

Words by
Tanya Sweeney

Photography by
Steve Humphreys

CAN'T GET NO SLEEP

For years, Tanya Sweeney struggled with insomnia, a problem made worse first by motherhood, then by mid-life. With the global sleep economy now worth more than \$600bn and our collective shut-eye obsession at an all-time high, she goes in search of her ultimate dream of a good night's sleep

Twenty or 30 years ago, surviving on three hours of sleep a night was a doddle for me. As students, we would leave clubs at 3am, head back home for gossipy post-mortems over tea and toasties, and could still be perky enough for 9am lectures the day after.

Nowadays, it's a different story. By 9pm, the siren-song of the scratcher is too loud to ignore. Far from falling into bed in a beery post-toastie fug, I am versed in the routines of sleep hygiene. Reading, a relaxing bed routine, low lights, sleep masks, ear plugs, cotton pyjamas, laying off the tea and coffee. Hygiene? Sleep sanitation, more like.

And yet, sleep somehow evades me. Staying asleep takes effort, like staying at the bottom of a pool: a constant striving to stay under. For some reason, 2am is when my brain likes to do most of its heavy thinking. A ticker-tape of worries go by on an endless loop. Seeing the clock tick towards 4am is an all-too-common occurrence.

The nights are filled with silent, low-level panic and fretting about exactly how non-functional I will be in the morning. It's only about 15 minutes before the alarm clock goes at 7.30am that I finally fall, hard, into sleep. I'm not as hardy as I used to be. The days become foggy, and can only be rescued by a 15-minute lunchtime nap.

Many things have conspired to decimate my ability to sleep. More recently, motherhood and night feeds did my sleeping habits in altogether. I had a toddler who would shriek out in the night, or would come into the bedroom at 3am for a sociable 'chat'. Running in tandem to this was the dreaded perimenopause, which had me running (well, sleepwalking) to the loo three or four times a night.

I began to think of sleep the way I used to think about money: I loved it, worshipped it almost, thought of it as the last word in luxury, and yet there was never, ever enough.

But the toddler is now six, and we have cleared the night-time thickets. She is mostly sleeping through the night, and, in a pleasant development, is able to look after herself in the times that she doesn't. HRT has also been doing its thing, alleviating various perimenopausal symptoms. It was definitely time to go on a proper quest for a better, sedative-free night's sleep, but also to explore exactly why there are many, many more people than me with the same issue.

Earlier this year, an Ikea global study, surveying 55,000 people over 57 markets, found that Irish people are among the most tired in the whole world when they wake up. The study found 49pc of people wake feeling tired almost every day and 27pc of us wake more than twice. The survey also found that 43pc of people in Ireland are worried they are not getting enough sleep.

I start small, soliciting advice from others about how to get a better night's sleep. A friend of mine who travels a lot for work recommends a magnesium foot spray. This works through a process called transdermal absorption, where magnesium is absorbed directly into the body through the skin. Magnesium is said to improve mood regulation and promote sleep.

Unfortunately, I get irritated by what feels like a 'salty' residue on the soles of my feet, and it keeps waking me up. I switch to magnesium supplements instead. Later, I am told that many regular magnesium supplements contain magnesium oxide: magnesium glycinate and magnesium chloride are said to be much more effective.

Another pal swears by Deepak Chopra's 'fall asleep' meditations, which he listens to on YouTube as he goes to sleep. "I never manage to get to the end of one, I'm already out cold by then," he tells me.

Certainly, Chopra's tone is soft and soporific, but I worry about losing an AirPods in the bed, and also having my phone on in the bedroom. Haven't we been told to leave phones outside the room?

An hour of yin yoga one evening delivers a brilliant six hours of sleep. I delight that I have found the answer, but when I return to the class a week later, the following night's sleep isn't quite as refreshing.

I switch tack, turning my attention to olfactory instead. A few squirts of Ground Wellbeing's Sleep/Codladh sleep spray on the pillow, and I'm off and away to the land of nod fairly quickly. I wake up four hours later instead of the usual two, feeling oddly refreshed. I'm elated.

