person on earth likely to have a mental health “issue”. We all have our vulnerabilities. Circumstances and damaging thought patterns can conspire to prey on anyone. There’s no such thing as someone with a perfect psychology.

If any of this is striking a chord, then know this: however you are feeling, however lonely, you are not alone. This is an illness. It is common. You can avoid it getting worse, and if you find yourself at the bottom of the well and the darkness seems overwhelming, you can and will get better.

Very early on in the process, I could see those assigned to help me were opening doors that would in time prove liberating. And so it has turned out. You can change how you feel by how you think. Thoughts — unhelpful, negative thoughts — can be the most terrible prisons. Freeing myself of them has been one of the most powerful and positive experiences of my life.

If you really can’t fall asleep, concentrate on resting rather than on dropping off as well as our minds. He studied post-traumatic stress disorder in Vietnam War veterans and concludes that physical therapy has to be a part of any recovery. Reading the book, I recalled that in the two years prior to my “illness”, I had sought treatment for an ever-lengthening list of physical ailments: a ferociously bad back, a terrible stomach... But each test came back negative. There was nothing physically wrong with me. That is what stress can do to you. I concentrated on yoga, which had an incredible impact. And if going to a yoga class seems intimidating, try some of the best YouTube channels, such as Yoga with Adriene, which has some great routines for stress reduction that you can do in your bedroom.