Midlife Sleep, Restored

The 3AM Reset: How to stop waking at 3am and get back to sleep

For women over 35 who want to sleep through the small hours and wake up feeling like themselves again..



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In a sleep lab, scientists wired up 57 healthy young adults and watched them sleep through the night.

None of them had a sleep problem. They were the people you quietly envy, the ones who say they slept like a log and mean it.

Then the machines showed what really happened. On an average night, each of them woke up more than 20 times.

And they still got a great night's sleep, because every time they surfaced, they rolled over and were gone again before they knew it.

A good sleeper wakes all night long. She just doesn't remember it.

Now think about your 3am. You fell asleep fine, and then suddenly you're wide awake in a silent house.

Your mind goes straight to the thing your boss said, the bill, the conversation you wish had gone differently.

An hour later you're still lying there doing sums: if I drop off now, I'll get two and a half hours.

I wrote this for the woman over 35 who loses the back half of her night.

I want you surfacing at 3am the way those sleepers in the lab do, rolling over, and waking at your alarm feeling like yourself again.

So here's what I believe. I believe the clock on your bedside table is costing you more sleep than anything you ate today.

I believe going to bed earlier to catch up is how most women make 3am worse.

And I believe the real fix for your nights happens in the morning, in the first half hour after you get up.

The results back it up. Across nearly 5,000 sleep clinic patients, the ones who kept checking the time slept worse.

A warm bath at the right time cuts how long it takes to fall asleep by about a third.

And women in menopause with hot flushes beat their insomnia with a short course of habit changes over the phone.

In the pages ahead you'll find

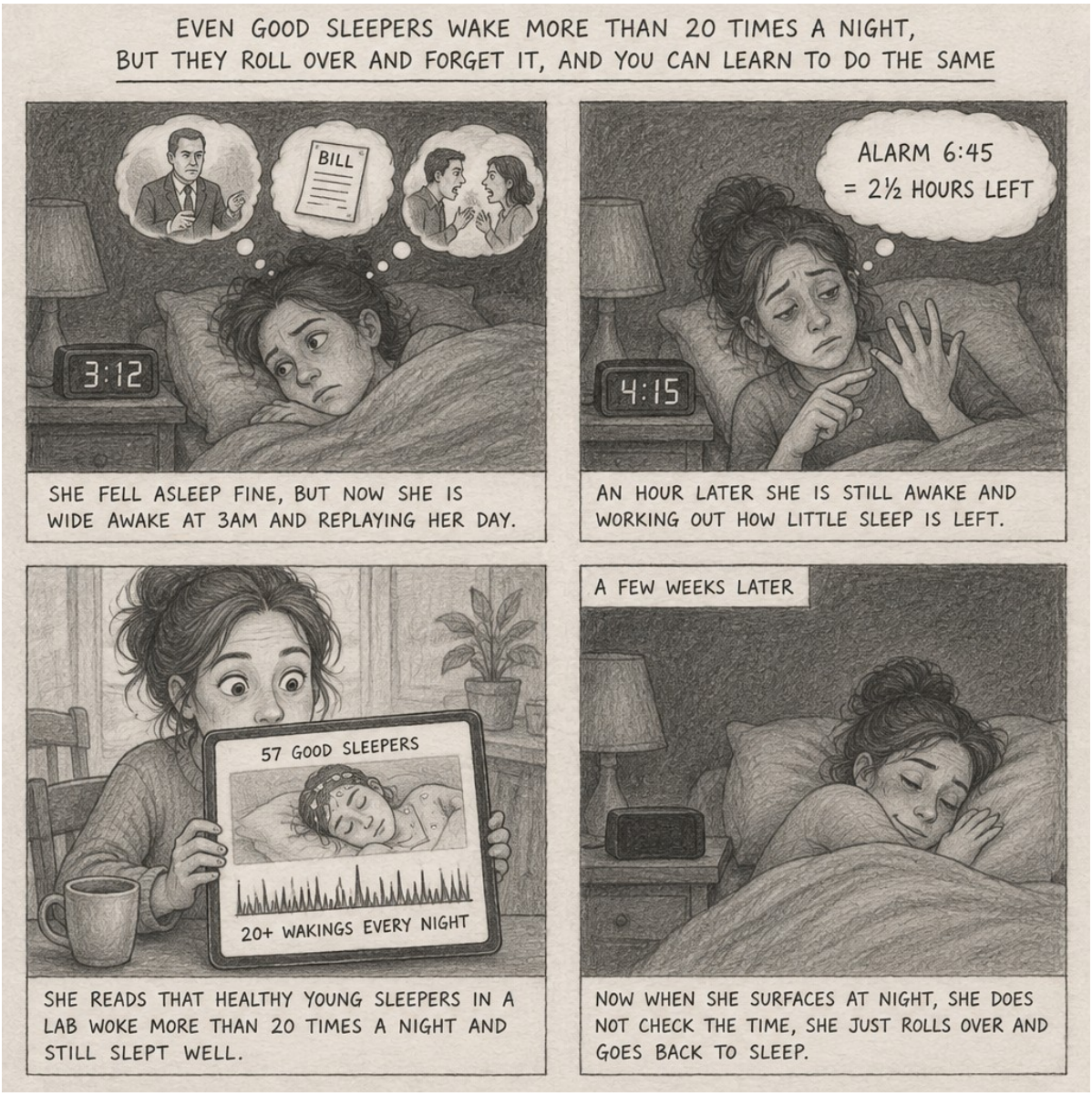
- Why your body wakes at 3am almost to the minute, and how to retrain it
- The ten-second rule that stops a short waking turning into a long one
- A word game that pulls your mind off the replay of your day
- The one moment when getting out of bed gets you more sleep
- The morning move that quietly resets your whole night
- The evening habit that is very likely waking you at 3am
- Why it can be your hormones and still be fixable by what you do

