

Partner's Guide to Understanding Insomnia

with Aleš Šípek

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Our story

My partner suffered from chronic insomnia for many years. I always wanted to help her, but I had absolutely no idea how. With my words and actions, I often ended up doing more harm than good to the person I cared about most.

Back then, I would have given anything for a guide—someone I could turn to, who could explain how insomnia works and how it can be overcome. Someone who could tell me when to speak and when it was better to stay silent.

Our story

I wrote this guide for those of you who are feeling lost and making mistakes, just as I once did, but who are willing to learn. Because good intentions and love are sometimes not enough; what's needed is true understanding. Only then can you become a real support. The kind of support that a person suffering from insomnia deserves.

Do not try to control sleep

The most fundamental truth about sleep is that it is a passive process.

When our bodies need to rest and we are not actively interfering, sleep happens naturally and effortlessly.

However, the moment we begin to try to sleep, we introduce pressure and anxiety into the process. This conscious effort creates a mental friction that actively pushes sleep away, leading to a frustrating paradox where the more you try to achieve sleep, the less of it you will get.

Do not try to control sleep

At its core, the entire struggle with insomnia comes from the false belief that sleep can be controlled. It is a passive biological process, much like breathing, that cannot be forced.

Common tips, tricks, and "sleep hygiene" rules are often problematic because they reinforce this illusion of control. They send people on an endless quest for the right technique, leading to more self-monitoring, more effort, and more struggle.

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True and lasting recovery comes from abandoning the attempt to control sleep and instead allowing it to unfold naturally.

For this reason, do not offer your partner any new, "miracle" supplements or devices on their path to recovery. Do not criticize them for breaking sleep hygiene rules when they turn on a light at night to read. And do not talk about what helps you or your friends fall asleep.

Do not try to control sleep

Instead, constantly reassure them that their body is perfectly fine—that nothing is broken, nothing is permanently damaged. Remind them that they are safe and completely capable of sleeping peacefully again. Assure them of your support, even when your shared journey is difficult at times.

Instead of reciting sleep hygiene rules and offering the latest sleep gadgets, buy them a relaxing book they can read during the night. After a sleepless night, invite them out for a nice coffee and a piece of cake.

Or simply give them a hug and show them that you're there for them and you care.

**Do not try to
control sleep**

The primary purpose of the brain is to keep us alive. To achieve this, we are equipped with core emotions like anger, disgust, sadness, happiness, and fear, each serving a distinct function aimed at our survival and well-being.

This internal safety system works perfectly when we are faced with a physical threat, such as a grizzly bear. The emotion of fear is triggered, activating a "fight or flight" response. We either confront the threat or escape from it.

**Do not underestimate
the brain**

When it comes to insomnia, things are different. Sleeplessness is not a tangible threat; it is a perceived threat. To your brain, however, this distinction doesn't matter; as far as it is concerned, a threat is a threat. Consequently, it deploys the exact same survival strategy: fight or flight.

The problem is that you cannot physically fight or run away from a perceived, internal threat like wakefulness. When you try to, it doesn't work. This failure sends a signal to your brain that the threat must be even bigger and more dangerous than initially thought. .

**Do not underestimate
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In response, your brain doubles down, deploying an even stronger "fight or flight" reaction.

In other words, the more you try to escape wakefulness, the more wakefulness you will create.

**Do not underestimate
the brain**

When you understand how the brain works and what a powerful opponent it is, you will have a much deeper understanding of your partner's behavior.

The feeling of being awake when you think you should be sleeping can be genuinely terrifying. Your partner is living in a constant state of fear.

Imagine yourself in a room full of spiders when even the thought of one horrifies you. Imagine yourself on a suspension bridge when a glance from a third-floor window scares you to death.

**Do not underestimate
the brain**

Now, imagine being exposed to that fear EVERY. SINGLE. NIGHT.

For this reason, never tell your partner, "It's no big deal, so you're not sleeping, what's the problem?" Don't ask them why they're making such a big deal out of it. Do not dismiss their feelings. Being exposed to this level of fear day in and day out is incredibly mentally exhausting, so always choose words of understanding.

**Do not underestimate
the brain**

Since fighting wakefulness only creates more of it, the only way to break the cycle is to stop fighting.

The solution is to teach the brain that there is no threat. This is achieved by what I call "befriending wakefulness"—learning to be okay with the state of being awake, even at night.

When your brain starts to understand that there is no real danger, it no longer needs to fight or try to escape. Once the "fight or flight" system deactivates, the pressure is gone, and sleep can start to come to you naturally.

**Do not make it any
harder**

To actively turn the experience of being awake at night into something pleasant is a powerful way to teach the brain that there's nothing to be afraid of.

However, the ultimate point of befriending wakefulness is simply to communicate a message of safety to the brain.

**Do not overestimate
your own perspective**

Doing something you enjoy at night, something that brings you pleasure, is a very counterintuitive yet highly effective tool. However, it's far from easy. When you're exhausted and the only thing you want is to sleep, any other activity can feel like a chore. And it's in these moments that you can be truly helpful to your partner.

Since you know them so well, it can be relatively easy for you to come up with ideas to make this time more doable. You could buy them a book from their favorite author, download a beloved movie or TV series, print out some relaxing coloring pages, or simply get them a cozy pillow to cuddle with at night. The possibilities are endless. Anything that can turn a challenging night into one that's simply okay.

**Do not make it any
harder**

Just as important as what you can do is knowing what you should never do. Don't question the recovery process. Don't ask if your partner is sure it will work, or how long it will take. Don't make them feel ashamed or reinforce the feeling that something is wrong with them—that they are somehow broken or inadequate just because they can't sleep.

Instead, encourage them to be kind and gentle with themselves. Lead by example. Show them that you also have nights that aren't ideal, yet you continue to live your life to the fullest.

**Do not make it any
harder**

Embrace this journey, together,
whatever it may be and however long it
takes. On the other side, you will find
light and joy.

**Do not make it any
harder**