Understanding Insomnia

Restoring Your Quiet Nights with Aleš Šípek

Source: The Sleep Coach School

The Sleep Paradox

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.

Source: The Sleep Coach School

The Sleep Paradox

- Remember: Sleep is a passive, natural process, not an active task to be completed.

- Remember: Actively trying to sleep creates mental pressure that is counterproductive.

- Remember: The more effort you apply to sleeping, the more elusive it becomes.

Source: The Sleep Coach School

Sleep Effort

A "sleep effort" is the central mechanism that fuels insomnia. It is defined as anything you do—or avoid doing—with the specific intent and purpose of producing or preserving sleep.

Common examples include using a meditation app with the goal of falling asleep, taking melatonin, installing blackout curtains, or avoiding screens before bed.

Source: The Sleep Coach School

Sleep Effort

Because sleep is inherently passive, any action that interferes with this passive nature will disrupt it. The problem is not the activity itself, but the goal-oriented pressure it places on the mind.

Source: The Sleep Coach School

Sleep Effort

- Remember: A sleep effort is any action whose primary goal is to make yourself sleep.

- Remember: These efforts turn a passive process into an active, and often stressful, struggle.

- Remember: Even seemingly helpful actions backfire when they become a strategy to control sleep.

Source: The Sleep Coach School

The Brain´s primary Mission

Our brains are designed for one specific and primary purpose: 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 tangible, physical threat, such as a grizzly bear. The emotion of fear is triggered, activating a "fight or flight" response.

Source: The Sleep Coach School

The Brain´s primary Mission

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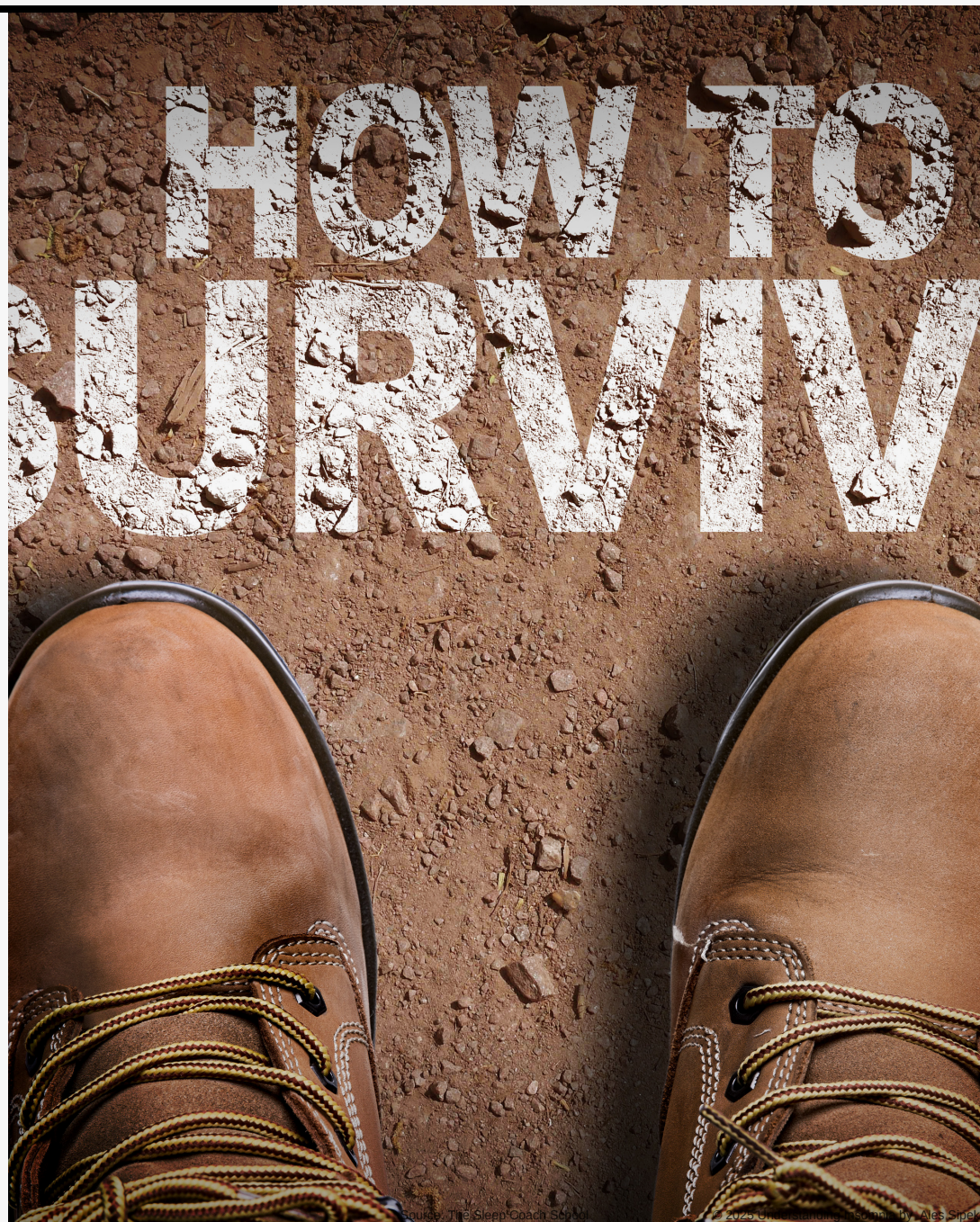
- Remember: The brain's fundamental purpose is to ensure our survival.