You don't need every idea in here. Start with three.

One takes a minute tonight, and you can do another one lying in bed with your eyes shut.

Picture a few weeks from now.

You surface in the dark, you don't know what time it is and you don't care, and the next thing you know it's morning.



WHY YOUR BODY PICKS 3AM

Around 3 or 4 in the morning, your body starts getting ready for the day, even in total darkness.

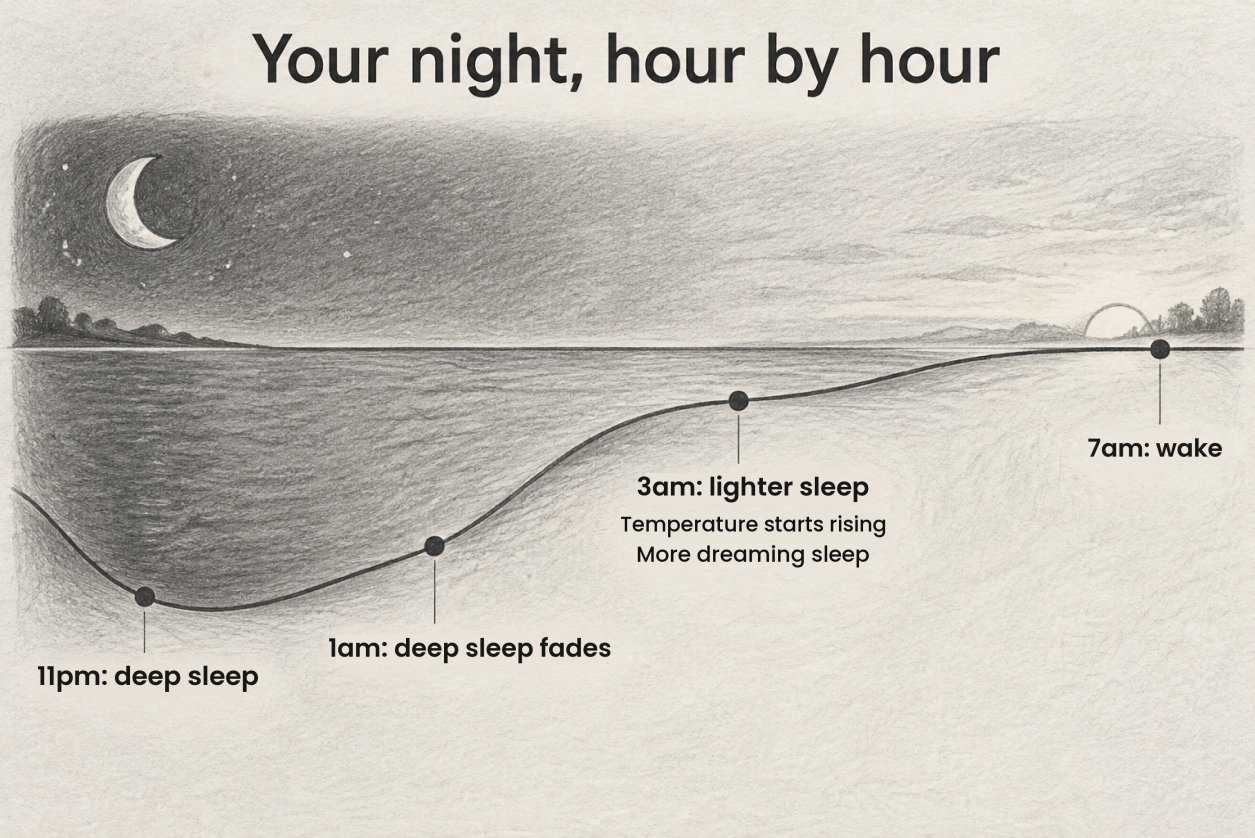
Your core temperature, which is the heat deep inside your body, starts to rise. Melatonin, the hormone that makes you sleepy, has already peaked.

