



Not-So-Good Morning

For some anxiety sufferers, the darkest hours are just after dawn. But there is hope for a sunnier start to each day.

BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY

AT NIGHT I DRIFT OFF to sleep with blissful ease. But come 6 a.m., I'm a wreck. Unanswered emails and a reminder of an upcoming dental appointment (inflamed pocket?!) escalate to existential terrors: What wrong turn did I take to make such a mess of my life? All before my feet hit the floor.

Although "morning anxiety" isn't listed in the psychologist's bible, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, it's a relatively common complaint, says Ellen Hendriksen, PhD, a clinical psychologist at Boston University's Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders. The anxiety-prone frequently open their eyes to a looming gauntlet of perceived must-dos. Meanwhile, levels of the body's main stress hormone, which

have been rising during the wee hours, surge to a crescendo about a half hour after wake-up time, says Ashley Kendall, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Chicago. This "cortisol awakening response" is thought to have evolved, at least in part, to energize us for the day's challenges, but it may make some people feel more panicky than plucky.

The good news: There are steps you can take to ease a.m. anxiety ASAP. Start with these tonight (but if morning stress persists, consult a professional).

HEED AN EARLY LAST CALL FOR ALCOHOL

A glass of Chardonnay is relaxing because it targets the same brain receptors as prescription anxiety meds, says Uma Naidoo, MD,

director of nutritional and lifestyle psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital. However, over the course of several hours, alcohol's calm-down substances are metabolized out of your system, after which some people experience "hangxiety," a mini withdrawal and spike in morning-after stress. Try to have your last drink at least three hours before bedtime.

SLEEP DEEP

Last year research from UC Berkeley's Center for Human Sleep Science found that on a morning when participants had been deprived of sleep

for 24 hours, their anxiety levels shot up 30 percent. "A bad night of sleep diminishes the ability of the prefrontal cortex to fact-check our worries," says Eti Ben Simon, PhD, one of the researchers. If your mind tends to race as soon as your head hits the pillow, she suggests divesting yourself of concerns by writing them down a few hours before entering the bedroom.

EXILE YOUR PHONE

If your device is your alarm, then you risk opening your eyes to negative headlines, unsettling updates, or work requests. Better to opt for a wake-up call of zen chimes or soothing music. Charge your phone in another part of your home.

CONSULT THE CARDS

"Often we revisit the same unrealistic worries over and over," says Shelby Harris, a behavioral sleep medicine specialist in White Plains, New York. Coping cards can help you check yourself: On one side, note your fear ("I'm going to get fired"); on the other, present the evidence against it ("My review was great!"). Harris says seeing such facts in black-and-white makes them more persuasive.

EXHALE TENSION

Observing your breath is an effective mindfulness trick, but doing so can worsen the jitters in some people ("Why am I panting?!"). If you're one of them, calm your system with a sloooow exhale, suggests Hendriksen, author of *How to Be Yourself: Quiet Your Inner Critic and Rise Above Social Anxiety*. Purse your lips as if you're blowing out a birthday candle and let out a long, gentle exhale. Repeat until you feel your heart rate slow.

REFUEL

After a long night without fluids, "dehydration could bring on a feeling of panic," says Naidoo, and low blood sugar may also cause you to feel anxious. Sip water as soon as you get up, and make a nutrient-packed breakfast, like steel-cut oatmeal. Following a healthy diet—heavy on vegetables, fruits, and whole grains and light on sugars, red meat, and processed food—has also been shown to improve mood all day long, says Naidoo.

GET CHECKED FOR APNEA

This sleep disorder causes people to stop breathing, waking them throughout the night—without their realizing it. Some sufferers experience more episodes during the REM stage of sleep near morning. "Your heart may be racing because your body is saying 'I need to breathe!'" says Harris. If you also have apnea symptoms like fatigue, depressed mood, or snoring, talk to your doctor.

DON'T JUST LIE THERE

On my most overwhelming mornings, I used to will the feeling to pass before I got up. This can create an association between bed and stress, says Harris, author of *The Women's Guide to Overcoming Insomnia*. "Try to think of your anxiety as the jolt you need to get going," she says. I now spring forth and launch into something productive, like emptying the dishwasher—tension defused, chores completed. Turns out morning adrenaline is good for something after all.