



by CHLOË
HAMILTON

IT'S 5.16am and I've not slept a wink since 1.32am when I'd woken with a start, a cough from my partner dragging me from my slumber.

Hundreds of minutes have crawled past since and the light in my bedroom has taken on the navy-blue hue of dawn. As I watch the day approach through the curtains, the hazy shadows creeping across my ceiling, I'm surprised to note a wave of what feels like relief.

I'm exhausted, yes, but at least I no longer have to try to get to sleep. For the first time in hours, I feel free.

This is the reality of living with insomnia, where the mental battle of lying in bed unable to sleep is just as crushing as the physical effects of not sleeping.

Like so many women, I began to struggle with insomnia during the last trimester of my first pregnancy four years ago.

Then, of course, there were the sleepless nights with a newborn – but even once my son was sleeping through, my ability to drop off never fully returned, no matter how exhausted I was.

Rather than being constant, my insomnia has come and gone. After a bad night, I'll be resolute in my need to get help and then, the next night, I'll sleep again, the exhaustion will abate and the giddy restoration of rest will make me feel like I can take on anything.

But recently, after a bout of particularly bad insomnia, I realised that my issues aren't entirely sleep related.

BECAUSE knowing what's ahead – more often than not, a restless night of tossing and turning and a following day plagued by exhaustion – I've developed a fear of going to bed in the first place, which, in turn, exacerbates my inability to sleep. It's what I like to call 'bed dread'. And it's beginning to dominate my waking life.

I began to notice the effect that any kind of mental stimulation had on my sleep. Even *The Celebrity Traitors* TV show was too thrilling, too tense to watch in the hours before bed. I had to catch up the following morning while unsuccessfully dodging spoilers.

Increasingly anxious about my inability to rest, I began adjusting my life elsewhere. I cancelled evening plans with friends if it meant getting home late. I'd forgo time with my partner watching TV or reading on the sofa together.

Instead, I'd sit in bed from 7.30pm, desperately trying to keep myself calm – not easy with two children aged four and one. Though the guilt and the fear of missing out were bad, they both felt like small prices to pay.

But, of course, my efforts were a sure-fire recipe for anxiety. I realised I had become, to all intents and purposes, afraid of bedtime.

It makes sense in many ways. I've been diagnosed with anxiety

and OCD, and as a compulsive and obsessive thinker I always jump to the worst-case scenario.

And with two young children, my sleep has been unpredictable for the past four years, something especially challenging for someone who craves control.

Still, I was struck by how quickly the fear of not sleeping took hold. I dreaded going to bed and before long, the unease started to set in earlier and earlier, a knot of nausea tangling in my stomach from mid-afternoon: Would I sleep? How long would I lie awake for? How would I manage the next day?

A doom loop played in my brain that told me that I wouldn't sleep and, worse, that I wouldn't cope.

The anxiety was aggravated if I had nice plans the following day. Initially, this only applied to big plans: weddings, birthday parties, Christmas Day. Last week, though, the panic took hold over something far less consequential: a fun shopping trip I'd arranged for the following day and didn't want to be too tired to enjoy.

Because sleeplessness has ruined important days. The night before my wedding in 2023, I

managed just three hours of sleep. I'm smiling in the wedding pictures, of course, but I can see the manic exhaustion in my eyes.

Lying in bed, I'll feel flushed with fear, the bedclothes making me clammy and fidgety as I toss and turn trying to get comfortable. I'll squeeze my eyes shut and implore my body to drop off, as though I can summon sleep by sheer force of will. (Spoiler: I can't.)

I've become hyper-aware of my body, too, scanning it for anything that might keep me awake. An itchy foot? An asthmatic wheeze? A wee? One night, I must have made about ten trips to the bathroom, convinced my body wouldn't let me drift off if there was even the slightest niggles in my bladder.

Of course, some nights the bed dread is unfounded and I drop off relatively easily. In the morning, the relief of waking at 6.30am and realising I have achieved the impossible – a night's sleep – washes over me and I revel, euphoric, in the joy of it.

I wonder, though, if this relief has become part of my vicious cycle; in celebrating a night's sleep, perhaps I'm validating all

of the anxiety that came before it. I wish I could say I have found a solution. I had therapy – which helped me understand the problem but little else – and was advised, rather unhelpfully, to try sleeping tablets, a slope I really don't want to slip down.

I'm trying to improve my 'sleep hygiene' – keeping my phone out of reach, no blue light before bed – but it strikes me that this problem is more complex than simply learning to wind down properly. This is an anxiety issue, a product of my ruminating mind worrying about what will happen if I don't sleep.

I feel utterly betrayed by my body. Why have I forgotten how to fall asleep? It's a necessary bodily function that I used to be able to perform with ease.

But at least I've got some fresh motivation to sort my issues out. The new series of *The Traitors* started yesterday, and I want to be able to watch it. I can't let myself get too excited, though...

Insomnia has ruined my nights. Now bed dread is plaguing my days as well!



Picture: SHUTTERSTOCK/DMYTRO ZINKEVYCH

5 SLEEP TIPS TO GET YOU BACK ON TRACK

THERE are many ways you can mitigate the effects of sleeping badly. Here, Dr Lindsay Browning, sleep expert at troublesleeping.co.uk, shares her tips on how to get a better night's rest – and what to do if you don't.

EXERCISE

EXERCISE can help you feel awake after a sleepless night. Dr Browning recommends doing something that gets your heart going a little bit – but nothing too strenuous, as you're at increased risk of injury while sleep deprived. Many studies have also found that leading a physically active lifestyle makes it more likely you'll sleep better. But schedule activity to the earlier hours of the day. Vigorous exercise close to bedtime can keep you awake.

ANXIETY

TRY not to let your fear of insomnia take over. Dr Browning says obsessing over routines we think might help us, such as avoiding caffeine after lunch, makes us more anxious. Similarly, don't let a bad night's sleep fester. 'Just like if you have a day eating all the Christmas chocolates, it's not going to destroy your body.'

WATER

MANY of us won't drink before bed for fear of an early-hours call of nature. 'But if you ban yourself,' says Dr Browning, 'you're more likely to wake up because you're thirsty.' She suggests small amounts to drink in the hour or so before bed if you need to. Waking up dehydrated makes you feel worse the next day.

FOOD

PEOPLE who sleep less crave high-calorie foods. But avoiding unhealthy foods can improve your sleep. Dr Browning recommends not eating any fatty or sugary foods before bed, as this can give you indigestion. But don't hit the hay hungry, that can delay the onset of slumber. Try a pre-bedtime snack such as a small brown bread turkey sandwich or porridge. 'They will give you slow-release energy so you're less likely to wake up hungry in the night,' says Dr Browning.

BE AWARE

IF SLUMBER eludes you, you'll have slower reaction times and a higher risk of things such as car accidents. See a doctor to rule out sleep apnoea, iron deficiency or a thyroid issue, says Dr Browning.

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BRYONY GORDON IS AWAY