And you've already used up a good chunk of your sleep need, so the heavy pull that held you down at 11pm is weaker by now.

Sleep also gets lighter as the night goes on.

Most of your deep sleep comes in the first half, and the second half holds more dreaming sleep, called REM, and more light sleep.

That's why a creak, a hot flush or a busy thought can bring you to the surface so easily at 3am when it wouldn't have touched you at midnight.



By 3am your sleep is closer to the surface than at any time before it, so waking then is normal and staying awake is the part you can change.

There's one more reason, and every mother will recognise it.

A sleep doctor at one of America's biggest hospitals explains that your body can learn to wake at a set time, because once you had a reason to, like a crying baby.

Bodies are surprisingly predictable that way.

If you spent months up for night feeds, your body kept the habit, and a habit that was learned can be unlearned.

What keeps you awake once you're up has a surprise in it too.

Researchers studied about 200 adults with insomnia at two sleep clinics, most of them women.

The ones who **replayed the past**, going over what happened and how they felt about it, spent longer awake in the middle of the night.

Worrying about tomorrow made no difference to their sleep at all.

So your job at 3am is to stop replaying your day, and you can do that in under a minute.

YOUR FIRST TWO MINUTES AWAKE

The Clock With No Face starts tonight, before you get into bed. Turn the bedside clock to face the wall, take off your smartwatch, and put your phone across the room where you can't reach it. Then when you surface at 3am, your first ten seconds follow one rule: no checking the time and no touching the phone. Keep your eyes closed, let your jaw go soft and let your shoulders drop.

It works for two reasons. The moment you see 3:12, you start counting how much night is left, and that sum builds the frustration that keeps you awake.

And you may still be half asleep when you first surface, so the light from a screen and the movement of reaching for it are what finish the job of waking you.

Researchers in Indiana looked at nearly 5,000 sleep clinic patients.

The ones who watched the clock had worse insomnia and were more likely to reach for sleeping pills, and the main reason was frustration.

The doctor who led it gives every new patient the same first instruction: turn the clock around or cover it.

That makes The Clock With No Face the cheapest, quickest change you can make tonight.

> **Need an alarm?** Leave it set on the phone across the room. It can still wake you in the morning, but you can't see it at 3am.

Next, your mind needs a job, because an idle mind at 3am goes straight back to the replay.

The Cake Alphabet gives it one that leaves no room for anything else.

Lying still in the dark:

1. Pick a dull word with no feelings attached to it, like cake.
2. Take the first letter, C, and picture as many things starting with C as you can, quickly and one after another: a car, a carrot, a cottage, a cup.
3. See each one clearly for a moment, then move straight on to the next.
4. When you run out of C things, move to the second letter, A, and do the same.
5. Most people drift off before they ever reach the third letter.

The quick, random pictures copy what your brain does on its own as you fall asleep, when scattered little images float past.

Counting sheep fails most adults because you can count and worry at the same time, but the Cake Alphabet takes up the space the worry would use.

Keep the word boring, because words about work or the news wake you up.

A researcher at a Canadian university tested this with about 150 students who struggled to sleep.

Picturing random words helped them feel sleepy just as well as writing down their worries did, and you can do it without even opening your eyes.

So the Cake Alphabet is the thing to reach for the moment you catch yourself replaying your day.

