How to Think Like an Athlete for Stellar Sleep

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Record-breaking alpine skiers do it. So do champion triathletes and a slew of other athletes at the top of their game.

Triathlete Gwen Jorgensen

Visualization has been proven to help sports stars push their boundaries and achieve greater success. But you don't have to be athletically-inclined to make this technique work for you. It can be used to reach many different goals — including becoming a better sleeper, says **Steve Orma,** a clinical psychologist who specializes in insomnia and anxiety.

Visualization is essentially a mental dress rehearsal for a real-life event, explains Orma, author of *Stop Worrying and Go to Sleep: How to Put Insomnia to Bed for Good*. Many in show business also use it, he says.

The key is to vividly picture every step of your goal in such detail that your brain doesn't know the difference between what's real and what you've imagined. "Practicing" the outcome in your head primes you for

success.

One study from the **Cleveland Clinic** compared people who lifted weights to those who visualized doing so. Those who exercised their elbow flexor muscles only in their minds increased their muscle strength by 13.5 percent, despite never picking up any weights. Other research, from **Vanderbilt University**, found that people who visualized picking a target from a group of distracting items performed better at the task than those who had a true practice run.

Someone who's battling insomnia can't really practice getting good rest, so visualization can be key.

"The biggest problems occur when you start seeing yourself as a 'bad sleeper,'" says Orma. "It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Imagine your best rest

Using visualization for better sleep isn't hard, but it does take some patience and dedication, says Orma. Here's how to do it:

- Set a specific, positive outcome. Try, "I want to sleep soundly and deeply and wake up rested."
- During the day, find a quiet place where you can relax for about 15 minutes without being disturbed. A sofa or comfy chair works well.
- Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Imagine yourself going through every step of your pre-bedtime routine in as much detail as possible. You might start by picturing yourself changing into pajamas, brushing your teeth, climbing into bed and turning off the light.
- Feel your eyes getting heavy as your breathing slows until you imagine yourself snoozing soundly. Then imagine yourself waking up gently in the morning and feeling refreshed.

If you have a hard time embracing this practice, try picturing a giant movie screen that's playing a movie, starring you, in which you "watch" yourself go through the same process, suggests Orma. Practice every day and you should notice an improvement within a few weeks.

Gwen Jorgensen's photo Courtesy of Felix Sanchez Arrazola.