- Remember: Core emotions like fear are tools that trigger a "fight or flight" response to danger.

- Remember: This system is highly effective against tangible, physical threats.



Perceived, Not Real Threat

When it comes to insomnia, things are different. Sleeplessness is not a tangible threat that can physically harm you, but 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 it would for a real danger: fight or flight.

Source: The Sleep Coach School

Perceived, Not Real Threat

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.

In response, your brain doubles down, deploying an even stronger "fight or flight" reaction.

Source: The Sleep Coach School

Perceived, Not Real Threat

This makes the feeling of threat seem even larger, which leads to more fighting, and on and on it goes.

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

Source: The Sleep Coach School

Perceived, Not Real Threat

- Remember: Insomnia is a perceived threat, not a tangible danger like a bear.

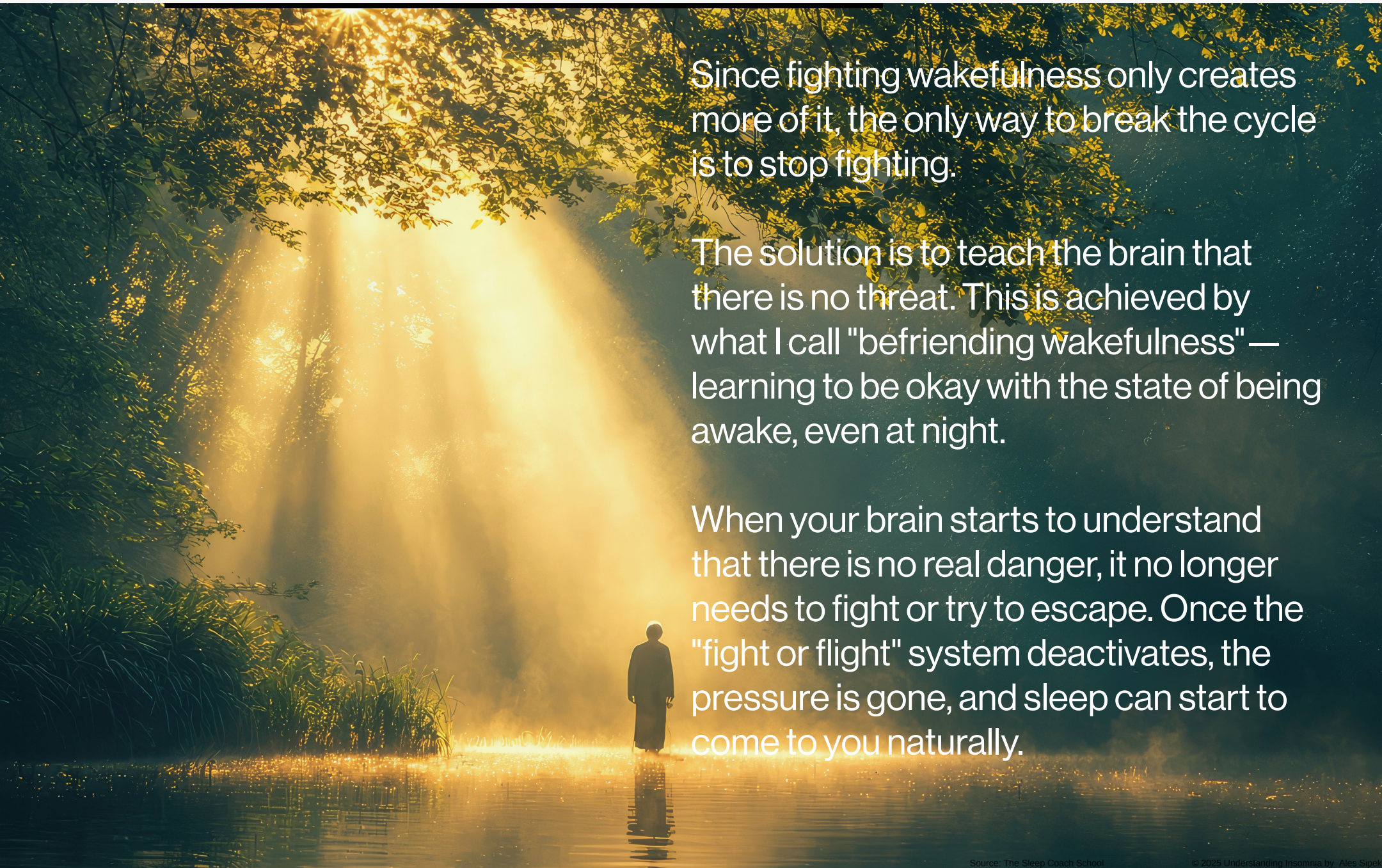
- Remember: The brain cannot tell the difference and activates the same "fight or flight" response.