> **Try embracing it. Say to yourself, oh good, I'm falling asleep.**
>
> Someone who learned to sleep again after years of insomnia

That line is worth keeping. When odd, random thoughts start drifting in, that's sleep arriving, so greet them instead of fighting them.

If your body feels tense, slow your breathing so each breath out is longer than the breath in.

Breathe in through your nose while you count to four, hold it while you count to seven, then let it out slowly through your mouth while you count to eight.

Do that a few times to settle yourself, then go back to the Cake Alphabet.

Make one more decision now, in daylight: **nothing gets decided at 3am**.

A tired brain reacts more strongly to bad news, and the part of your brain that normally calms you down goes quiet, so night thoughts slide toward the worst case.

That's why they shrink to nothing once the sun is up.

Some women talk to that 3am voice kindly: I know you want to be heard, but I need to sleep, and we'll deal with it tomorrow.

And if you're truly hungry, especially after an early or light dinner, have a small bit of protein, like a slice of cheese or a spoon of yoghurt.



Keep this order and most short wakings stay short.

STILL AWAKE AFTER 20 MINUTES? GET UP

If you're still awake after about 20 minutes, or the moment frustration kicks in, whichever comes first, get out of bed.

You'll have to guess the 20 minutes, and that's fine.

Go to another room, switch on a dim lamp and do something quiet and dull, like reading a boring book or folding washing.

No screens and no planning. Go back to bed only when your eyes feel heavy.

This is the biggest lever you have at 3am, because in insomnia the bed itself gets trained.

Every night you lie there going over a conversation, your brain learns that bed is the place where you're awake and thinking.

Getting up breaks that link, so the bed goes back to meaning sleep.

You might worry that getting up will wake you completely.

But you're already awake, so the only choice is whether the bed keeps learning the wrong lesson.

It protects tomorrow too, because a psychiatrist who treats sleep problems explains that two long wakings wreck your sleep cycles far more than five short ones.

Cutting the long one short is how you save the morning.

A sleep researcher who has spent his career on this does it himself.

He listens to his breathing first, and if he's still caught in dark thoughts after 15 or 20 minutes, he gets up, turns on a dim light and reads.

He calls it mundane but powerfully compassionate at that hour.



A dim lamp and a dull book let your brain wind back down without teaching the bed that it's a place for being awake.

FIX THE MORNING AND THE NIGHT FOLLOWS

Most women work hard on bedtime. The strongest lever is the hour you get up, because your body clock sets the whole night by it.

So get up at the **same time every day**, seven days a week, and especially after a bad night.

Then get outside within about half an hour of waking for 5 to 15 minutes, and a cloudy sky counts.

Your body clock is always guessing when sunrise will come, and morning light tells it, so the sleepy part of your night lines up where it should be.

Then stop going to bed earlier to catch up.

All day your body builds a pressure to sleep, and the longer you're awake, the stronger it gets.

When you go to bed early, you spend that pressure in the first half of the night, so there's too little left to carry you through 3am.

The rule sleep courses use is simple: spend about as long in bed as you actually sleep, plus half an hour.

If you've been sleeping about six hours, that's six and a half in bed, and never less than five and a half.

Once you're asleep almost the whole time you're lying there, add another half hour.

This is the heart of CBT for insomnia, a short course of habit changes that sleep doctors use instead of pills.

A big review of 77 trials found that in-person CBT for insomnia helped about four in ten people get free of insomnia altogether.

Just the two pieces you've now learned, setting your time in bed and getting up when you can't sleep, did about as well as the whole course.

That means you already hold the parts that carry most of the result.

> **Can't change your evenings?** Kids, shifts and late emails are real. Start with just the same wake time and morning light. Neither one touches your evening.

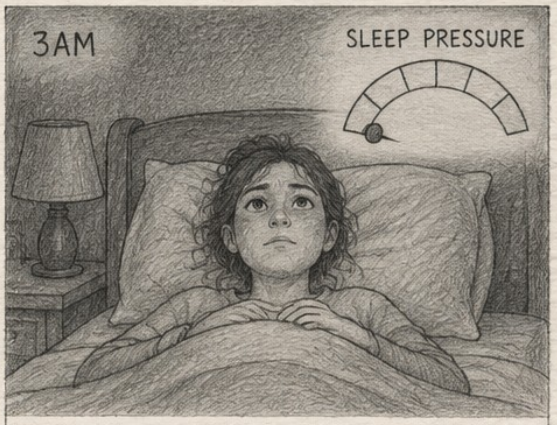
GOING TO BED EARLIER TO CATCH UP USES UP YOUR SLEEP PRESSURE TOO SOON, SO KEEP THE SAME WAKE TIME AND GET MORNING LIGHT INSTEAD



ALL DAY HER BODY BUILDS A PRESSURE TO SLEEP, AND IT GETS STRONGER THE LONGER SHE IS AWAKE.