Unfortunately for me, my body either gets used to the lovely fragrance, or the 2am panic thoughts are no longer overpowered by it. Within a week, I am back to clock-watching at 4am (in any case, the six-year-old has commandeered the sleep spray).

An industry designed to help us sleep is growing by the day. And no wonder, given that in 2016 the World Health Organisation released a study titled 'Sleep Problems: An Emerging Global Epidemic?'

According to *World Finance*, the global sleep economy is now estimated to be worth nearly \$600bn (€528.8bn). Sleep trackers, supplements, sleep monitoring mattresses, and high-tech wearables are all big noise, aided and abetted by a growing number of what are being called 'sleep-fluencers'.

A recent piece for *The New York Times* identified the rise of the 'sleepmaxxers' online; people who post suggestions on how to get some decent kip. They're as varied as they come: one recommended an adjustable pillow to reduce facial pressure; another has filmed herself wearing a jaw strap. "Bragging about early bedtimes has become as much of a social media flex as documenting a lavish vacation," the article declared.

One Boston-based sleep doctor, Milena Pavlova, isn't quite convinced about this quest for the perfect sleep, and others in her field have likened it to orthorexia, the obsessive fixation with healthy eating. "Sleep is a passive process," Dr Pavlova told *The New York Times*. "It is to be protected, not forced — or 'maximised'."

Irish sleep expert Tom Coleman (tomcoleman.ie) says that looking towards the sleepfluencers for answers is probably a fool's errand.

"Sleep is very personal to you," he says. "I say, stop focus-



Keeping a sleep diary immediately throws up a clue to my situation, albeit a paradoxical one. Turns out that, weirdly, I might be spending too much time in bed

ing on the sleep and focus on yourself. The idea of people getting this amount of sleep, but I'm not — the quicker you let go of that concept, the better."

Coleman, who works internationally, and mainly with corporate clients and high-level, shift-pattern workers, has noticed a "huge surge" in sleep issues among Irish people.

"It's not that they have a sleep issue, it's that they put an incredible amount of stuff in the way of allowing the sleep to come naturally," he says. "More often than not, I hear people who say they have fired everything at the problem, and things work for a while, but then stop working."

We talk through my personal sleep patterns down the years, irregular though they have been, and he categorises sleep disruptions into four areas. The first is physical (light, temperature, food, electronics), the second is emotional (anxiety, stress), the third is medical (among them, hormonal issues), and the fourth is circadian misalignment, when the body lock is no longer regular.

Physical activity, Coleman notes, is a huge help. "In terms of biology, when we have energy expenditure, a by-product of that is something called adenosine, which is the tiredness molecule you feel in the morning. Melatonin is what puts you to sleep. If you're tired in the morning, that's the adenosine," he explains.

"The other big thing is an overstimulated nervous system. People try to cram too much in to their day, but the thing is, we haven't built up the tiredness. It's our failure to do that that is causing a huge amount of resistance to sleep. Throw the technology on top of that, and people aren't able to switch off. People arrive into bed, then spend two hours looking at cat videos on TikTok."

Coleman also explains that we sleep in cycles of 90 minutes — we often spend five minutes in the rapid eye movement (REM) stage, then some time in deep sleep, and then about an hour back in REM.

"So you have to reframe how you view that, because it's quite normal to wake up after three or four hours," he says.

The ideal is to get five of these cycles a night.

"Some people get five or six hours sleep, and that's fine," Coleman says. "We aim for seven to eight hours, but if I get the odd night of six hours, I am OK with that."

Coleman also suggests sending oneself on a "little cognitive adventure" with visualisation if it's hard to nod off in the first instance. "I love trekking in the mountain, so I visualise myself with as much detail as possible doing that, he says.

"Stage one of sleep is going into a hypnagogic state — you can mimic that hypnagogia by daydreaming. That's the stage you ideally would like to produce."

John Duffy (insomniatherapy.ie) is a chartered counselling psychologist, who treats insomnia and sleep difficulties using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). He, too, has experienced insomnia first-hand.

Over a number of weeks, Duffy offers me a course of insomnia treatment over Zoom (he charges €120 for a CBT session, and some of this can be claimed back via health

insurance). We talk about sleeping patterns over the years, what my sleep situation is currently like, and how I feel during those awful 4am moments.