- Remember:Trying to fight wakefulness signals to the brain that the "threat" is real.

- Remember: This intensifies the "fight or flight" response, creating a feedback loop that leads to more wakefulness.

Source: The Sleep Coach School

The solution: befriending Wakefulness



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.

Source: The Sleep Coach School

The solution: befriending Wakefulness

Remember:The way to break the cycle is to stop fighting and instead teach the brain there is no danger.

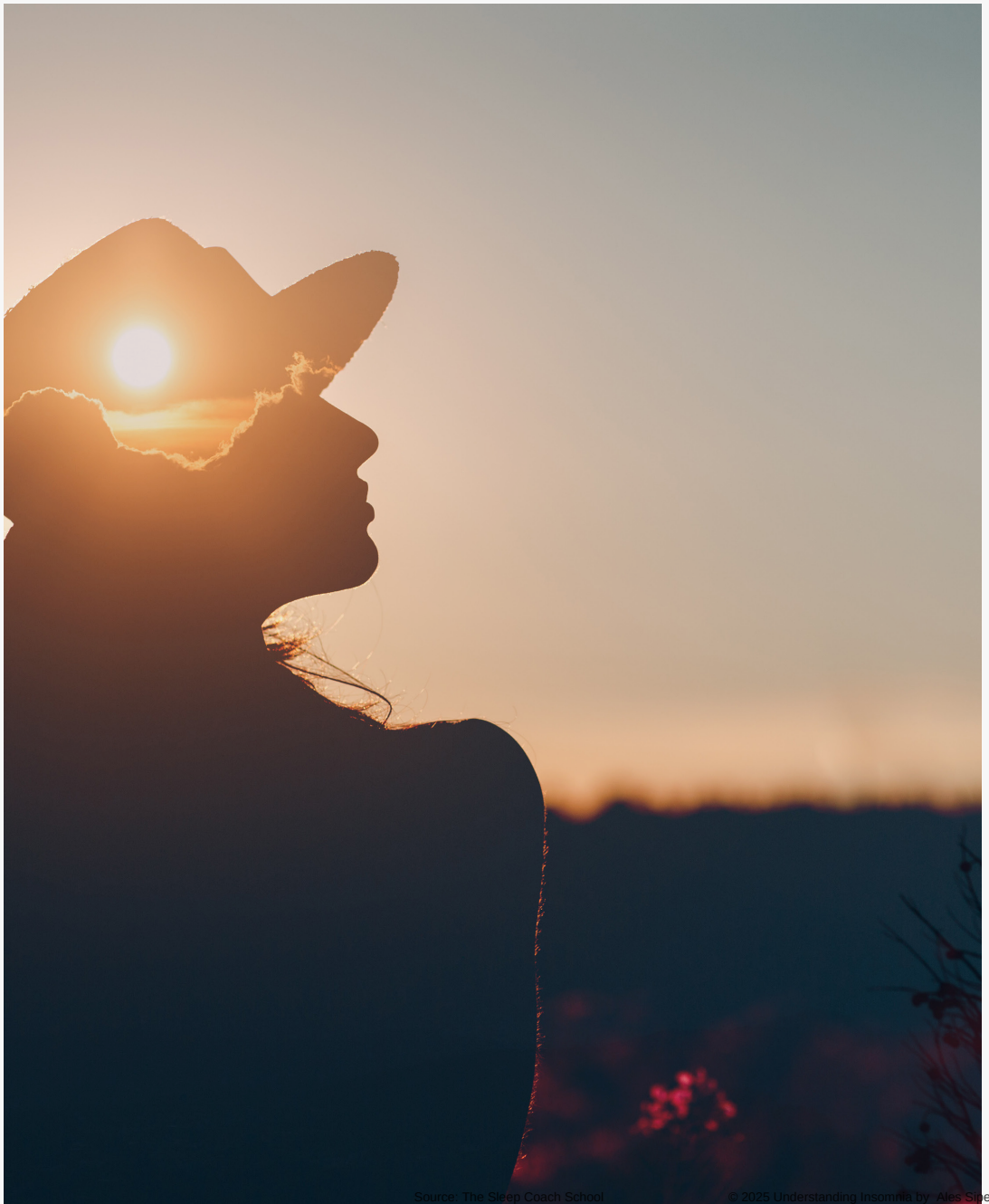
Remember:"Befriending wakefulness" means learning to be at peace with being awake.

Remember: When the brain no longer perceives a threat, the "fight or flight" response deactivates, allowing sleep to return.

Source: The Sleep Coach School

The Deeper Goal

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.



Source: The Sleep Coach School

The Deeper Goal

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

You can accomplish this even if you aren't particularly enjoying the night. Even when you feel bored, tired, or annoyed, you are still physically safe.

Source: The Sleep Coach School

The Deeper Goal

Remember:Encouraging enjoyable activities during nighttime wakefulness is a powerful, counterintuitive tool.

Remember:The goal is to show the brain that being awake isn't a threat by associating it with something pleasant.

Remember: The fundamental goal is not to force enjoyment, but to communicate a message of safety to the brain.

Source: The Sleep Coach School