

My Quest for That Elusive Good Night's Sleep

by Reid Payne

I WAS ALWAYS A WILD KID. Back in those days they called me “hyperactive.” I was constantly running around, breaking things, talking too much, and generally just creating havoc and getting into trouble. In an attempt to slow me down, when I was two years old they put me on more than double the adult dosage of a strong prescription antihistamine.

One time they tried a stimulant—but that didn't work out so well. I blasted out the church doors like a rocket, jumped onto the hood of the first car I came to, and proceeded to jump from car to car all the way down the church parking lot—with my mom and the deacons chasing after me, yelling at the top of their lungs and shaking their fists in anger. That was one of my more famous moments!

After that episode, I was put back on antihistamines, and stayed on them until I was fourteen or fifteen. I don't know why I quit. Perhaps I thought I didn't need them anymore. For the next twenty-five years I forgot that I was hyperactive. I remembered all the stories, but didn't make the connection anymore. Years later I heard

about ADHD and thought that sounded a lot like how I “used to be.” Fast-forward twenty-five years... I felt like a basket case. I was virtually paralyzed with anxiety and depression. But somehow in a flash of clarity I “re-remembered” that I had ADHD. It was time to get to work.

The present

Of all the possible ADHD issues, sleep (or lack thereof) is one of the more annoying ones in my life. I've just never had a good relationship with it. It's like an elusive dream (no pun intended) that's always out of reach.

And obviously I'm not alone. I'd say eighty to ninety percent of the people in our adult ADHD group struggle with sleep. There are a lot of different flavors. Some folks just won't shut off the computer or television. Others do go to bed but just can't fall asleep. A few lucky ones can crash out anytime, anywhere. Often it seems that this, too, is a side effect of ADHD: They run themselves ragged (self-medicating or compensating) so that when their head finally hits the pil-

low, they just collapse from exhaustion.

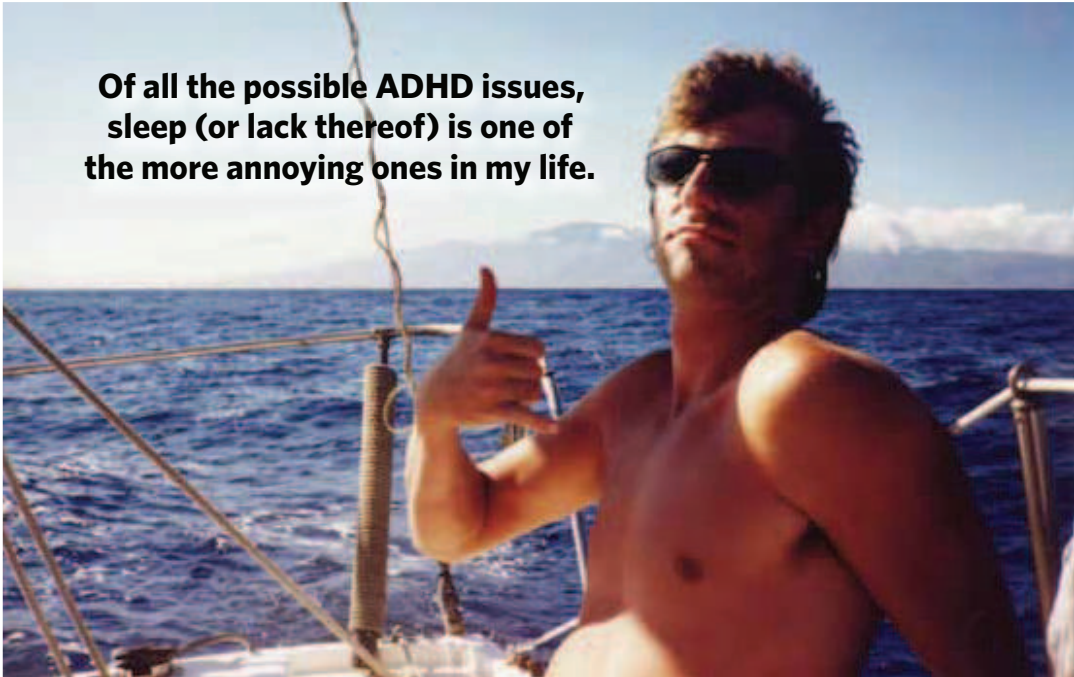
Based on my experience, I don't think doctors have a clue about it. Finding knowledgeable help for sleep issues is even more challenging than finding help for ADHD in general. My doctors focused on depression, thyroid, sleep hygiene, and other “usual suspects.” Alternative practitioners focused on adrenals, herbs, parasites, and other things. All were barking up the wrong tree, or at least didn't see the entire picture. I think many people (doctors included) don't put two and two together and realize that sleep is related to ADHD. Many doctors think all the sleep problems are caused by stimulant medications. But most of us have had these problems since childhood, way before we ever took a stimulant.

The issues

There seems to be a genetic component to sleep. Both of my parents and others in my family have sleep issues. I was a light sleeper from birth. My parents say they would just peek in the room and I'd wake up. Sometimes, even to this day, if someone just *touches* the doorknob—without even turning it—I wake up. I hear every sound and feel everything. I feel dust fall on my arm, so you can imagine how difficult that could make it to sleep. HINT: Earplugs help a lot!

I really need to keep my mind from winding up if I expect to get to sleep. Once it gets wound up, I'll be lying there for hours as my mind bounces from point to point, story to story. I remember a few times trying to count sheep as a kid. I would start thinking... *one, two*, and then... *sheep. Sheep are from New Zealand, their wool is warm, I have a wool sweater, I wonder what New Zealand is like*, and on and on. I'd be up

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for hours. Maybe that's why I don't like wool sweaters?

My circadian rhythm is probably about twenty-six hours and not twenty-four. One night I'll get sleepy at ten o'clock. The next night it's eleven or twelve o'clock, then one or two in the morning, and so on. Finally I'll end up going to bed at four or five o'clock and sleep for only four to five hours. I'll be totally exhausted so I crash early the next day, and then the cycle repeats.

Sometimes I find the idea of sleeping incredibly boring. What could be more boring than lying in the dark waiting for something to (not) happen? Surely there's something more exciting I could be doing, like working, reading, playing guitar, or spot cleaning my Frisbee.

I sometimes have anxiety about going to bed. My nasal passages are often so stuffy from allergies that I awaken terrified, as if being suffocated. That's very scary, and the association exacerbates the sleep problems.

Trying to find relief

I exercise almost every day, and while it does help my concentration, it hasn't helped my sleep much. Some days when I'm totally wired I do need to do more exercise to burn it off. But most days, even when I've exercised until I'm dead tired, it doesn't help. That's because it's not a physical thing, it's a mental thing.

I've found some over-the-counter amino acids and supplements that work sometimes, but they are inconsistent and can have side effects. Once my doctor prescribed a medication off-label that gave me the best sleep I'd had in years, but I stopped taking it because I felt like a zombie until midafternoon.

Yoga and meditation have helped, as has acupuncture. I feel more balanced and grounded, and the "noise" in my mind has definitely decreased. Deeper work that some would consider "woo-woo" has all but eliminated my depression, much of my ADHD and anxiety, and several other issues. Better sleep is just one of its many benefits.

It's taken years of trial and error to reach this point, but on the whole, my sleep is getting better. Once I get to sleep, I actually sleep pretty well, but getting to sleep is still a challenge sometimes. Like everything in life, it's a journey. I play the cards I've been dealt. I work on what I can and don't worry about what I can't. That's all you can do in the end. Hey, it's not worth losing sleep over! **A**

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