Duffy asks me to keep a sleep diary, recording how long it takes me to get to sleep, how many times I wake up, what time I get up at, what things might have affected my sleep. The diary immediately throws up a clue to my situation, albeit a paradoxical one. Turns out that, weirdly, I might be spending too much time in bed.

"It's one of the big issues with insomnia," he says. "We spend too long in bed, and we're awake for a long time, and we build up that negative connotation between being awake and being in bed." The aim, he says, is to make peace with being awake at night.

Normally, I turn in at 9.45pm and read for an hour, and stay in bed the following morning as long as I humanly can. Instead, Duffy suggests going to bed at 11pm — any reading or relaxation should happen elsewhere. What he says next terrifies me: he'd like

Six sleep maxxng trends...

Mouth tape

Placing a small strip of tape across the midline of your lips before bed, in order to encourage nose breathing instead of mouth breathing, is a relatively new trend. Fans say it stops them from snoring and deepens sleep, leading to more energy, a boosted immunity system and lower blood pressure. Jaw straps, meanwhile, wrap around the head to also keep the mouth firmly shut.

Nostril dilators

These increase airflow through your nose during sleep by gently opening the airways. They are often suggested as a way to reduce the intensity and frequency of snoring, leading to a better night's sleep.

Light therapy lamps

'Wake-up' lights are like a personal sunrise, offering a gradually brightening light that rouses people from sleep so that they feel as though they have woken 'naturally'. At bedtime, the 'fading sunset' function creates a bedroom environment that is thought to encourage sleep.

Sleep trackers

Costing anything from €30 to several hundred euro, sleep trackers are wearable devices that detect levels of sleep and measure the user's quality of sleep overall. Using motion sensors and heart rate sensors, they provide information on the stage of sleep and disruptions like restlessness or snoring. Many then suggest lifestyle tweaks based on the data delivered.

High-tech mattresses

In the US, hardcore sleepmaxxers are raving about the Eight Sleep Pod 4 Ultra mattress topper, that adjusts temperature, detects snoring and vibrates when it's time to wake. It uses sensors to detect body temperature and adjust the mattress surface accordingly. All yours for around \$4,249 (€3,751).

Blue and green light-blocking glasses

Exposure to blue/green light during the day is fine as it helps to synchronise the body's circadian clock. At night-time, sleepers might want to block these lights to maximise melatonin levels and shield disruptions to the body's circadian rhythms, for optimal sleep.



me to try getting out of bed at 6am every morning. One term that surfaces a lot in my sessions with Duffy is ‘sleep drive’. The longer we’re awake during the day, the stronger our drive to sleep becomes. We need to build up the sleep drive.

“Think of it like a balloon — if that balloon is good and full at bedtime, that can push us through a lot of the night. Or think of it in terms of being hungry,” Duffy says.

“We just get hungry, and then we eat. And sleep is very similar.”

This means, in the very first instance, cutting out afternoon naps. Instead, Duffy suggests that when I feel like I’m about to collapse with tiredness, I should take a quick walk outside.

The first week of this new regime, naturally, is hellish. But soon, the sleep drive adjusts. It starts to take no time at all to fall asleep. A deeper look at the sleep diaries shows that, on many nights, I do get nearly five or six hours of sleep; more than my mind tells me I am getting at 3am.

Duffy also tells me to focus on the wins, rather than the nights where I am not getting eight hours of sleep. “There will be some nights that are not as good as other nights,

and we need to make room for that in our head, that this is OK, it’s natural. Perfection puts pressure on us to sleep,” he says.

Among other measures, Duffy suggests a ‘scheduled worry time’ for during the day, which is designed to reduce overthinking. He gives me a start and stop time, and for 10 minutes during the afternoon, I get to “worry hard and elaborate any worries”.

There’s an exercise for later in the evening: putting the day to rest, where I sort out a ‘to do’ list for the following day with a pen and paper, while processing the day that just happened.

Other strategies are discussed, like muscle relaxation and ‘body scan’ exercises. Over time, I’m encouraged to befriend wakefulness and to think more positive thoughts if I do wake, among them being ‘sleep will find me’, or ‘I’m probably getting more sleep than I think I am’.

