



Relearning to Sleep

Brain training is probably the easiest path to better sleep.

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“Rhythm holds sway in all nature.”

— Rudolf Steiner

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This is the second in a four-part series titled "Who Says What Sleep Is?"

In the first section of this series, titled “**Who Says What Sleep Is,**” I talked about our dependence on medicine to explain to us how we do and should function. Medicine does not have much to tell us about sleep, so in this section we’ll turn to neurology.

Neurology

I’ve been reading and writing about brainwaves for many years. I offer neurofeedback training to clients and neurofeedback education to clinicians. I watch the brainwaves of my therapy clients while I work with them. Brainwaves are the “gold standard” for sleep measurement. Few clinicians understand how to use this information, and it is beyond the ken of doctors and psychotherapists.

On the surface, brainwaves are simply the collective electrical “sound” of your brain. However, they are the electrical activity of *all* your brain and, in addition to whatever else it’s doing, your brain is electrical. Examining brainwaves to understand the mind is like looking at the stars to understand the universe.

Brainwaves are a collective phenomena, they reflect the brain’s entire function. They are not “in” the brain and cannot be extracted from it. They are the “music” your brain produces, a song which includes your mind and soul. Such music emanates from all parts of your body, but it’s only what comes from the brain that we measure as brainwaves. We’re missing a lot of information but, even so, brainwaves give us far more than we know what to do with.

It is not that brainwaves are so complex that you need to be an expert to say anything, it’s rather that you have to know what to look for. You don’t need to be a mechanic to know your car has overheated, you just need to know the signs of overheating. The shape of your brainwaves correlate with the quality of your sleep and some of these patterns are straight forward.

It is fairly easy to change the shape of your brainwaves but there are reasons why these waves are “the wrong shape” to begin with. Brainwaves subtly reflect patterns of thinking through focus, attention, awareness, and response. Our minds have layers of patterns, patterns built out of other patterns. The patterns related to brainwaves lie beneath our awareness but they are not beyond measurement. It is easier to change these patterns than patterns of behavior because brainwave patterns are not in direct conflict with our behavior.

Brainwave patterns strongly affect behavior but they do so incidentally, that is their change indirectly affects you. If you were to think about how zoning laws affect your life you’d probably think zoning laws have little effect but, in truth, zoning laws determine the shape and structure of our communities, neighborhoods. and homes and in that way they affect us tremendously.

In a similar way, unless you’ve trained yourself to feel changes in your brainwaves affect you, you won’t notice changes in your own brainwaves. Their change does not require you to voluntarily act differently, yet changing them can have far reaching effects on your mental state. It is often the case that after someone has succeeded in changing their brainwaves they’ll notice unusual changes around them and believe these changes reside in changes in the behavior of others, denying any change in themselves.



How To Exist

We don't have a word that describes how we chose to experience our existence, and this should make you wonder. Why is the act of being something we accept so much without question that we don't even have a word for it? It's hard for me to even put this in a sentence without that sentence being confusing. If we were to construct a word in English it might look something like "being aware of how we are choosing to be aware."

We've got the phrase "state of mind" but this generally refers to how we choose to interpret things, like an intellectual construct. We've got the phrase "sense of self" but this is often considered to refer to how one feels about oneself, something that is again idea-based. In each case we turn to our thoughts. Instead, I'm referring to the state of awareness from which our thoughts emerge. That state that precedes our thoughts. What is that state and might we have some control over it?

Think of pure awareness and break it into its parts. There is attention, and we know we can pay attention to different things. Also, our attention ebbs and flows. Sometimes we're aware of what's going on around us. Sometimes we're aware of what's happening inside us. And at yet other times we're embedded in a fabricated reality of our own creation.

Then there is the matter of how we knit together what we're aware of: sometimes scanning, sometimes identifying, and at other times putting together stories made of what we've identified. These changes in awareness enable us to understand things as continuing to exist even when they're out of sight.

For example, consider an object like a car. Rarely can we devote the time required to perceive more than a few details, so we presume much of what we see using as little of our attention resources as possible. For the most part, we only need to know its size, shape, direction, and speed. Even if you were to notice a car's unusually large tires you would not remember them for more than an instant. So it goes for everything: we basically invent everything we're aware of based on what we presume these things to be. On these presumptions we locate ourselves and construct our self-identity.

We can use brainwaves to describe this constant pattern of creation: brainwaves reflect the level of our attention. Slow brainwaves correspond to expansive awareness, fast brainwaves to narrow awareness. Expansive awareness is relaxing because it makes us feel fully aware and safe. We shift into narrow awareness when we suspect that a threat is emerging from some particular location. It works the other way around as well: being drawn into a state of narrow awareness triggers our anxiety in expectations for the threat we have learned or are programmed to identify.

We build our awareness on this constantly shifting "surface" of fast and slow brainwaves, whose frequency also correlates to different aspects of perception. You might envision this surface as the shifting moods we adopt as we scan the world around us, and we're always scanning to a greater or lesser degree. That's called

“vigilance” and some of us are more vigilant than others. If you’re too vigilant you’re chronically narrowly focused, and the narrower the focus the tighter you’re wound. None of this is specific to what you’re thinking, it’s all about how your thinking.

Patterns

Problematic brainwave patterns cannot be reduced to chemical foundations. Chemicals effect short term changes, but their effect is not sustainable. Drugs can make you fall asleep but cannot make you sleep well. That is because falling asleep is simply entering the sleep domain, like Dorothy being blown into the land of Oz. Falling asleep is little more than being knocked out. Sleeping well, on the other hand, involves performing well in sleep, and there is a lot to do while you’re asleep. To sleep well you must not just get to Oz, you must make it to the Emerald City.

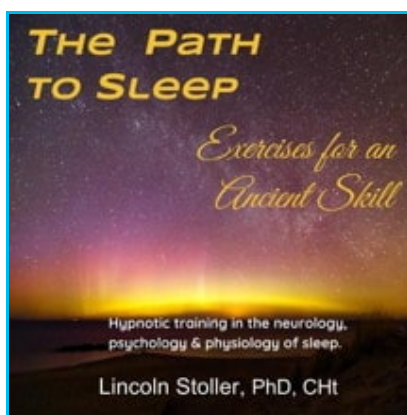
You can train your brain to function better during sleep. It’s a process of tuning down habitual tension and separating yourself from habitual conflict. This assumes the problem is not physical although, even then, there are psychological elements. In short, most of your problems with sleep reside in your brain. Current research on the power of brainwave training to improve sleep is positive but weak. Much more can be done.

Brain training is not just anti-intuitive, it is the definition of anti-intuitive. It involves little cognitive engagement. You do not “know” what you’re doing so, in a kind of happy coincidence, your mind raises no objection. Unfortunately, this also results in a limited sense of accomplishment and so requires a good deal of patience.

Many people fail to retrain their brain because they lack the discipline to persist without the gratification of immediate reward or the order of some authority. It is a training after all, and not a treatment. If you take your own initiative and learn how to do it, then brain training is probably the easiest path to better sleep.

In the third section of this series we’ll consider psychology’s role in restoring good sleep. Psychology is the cognitive side of brain function, though there is an obvious interplay between the content of your thoughts and the rhythms of your brain. From my point of view as a sleep therapist, neurology and psychology are two sides of the same coin.

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