

The power of good sleep hygiene

Guest: Dr Ed O'Malley

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[00:00:10] Alex Howard

Welcome everyone, to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with Dr Ed O'Malley. We're going to be talking about the importance of good sleep hygiene, the importance of a consistent bedtime and particular waking time. We'll also talk about how to work with that if you have disrupted sleep.

We'll talk about the importance of managing shift work, if that's something that you have to do, and how to navigate that. We'll also talk about practical ways of helping support and calm the system. And towards the end we're going to talk about the power of things like biofeedback and neurofeedback.

To give you a bit of Dr Ed O'Malley's background, Dr Ed O'Malley is an integrative sleep specialist trained at Cornell University Graduate School of Medical Sciences and New York University Sleep Disorder Center in New York City. He ran the Norwalk Hospital, the teaching hospital of Yale, for twelve years, training resident physicians in sleep medicine and creating the first insomnia center in the region.

He also holds advanced certification in bio and neurofeedback and nature awareness training. Dr O'Malley takes a broad approach to sleep and wellness, moving easily between the technological and the natural world.

Ed guides clients to slow down, becoming mindful of what really matters. So firstly, welcome Ed. I'm really pleased to have you here. Thank you for joining us.

Dr Ed O'Malley

Oh, thanks for having me, Alex. Much appreciated.

Alex Howard

So I think a good starting point to this is, why is sleep so important? You're someone that's worked for many, many years with people with a whole range of different sleep issues. And I'm curious as to what you see as the real core importance of getting, I guess not just quantity of sleep, but also quality of sleep.

[00:02:07] Dr Ed O'Malley

Well, sleep is what nature built in for us to restore, to rejuvenate, to replenish what we use up during the day. Getting that adequate amount of good quality sleep allows us to bring our best selves to our daytime work. And I have this saying that you need to sleep well to be well, to sleep well. They're all connected. But the first starting point is getting that good deep sleep because that enables us to start fresh each day.

Alex Howard

And I was curious, is sleep something that all living creatures need or is it particularly a human phenomena?

Dr Ed O'Malley

Well, in general terms, all creatures sleep. Now, in the lower insects, let's say, you know, it's dicey about what actually is sleep. In fact, there was a recent article on spiders. Do they have REM sleep? But they all have a period of inactivity compared and contrasted with a period of activity. But beyond that, all mammals do sleep. They've been recorded. There are certain types of sleep. Some animals don't have REM sleep. There are a couple of exceptions, but they all have sleep.

Alex Howard

So, Ed, I want to come into the area of sleep hygiene and maybe we can start off by saying what it is, and then we can come into how it impacts us and why it's so important.

Dr Ed O'Malley

Sure, yeah. Sleep hygiene is probably what we've all heard about, and we try to keep sleep hygiene. It's kind of like our hygiene that we have throughout our bodies and systems and the way we move in the world. But for sleep, it means doing the basic things that don't get in the way of sleep. So, for instance, we don't want that three cups of coffee before we go to bed at night. We don't want to have alcohol too close to bed.

We want to make sure if we're exercising it's generally earlier in the evening so we're not raising our metabolic rates that keep us going and maybe prevent or delay sleep onset. And we don't want to have the blue light exposure, you know, after sunset, in a sense, or too close to bedtime because that will help delay sleep onset as well. So these are basically things we do or we really don't do.

Kind of like the things that we do for sleep. We brush our teeth right before bed. We get our pajamas on. We do all that. Well, sleep hygiene, same thing. We kind of tone down, we wind down, and we don't have a lot of things that are stimulants that might prevent us from falling asleep.

Alex Howard

Of course, one of the things that can happen is when people have issues with sleep, they often, I think, can develop bad habits around it in some ways to avoid or try to manage those issues that can perpetuate. So, for example, if someone almost fears going to bed at night because of the anxiety about not sleeping, sometimes, I guess, what they can find themselves doing is watching TV up until the last minute or having ways of trying to distract themselves. And I guess that often ultimately makes the situation worse.

[00:05:17] Dr Ed O'Malley

Absolutely. And in fact, we have a sleep disorder named for that called psychophysiological insomnia, or learned insomnia. And so it's true that the things we do to try to help ourselves get to sleep, which sound intuitively sound, don't actually work for us and can make it worse. So one of the things we do when we're not sleeping is, you know what, I'm going to go to bed earlier tonight. I'm going to go to bed 2 hours earlier. I'm sure to get some sleep somewhere in that. And if not, I'm at least resting. That's doing something that's as good as sleep, right?