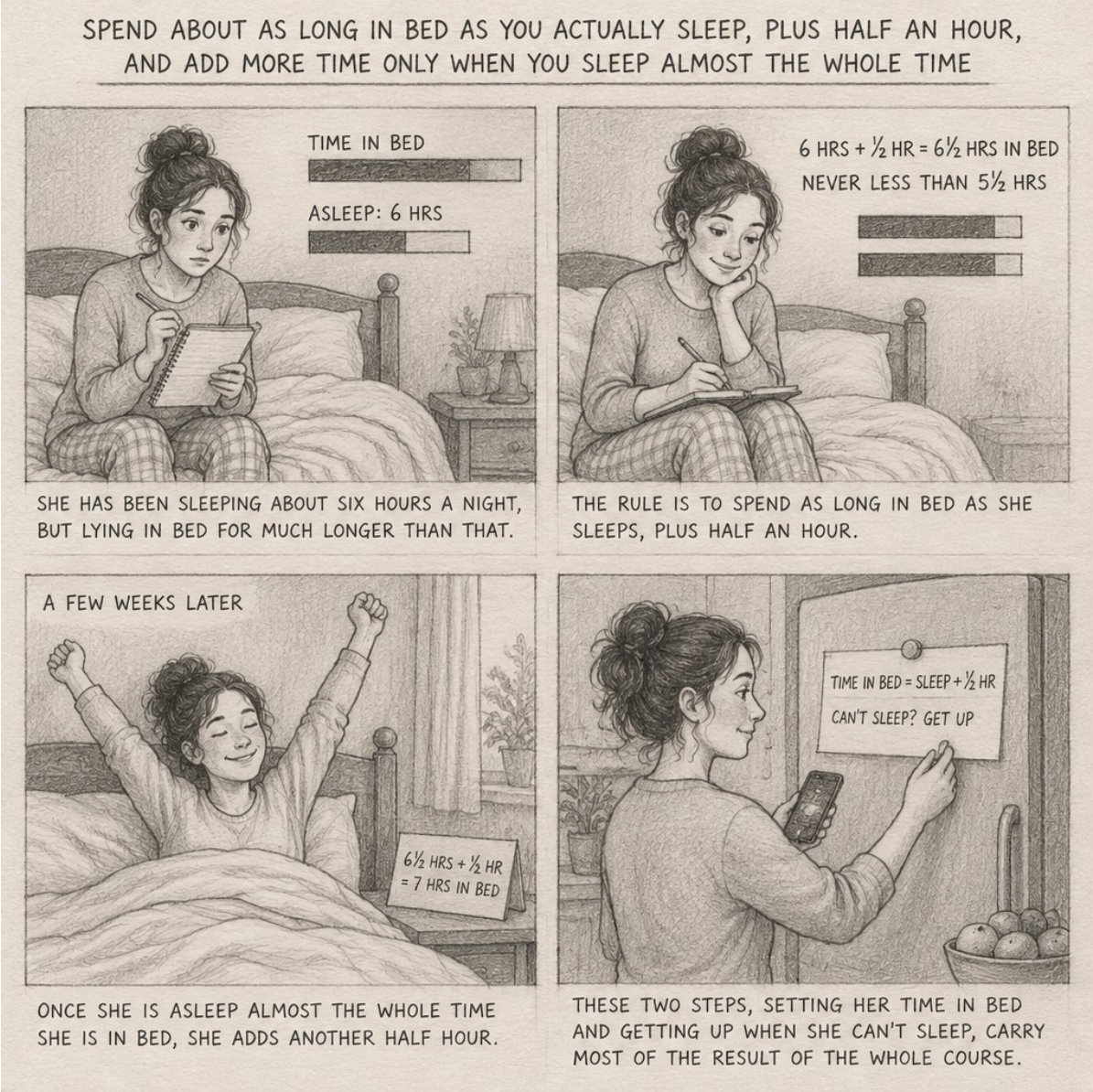
AFTER A BAD NIGHT SHE GOES TO BED EARLY TO CATCH UP ON SLEEP.