It’s certainly effortful, and yet effective. Within weeks, things have slowly but tangibly improved. There are nights where I am awake at 4am, but the trick is to see being awake in the small hours of the morning as no big deal. Or, in more extreme cases, to simply get up entirely and do something restful, like reading.

Elsewhere, Anne Marie Boyhan employs similar principles of CBT, sleep journalling and sleep hygiene, but also believes that our physical state greatly affects our inability to sleep. Like Duffy, she also experienced insomnia, while working in the corporate world.

“I was probably getting about four hours a night, and didn’t know how to wind down,” she says. “I made a decision to leave my job and researched [insomnia] like mad.”

Gaining a qualification in functional diagnostic nutrition and becoming a certified sleep coach, Boyhan founded The Sleep Care Company (*thesleepcarecompany.com*). She says her clients are people who have tried pretty much everything else to address their chronic insomnia issues.

“Sleep hygiene [strategies] work for 90pc of the population, where they’re not in a sleep routine or they’re not prioritising their sleep,” she says. “But for people with insomnia, who have tried all of those and they haven’t worked, something else is going on.”

The Sleep Care Company programme incorporates functional lab testing so that experts can pinpoint with accuracy the root cause of the problem. A data-based health plan is then recommended after that.

“I was doing all the sleep hygiene hacks and they worked

to a certain extent, but they weren’t cutting it [for me],” Boyhan says. “So when someone calls me and they’ve tried sleep hygiene and CBT and it doesn’t work for them, there’s a health issue there. It allows you to look under the hood and conduct, for example, a gut test, a stress test, a hormone test.

“The gut and sleep are hugely related. For instance, if you have bacteria or pathogens in your gut, these things are very nocturnal.”

Other tests that Boyhan suggests can also involve getting hair tissue mineral analysis, and thyroid testing.

“All of it paints a picture,” she says. “[The tests] tell me about your thyroid health, your blood sugar, and whether you have enough vitamins and minerals, which affects sleep. They also tell me if there are heavy metals in your system, which can affect sleep as well.

“It’s quite unconventional. It’s not the standard ‘turn off your phone and drink some herbal tea’ [measures].”

The programme is no overnight solution; in fact, Boyhan offers a 180-day coaching programme for people wanting to seriously address their sleep problems. The programme, including testing, is €3,500 for six months, or €583 a month.

Boyhan encourages clients to keep a sleep diary. They join a small online community and are invited not only to encourage each other, but to partake in Zoom calls and masterclasses with sleep specialists and nutritionists. In other words, they mean business.

The lifestyle changes that The Sleep Care Company extols, once it has made extensive investigations into my lifestyle, are also substantial. Chief among these is diet, exercise, stress reduction and (several) supplements.

In my case, it’s suggested blood test analysis has shown up evidence of gut and liver issues, as well as low seroto-

nin and dopamine. I’m encouraged to wear a heart rate variability (HRV) monitor to bed, and to practise low and slow breathing for five minutes — later, 10 minutes — before bed. As Coleman and Duffy suggested, I also need to refrain from talking negatively about sleep or being a ‘bad’ sleeper, and I have to practise ‘good sleeper thoughts’.

Boyhan also recommends other lifestyle tweaks: switching from a plastic water bottle to a metal one, using wooden utensils in the kitchen, changing deodorant to a non-aluminium one, getting five minutes of sunshine three times a day.

The programme is intensive and detailed, by anyone’s reckoning. I am also told that, much like a gym routine, it will take consistency and time to see the results. Those further along on the programme say that it delivers results.

Vickie, who is 55 and an accountant from Kildare, has recently come through the Easy Sleep Method’s six-month programme, which she found out about through her employer wellbeing programme. Her sleep issues started to become serious in her 30s.

“I started around 20 years ago using sleep aids like herbal teas and melatonin tablets,” she says. “While they sometimes helped me fall asleep, I often felt groggy and hungover the next morning, which made them unsustainable. About 10 years ago, I even tried hypnotherapy in the hope of easing the fear and dread I felt about going to bed, which had become a real mental barrier.”

