

## Sleepy Time Troubles

by Jenny Rough



Sometime in my mid-20s, I stopped sleeping. I thought it was law school exams, but the exams passed. My sleep troubles didn't. They hung around all through school, through a 12-month federal clerkship, through my first job at a law firm.

I'd been working at the firm two years when I attempted to cure my insomnia by turning my bedroom into Sleepy Time Place. I stole the idea from a magazine article. It instructed me to use my bedroom only for sleeping. And sex—although at that point in time, my life was completely devoid of nookie. In fact, I wasn't doing much of anything except billing countless hours (days) and then worrying about my never-shrinking In-Box (nights).

To create Sleepy Time Place, I removed all distracting items from my room. Bye-bye television, adios computer, sayonara piles of clutter. Next, I bought new sheets (the high thread count kind) and squirted them with lavender scented linen spray. After a hot bath, which included a ritual of aromatherapy candles and fairy dust, I finally crawled into bed. I'd placed my alarm clock on the opposite side of the room. Without my contact lenses, the numbers fused together like a fat, lazy glowworm. I turned off my reading light—no use for that since I'd diligently moved my stack of books to the living room—and I settled into my pillow.

There.

All set.

Except I was awake.

Sleepy Time Place went bust, as had all the other nighttime remedies I'd tried: warm milk, fuzzy socks and Steven Halpern CDs, to name a few. I tried breathing exercises, earplugs and sleeping with my head facing north—bizarre, but a sworn theory (no, it didn't work). I quit drinking coffee in the mornings, but without a regular pick-me-up, the lack of caffeine brought further misery. I tried sleeping pills, but the medication gave me memory loss and vivid nightmares. I even tried counting sheep. This never worked either; inevitably, one of the bouncing, bleating little lambs would catch a hoof on the splintering wood and trip, landing squarely on its face.

Still awake, I would wrestle around the sheets in confusion. I was tired but not sleepy. There's a difference. Sleepy means drowsy. Tired is cranky. Eventually, I'd slide out of bed and pad off to the living room, grabbing a book. This was in blatant violation of the magazine article's advice (if I was feeling like an extra rebellious insomniac, I'd snap on the TV, too). Somewhere after 3:00am, I'd finally, finally drift off...

And then my alarm clock clanged.

Mornings were awful. At last REM was within reach, at last my eyes were heavy, at last my restless mind was lethargic—only now I had to wake up. To make matters worse, I dreaded my job. The pile of cases on my desk didn't motivate me to leave my warm blankets, rush madly to get ready and then sit in a traffic-packed commute, only to fight with opposing counsel all day.

If asked, I would have admitted that I didn't want to be a lawyer; I wanted to be a writer. And I would have admitted there was probably a connection between my insomnia and my job. But it never dawned on me to actually switch careers. So I kept on barreling through the days and tossing and turning through the nights. My body—frustrated at not being taken care of—began firing off more warnings shots. Frequent anxiety attacks brought not only sleepless nights, but stomachaches, headaches and a squeezing feeling in my chest. My body was shouting: *Something's wrong!* When I fainted—for the third time—and smacked my head on a tile bathroom floor, I thought, "Okay fine, body. I'll listen."

And I did.

I took a sabbatical and I rested. I didn't exactly sleep—not at first—but I rested. I rested for a month, and then another and another. I took long walks on the beach and sat outside on my balcony gazing at the peaceful ocean. I nourished myself with healthy food and water and nature hikes (which I hadn't done in ages) and then, slowly, I began sleeping better. For the first time in years, I was truly living. The anxiety attacks began to wear off.

In the end, I did switch careers, although that change alone has not cured my insomnia. I still spend many nights worrying about editing deadlines, worrying if I'll make it as a freelance writer, worrying about everything and nothing. But in the middle of those awful nights, when it's approaching 2:00am and I'm still awake, I try to remind myself to listen to my body. She offers good advice: *You're a night owl and that's okay*, or *You're hungry, so make that smoothie you've been craving*, or *You have too much on your calendar, reschedule your appointments tomorrow*. If I listen, I tend to calm down. And eventually, I find sleep.

But funnily enough, sleep isn't the best part. The best part is morning. Now that I'm living a life I love, mornings aren't awful anymore. In fact, they're my favorite time of day.

*Jenny Rough is a freelance writer. She's pleased to report she slept a full eight hours last night.* [JennyRough.com](http://JennyRough.com)