SHE USED UP HER SLEEP PRESSURE IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE NIGHT, SO THERE IS NONE LEFT TO CARRY HER THROUGH 3AM.



SO SHE GETS UP AT THE SAME TIME EVERY DAY AND STEPS OUTSIDE INTO THE MORNING LIGHT WITHIN HALF AN HOUR.



THE AFTERNOON AND EVENING HABITS THAT KEEP 3AM QUIET

Your 3am is shaped during the day, so start with the habits that make the biggest difference, in the order your day runs.

First, give your worries an appointment in the afternoon.

Keep a small notebook, and when a worry pops up during the day, write one or two words and tell it, I'll see you at worry time.

You'll do that dozens of times at first, and that's normal.

Then sit down at the same time and place each afternoon for 10 to 20 minutes, never in bed or on the couch and never close to bedtime.

Cross off anything that has sorted itself out, then for the rest, either let yourself worry for the time you've set or write down one concrete next step.

Anything left goes to tomorrow, and do something pleasant straight after.

In a small trial, people with insomnia who added this kind of worry time to their sleep treatment did far better than those who had the sleep treatment alone.

Most of them improved, against about one in four without it.

So worry time is the one habit that empties out what 3am would otherwise fill.

Next, alcohol, which is very likely part of the answer even though nobody enjoys hearing it.

A glass of wine helps you drop off, but your body breaks it down in the second half of the night, and it leaves your system right around 3am, breaking up your sleep as it goes.

In older adults it means more time awake in the night.

One woman going through menopause put it simply: when she had a drink she woke at 3am and couldn't get back to sleep, and when she cut the alcohol, that stopped.

Then take a warm bath or shower one to two hours before bed.

The warm water draws heat out to your hands and feet, so afterwards your core temperature drops, and that drop is one of your body's strongest signals for sleep.

A review of the research found that as little as 10 minutes in warm water, at the right time, cut the time it took to fall asleep by about a third.

So save the bath for earlier in the evening, because straight before bed you're still too warm when your head hits the pillow.

And put your phone away for the last 30 minutes before bed.

In one trial, 38 poor sleepers did exactly that for four weeks, and the time it took them to fall asleep dropped from about half an hour to under 20 minutes, with much better sleep overall.

They got reminders every night to keep the phone off, so make it easy for yourself and charge it in the kitchen.

The smaller habits that round it out:

- Have your last coffee by early afternoon. Caffeine doesn't give you back the sleep you lost, it just stops your brain noticing you're tired, so the third coffee after a bad night helps build the next one.
- Move for about 30 minutes most days. People often notice the biggest change after two weeks, and an evening walk or workout is fine for sleep.
- Keep naps to about 20 minutes and before mid-afternoon, so you still have plenty of sleep pressure at night.
- Keep the bedroom cool, dark and quiet, and keep the bed for sleep.



Most of what decides your 3am happens long before you go to bed.

WHEN HORMONES ARE PART OF IT

For many women, the years before menopause, usually somewhere between 45 and 55, are when 3am really starts.

Hot flushes and night sweats break up your sleep, broken sleep makes you more anxious and low, and that makes sleep worse again, so it turns into a loop.

A large study that followed women through these years found that staying asleep got harder as the change went on, and women with frequent hot flushes were twice as likely to have broken sleep.