No, it's not. And not only is it not as good as sleep, but if you've gotten up at a certain time, your brain is timed to fall asleep approximately 16 hours later in an 8 hour night sleeper. So if you now try to go to bed 2 hours earlier and your brain is programmed to fall asleep 2 hours later, which by that I mean have melatonin come on and all those things that get us to sleep, if you do that, you're lying in bed working against yourself because your brain is like, no, no, we're awake. This is still daytime, we're not ready for sleep.

And so you're going to start, you know, the mind churns and you start worrying about this, thinking about that. Even if there aren't worries, if your mind is awake, it's going to continue to think and to keep you up longer and longer. And so the only thing for sleep is sleep. And so there are recommendations we make around that. And that's where we get into some of the behavioral therapy for sleep, cognitive behavioral therapy, but also where we get into what I would call best sleep practices.

And best sleep practices grew out of sleep hygiene. But what they do is they actually are ways we prioritize sleep. We build in behaviors that begin to support good sleep. So we start making sure that we use our phones, we pull up the phone and we have the alarm set to cue us at night when we're preparing for bed. So now all these features on the phone, every one of them has a feature which allows you to set a bedtime alarm. And my patients, they scream, what do you mean? I already have an alarm I hate in the morning. What do you mean, another alarm?

And I say, no, it's really more like a cue because we forget. We binge watch, we get caught up in the TVs or whatever we're doing, and we forget we were going to go to bed at 10 and now it's 12:30. So if you set that cue for about 45 minutes before that gives you the reminder that, okay, all right, this will be the last episode I'm going to watch, or this is the last thing. I'm going to start winding down. I'm not going to go out to the gym right now. I'm going to chill out, maybe do a little light yoga instead and know that I'm preparing for bed. And there are other things we do too.

Alex Howard

Yeah. So one of the things you're getting into here is the importance of having a regular sleeping and waking schedule. And when I was reading the notes for this interview I was particularly curious about that because one of the things that I used to do before we had kids and things changed in terms of your schedule, but I often used to sleep in on a Sunday morning because I'd be tired from the week and I'm just going to sleep until I'm done sleeping.

But then what I would sometimes find is that I would end up working very late on a Sunday night because I'd be really well rested and I wouldn't be tired. Then I'd work till sort of 02:00 A.M., then I'd spend Monday and Tuesday catching up on the fact that I only had 5, 6 hours of sleep on a Sunday.

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So that was just one reflection for me. I found that when we had kids and that became its own alarm clock, that regular schedule really helped. And I was just curious for you to dig a bit more into why these regular schedules help, particularly when there's sleep issues that people have.

Dr Ed O'Malley

Yeah, there are a lot of things you mentioned there, Alex, and pretty much along with 90% of Western societies, they have the same issue. They work during the week. They don't quite get enough sleep during the week. So that's what's called a sleep debt. You actually build up a debt that the mind, the brain, remembers and it keeps trying to meet that debt. And so come the weekend when you don't have that hard schedule of getting up for the kids and school and work and all that, you sleep in.

You want to make up for that lost sleep. You want to pay the bank back. Problem of course becomes when you sleep in, melatonin, that rhythm which is set by light exposure in the morning now gets shifted later. And now your brain doesn't want to turn off until later in the night by however much you slept in. Sleep in an hour, your brain is not turning off for an hour later on, Saturday night or Sunday night.

And that's great for Sunday night getting some work done because now you're really caught up. You've slept in both mornings. You're ready to go, but you have to get to bed at your regular time if you want to get up for work Monday morning. And so that becomes an issue, such an issue that we have a name for that too, called Sunday night insomnia. And it's fairly rampant throughout Western society.

So my recommendation when it comes to that because, look, we're living in the real world and this is where we get into what are good or best sleep practices, where we want to change our behavior. It doesn't take a lot. It may feel like a lot. It's like we've earned that sleep Saturday morning. Because we've lost it in the week. But instead of sleeping in, if we get up that close to our regular time and take that time we were going to sleep into and build it into an afternoon nap, everybody has that circadian dip time, siesta time, after lunch, which is built into our biology.

That's a great time to take a nap on the weekends. Of course with kids and families and all that, you're going to have to go into the bedroom, lock the door, pull the shades, put on your eyeshades, noise machine, ear plugs, whatever you need, and actually climb it to bed and get that extra hour then or extra hour and a half or whatever you need and that will keep your rhythm in place.

And also because you're making up for lost sleep from the week, it won't impact your ability to fall asleep that night. You'll still have the same sleep drive. It's not like you're stealing some sleep and now you're going to be up Saturday night, though you might want to be up for other reasons. It'll keep that rhythm in a strong pattern.