After signing up to the Easy Sleep Method, Vickie noticed a change within four weeks, and began to experience “truly restful sleep” for the first time in years within six to eight weeks.

“There was actually a sense of relief when the test results showed there were real, physical issues contributing to my sleep problems,” she says.

Just as there are countless reasons for a sleep problem, every person experiencing sleep difficulties will decide on a method that ultimately works for them. The luckier ones can course-correct with lifestyle changes and better sleep hygiene; for others, a more labour-intensive road lies ahead. But for almost everyone, it seems, the trick is not to see sleep as the enemy.

And for me, the journey towards better sleep has at least ushered in an awareness. People are becoming more aware of the benefits of a great night’s sleep, and are evidently spending a lot of money to make the grade in this particular area of life. But the basics are simple, and free to grasp. It’s not about being ‘great’ at this or it being a skill we need to perfect.

“If you think about it, sleep is the ultimate act of letting go,” says Coleman. “Letting go of the day. Letting go of what we didn’t get done, should have gotten done. Letting go of hopes, dreams plans. We have to let it all go, and we have to learn to do it correctly.”

Was the quest worth it? Undoubtedly. Much of the interrogating has led to better health practices, more balance and regular bouts of mental unloading. Even for those who get a perfect eight hours of sleep every night, these are practices worth incorporating.

These days, there are still moments where I wake and it’s dark outside (I’ve learned never to look at the clock during the night). Instead of fretting about the lack of sleep I’m getting, I find it more helpful to remind myself of a more positive mantra: sleep will eventually come find me.

More often than not, it does.

T: 01 637 1636
W: [traveldepartment.com](https://www.traveldepartment.com)
Visit: Travel Store, Second Level, Arnotts

SCAN ME

Save on 2025 Tours - Hurry Offer Ends Soon!

ENJOY EASY TRAVEL

SPARK MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS

LEARN FROM INSIGHTFUL GUIDES

EXPLORE TOP SIGHTS & CULTURE

NEW EXCURSION

BIG 5 SAFARI

MORE AFRICA TOURS AVAILABLE

NEW SOLO TRAVELLER AVAILABLE

SAVE UP TO €250* PER PERSON

FROM €4,429

Cape Town, the Garden Route & Safari

Fully Guided | 13 Nights | 3 ★ & 4 ★ B&B / Full board

Flights from Dublin to Cape Town, via Dubai, returning from Port Elizabeth via Johannesburg
3 nights in Cape Town with a city tour and ascent of Table Mountain and excursions to the wine region, including wine blending, Cape Peninsula and Robben Island
Drive the scenic "Garden Route", staying 2 nights in Arniston or Hermanus, depending on your chosen date, with a morning guided walking tour, 2 nights in Knysna and 1 night in Port Elizabeth, with visits to Featherbed Nature Reserve and Tsitsikamma National Park and Forest
3 nights at Kariega Game Reserve, with two early morning and three afternoon game drives in search of the "Big 5" game animals
A day at leisure
11 nights accommodation and 2 overnight flights. Internal flights included
Please note: Some excursions are subject to weather conditions. Itinerary varies on some dates, with a Johannesburg city tour included

3 night extension to Dubai available from €5,149

Holiday Departure Months: 2025														2026	
J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D				
J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D				

Irish Independent

Fully licensed by the Irish Aviation Authority (TO 163 & TA 0692) and bonded. Travel Department T&Cs apply for all bookings. Prices are per person and based on two sharing. Single-room supplements (excluding Solo Traveller tours) and room upgrade costings apply. A non-refundable / non-transferable deposit is required to book. Balances are due 10 weeks before departure date. Prices, taxes, flight times, holiday details & availability are subject to change. Prices subject to airline fuel surcharges. *Offer valid for all new bookings made between 8th July - 14th July 2025. Offer applies to 2025 departures. Save €250* per person on holidays of 14 nights or more using code LAUNCH250. Save €100* per person on holidays of 7 - 13 nights using code LAUNCH100. Save €50* per person on holidays of 6 nights or less using code LAUNCH50. Offers are non-transferable, subject to availability, cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer, and have no cash value. £&OE.

IAA

12 July 2025 **Weekend Magazine** IRISH INDEPENDENT 17