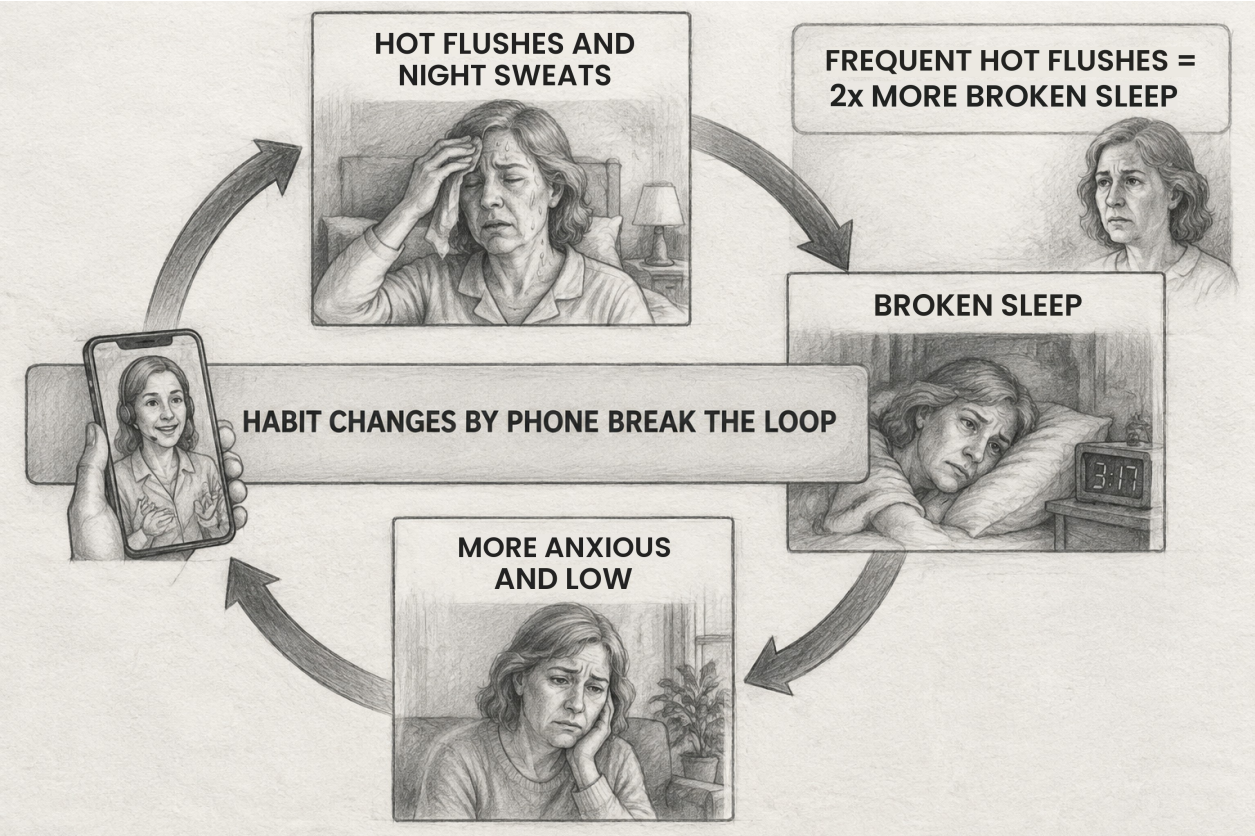
Here’s the good news.

In a trial of women going through and past menopause who had insomnia and hot flashes, CBT for insomnia delivered by telephone cut their insomnia and made them more likely to be free of it two and six months later.

They even rated their hot flashes as less bothersome.

So your sleep can be hormonal and still be fixable by what you do, and every habit here works alongside any treatment for the flushes.

> **See your doctor if:** you wake up soaked, your cycle is changing, you snore loudly, someone has seen you stop breathing in your sleep, or you're sleepy all day. These have treatments of their own, and this plan carries on working beside them.



HOW THE BEST IN THE WORLD TREAT SLEEP

Roger Federer reportedly slept around ten hours a night and added a two-hour nap.

LeBron James reportedly gets eight to ten hours at night plus naps.

Michael Phelps has described aiming for eight hours a night and an afternoon nap during his heaviest training.