And I want to add here too that the most important aspect of that sleep wake schedule is the waking part because that is what sets our bedtime the following night. It's like an internal rhythm. We call it an endogenous rhythm of melatonin. When it turns off in the morning by getting exposed to strong light in the morning, one of my best sleep practices is to get out first thing in the morning, 5 minutes, 10 minutes, cup of coffee on the back porch, walk the dog.

Your brain is getting strong light, stronger light than you get indoors, telling that melatonin rhythm, oh it's morning, shut down, and come back on 16 hours later. So that's why morning is the most

important part. If you're getting up at a regular time you're going to get sleepy at a regular time. Of course other things can impact that but, yeah.

[00:12:33] Alex Howard

And of course one of the things that can impact that is if someone has a real struggle getting to sleep, one of the things I imagine they say to you as well, I didn't get sleep until 03:00 in the morning and so I needed to add on that sleep afterwards to be able to function. I think there can be a vicious circle here where the more dysregulated sleep gets, the harder people can find it to have that routine. Is that something you come across?

Dr Ed O'Malley

Yes. That's a really tough one for people and what I say to them is I hear you, I understand. And if you could fix it by doing what you've been doing, you wouldn't be needing to see me. So what I'm going to suggest is tomorrow morning you get up at the same time. Even if you fall asleep at three, you still get up at six or seven, whatever your time is. That's going to be the only difficult time, or at least the most difficult time.

Once you do that and get exposed to light, now you're getting your internal rhythms reset to help you fall asleep the next night. But you gotta start somewhere and generally it's in the morning time and getting exposed to light. And for people who really have such a hard time doing that, you know, you can buy a light alarm clock, like a sunrise alarm clock. And what that does is it helps people wake up at their regular time.

You set the alarm and the light comes up like dawn and it actually will go through closed eyelids and begin telling your brain, hey, stop this melatonin stuff. It's getting to be daylight. Let's get ready to get up. So it makes it a bit easier even if you've only slept till 03:00 in the morning before.

Alex Howard

How about people working shift work because of course this can be a real, I remember when I was a kid my stepfather worked shift work in the airport which meant that he would sometimes be on a night shift which I think would start at 10:00 P.M. and finish at 06:00 A.M., other times on a morning shift, other times on an evening shift.

And of course quite a lot of the research is quite concerning in terms of the impacts of shift work. But I'm curious as to folks that you work with, how they're able to best manage a difficult situation.

Dr Ed O'Malley

Yeah, that's exactly right. It's not only trying to manage a difficult situation, it's trying to manage an impossible situation. Human biology has not been designed to work at night, particularly around that 04:00 A.M., the really dip time and our energy levels, our rhythms and all of that. But there are ways we can at least make it less painful and that is with judicious light exposure. So you want bright lights at work. That's one thing.

You want to have, I have my blue blocker glasses here, you want to put on to wear home in the morning, so you're not getting that sunlight giving your brain a mixed signal. You want light at work, but then when you leave work you want to shade your eyes. So you're going home and you want to

keep that darkness. When you get home you pull the shades and you do all those things to make it look like nighttime.

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Caffeine. If you're going to have caffeine to help support you, you need to have it early enough in your shift. You don't have it too close to when the shift is going to end, so it won't last and keep you awake when you get home. You need to turn off the phones and all that to protect your sleep at home. And if you work shifts in the direction that the circadian rhythm moves in, it will be easier than if you try to go the other way.

So the shift works later and later. So if you have a day shift, evening, night, morning, evening, night, if you move in that direction it will be easier to manage than going the other way. And the simple example of that that we've all probably experienced is jet lag.

Alex Howard

I was just going to say that.

Dr Ed O'Malley

When you fly East, we call it East is least, West is best. When you fly East, you're going against the rhythm. You're going back against it because now your brain is trying to, or they're trying to get you to sleep over there but your brain is wide awake because you've been set to this Western schedule. When you fly West, it's easier because we could force ourselves to stay up even though our clock is telling us to go to sleep, our melatonin is screaming at us, it's bedtime. But we could have physical activity, social activity, dinner, and we can stay up when we go West. When we go East, it gets really tough.

Alex Howard

Yeah. And my only trick around that is basically don't get too much sleep on the flight coming home because you have those night flights and sometimes you get a bit too comfortable if you've got a flat bed. And then once I slept 6, 7 hours on a flight, I woke up feeling great and I was just ruined for days. So it's a certain discipline, I guess.

And I like what you said about the shift work with caffeine because I guess the tendency, you mentioned that 04:00 A.M. dip, the tendency is going to be to want to use the caffeine to get through. And if that shift is going to finish at 06:00 A.M. a couple of hours later, that might get you through 04:00 A.M., but it's going to make it much harder in a few hours when it's time to sleep.