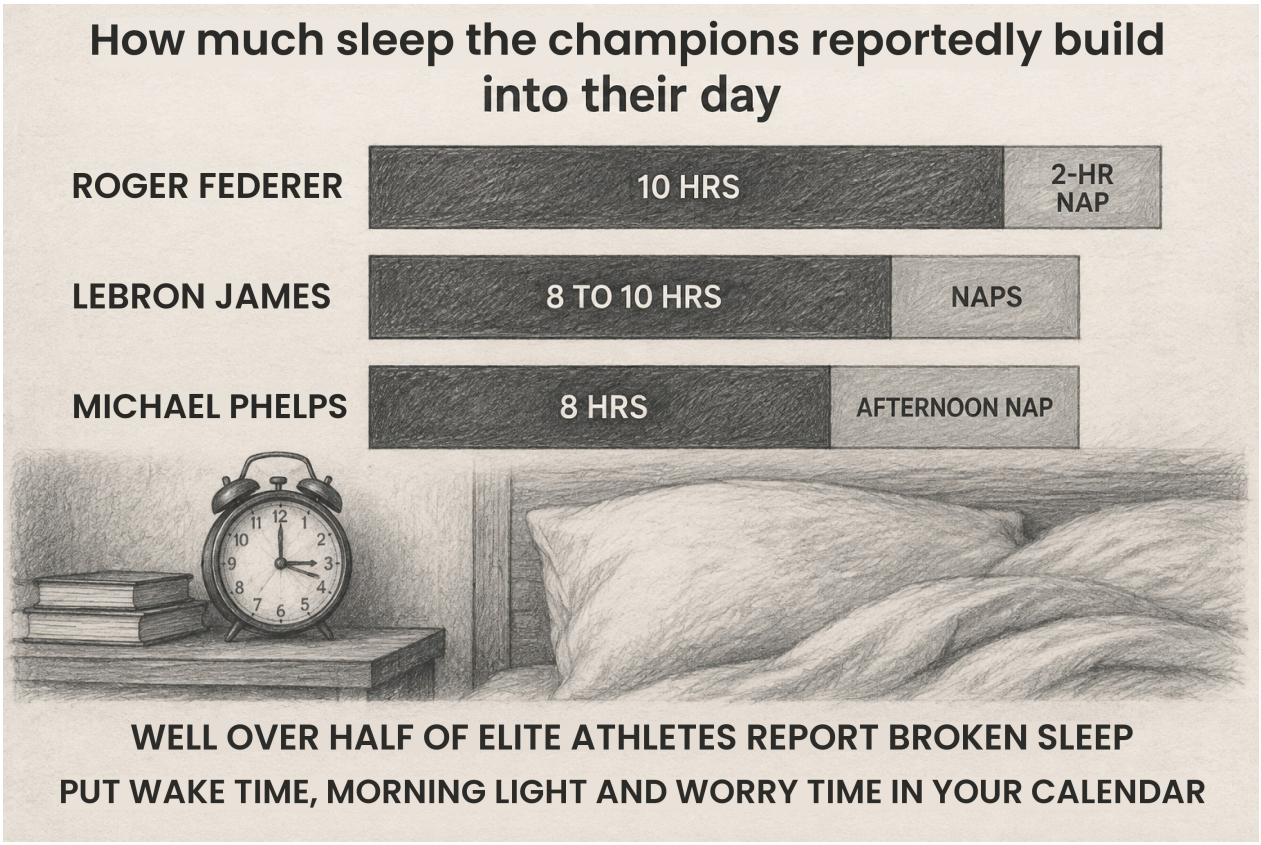
And Serena Williams made a point of switching her mind off with meditation, light TV and time with her daughter, so she could reset for the next day.

Even elite athletes don’t sleep perfectly. A group of sports scientists found that well over half of them report broken sleep, thanks to early training, travel and late games.

What the greats do is treat sleep like training: they put it on the schedule, protect it, and build the rest of the day around it, even on the nights it goes wrong.

Serena switched her mind off on purpose with something light and easy, and that’s what the Cake Alphabet does for you at 3am.

The champions put sleep on their schedule, so put your fixed wake time, morning light and worry time in your calendar the way you’d put in a meeting you can’t miss.



YOUR FIRST THREE MOVES

Don’t try everything at once, because that’s the quickest way to keep none of it. Start with three.

How to start

1. Tonight, set up The Clock With No Face: clock to the wall, watch off, phone across the room.
2. Tomorrow, get up at your chosen time and spend 5 to 15 minutes outside within half an hour.
3. Next time you’re awake past about 20 minutes, get up, go to a dim room and read something dull until your eyes are heavy.
4. Each week after that, add one daytime habit, starting with worry time or cutting the evening drink.

5. You'll know it's working when you surface in the night, have no idea what time it is, and wake up at your alarm.

The women who fix this say the turning point came when they stopped being afraid of waking up.

Once a 3am waking stops feeling like a disaster, it loses most of its power to keep you awake.

> **It's okay to have an off night or two, but the moment I start fearing sleep itself I propel it forward. And I have a better relationship with sleep even when I don't sleep.**
>
> Someone who beat years of insomnia

So the next time you surface in the dark, leave the clock alone, picture a carrot, and let yourself roll over like those good sleepers in the lab, who woke all night and never knew it.



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