Dr Ed O'Malley

Yeah, it's a real balancing act, you know, because on the other hand, you need to be alert enough to get home safely if you're driving, so you need to be at least aware enough. So it's a real balancing act. Sometimes, naps again, prophylactic naps in the evening for a night shift. The night shift worker never meets his full sleep need, his or her full sleep need, because again, the body is not designed to handle that.

So if you build in naps at the right time, just like that nap Saturday afternoon instead of sleeping in, you may be able to manage and not need the caffeine at 04:00 A.M. because you took a nap from

four to six before you started your seven or 08:00 shift. Yeah, there are ways. And melatonin, taking exogenous melatonin in the right amounts, in the right ways, that can help your rhythm when you get home to go to sleep.

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And there is a shift work sleep disorder that's been named, documented. Some people never fully adapt and they're really just in rough shape. For them, you can prescribe an alert promoting medication, which there are some new ones out that don't work on the amphetamine system, so don't put you up and then crash you down. It works slowly so they keep you awake and alert for a while and then they taper off. So that's available for those who really need to do those shifts and just can't manage.

Alex Howard

That's super helpful. Let's come to sleep trackers. Are they something that you find to be accurate and to be useful? I notice you're wearing a sleep tracking ring, so I'm curious as to what your thoughts are on those.

Dr Ed O'Malley

I've got this, my patients are all asking me about this. So I said you know what? I better start wearing them and see what they can tell us and what they can't tell us. And I've actually worn them myself using the dream headband. I don't want to mention any names, but it's the one that's been validated against sleep studies in the lab, so we know they work. So I've worn that and worn each of these.

And it's funny, each morning, I look at the data on all three of these and they are never exact. They are never fully in agreement. But what's really important is that they can provide you with relative data for you. So if you're doing something different on this night and you look at your data the next day and you see that things are off, well, whatever you did that night is not good for your sleep.

Conversely, if you do something good, like you did some relaxation exercises, you're taking a late yoga class or something, and you notice you've got more sleep by the tracker the next day, or more deep or more REM, those distinctions aren't as accurate as the overall how much, but if it looks like you got better sleep, figure out what you did, because whatever you did the night before, those few nights, that really is working for you. And so that's how I like to use these trackers, take them with a grain of salt. But for each individual, they can be really helpful to let you know what's working for your sleep and what's not.

Alex Howard

Is there a place where you find people overusing them, where they actually become a source of anxiety because someone is obsessing over the data?

Dr Ed O'Malley

Yeah, we have a name for that too, actually, it's escaping me at the moment, but it's something related to technological insomnia where people are saying, you know, I'm not getting enough deep sleep, I haven't got any deep sleep for the last three weeks. What am I going to do? Help me get more deep sleep. And I said, well, how's your daytime function? Oh, that's fine. I'm not worried about

that. Performance? No, not a problem. You're falling asleep inadvertently? No, not at all. You're feeling alert? Yeah, I'm feeling alert, but I'm not getting enough deep sleep.

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So we have to have that conversation. These are not actual accurate representations of what you're doing during sleep, so don't worry so much about the device. And in fact, if people have devices, I tell them, look, here's a sleep log. I give you a paper and pen sleep log. I want you to record your impression of your sleep first, then look at your data, and then you may get a better sense of, you know what, most nights when I say I'm feeling pretty good, then this is what correlates with that. And then I can believe that. We do what we can.

Alex Howard

I think it's a great point. I think it's similar to some of the functional medicine testing. I always try to remind people it's illustrative and it's helpful, but as you say, how you feel is really the thing that matters.

I'd love to cover, you said earlier a quote which I think was along the lines of sleep, a different quote but while I have it in my notes from the preparation, that sleeping well depends on living well, and living well depends on sleeping well. And it made me think about how what we do during the day is impacting on what's happening at night and how what's happening at night can sometimes be a reflection of what's not being done well and what may be out of balance in the day. And I'd love to get your thoughts on that.

Dr Ed O'Malley

Sure, Alex, that's a great question. And this really underscores all of the insomnia field, in my opinion. There are organic disorders, medications, aches, pains, different medical issues that can disrupt sleep. And I'm putting those to the side for the moment. Most of the rest of insomnia, probably 80% of it, has to do with how we're living our lives during the day and what those living habits and practices and behaviors are doing to affect our sleep.

In Western society today, in 21st century Western society, we are surrounded with stressors. Stressors. All over the place, no matter where we look. I tell people, don't watch the 10:00 news before bed, and God forbid, don't watch the 11:00 news. If you're trying to go to sleep, you don't want to know the world's going to hell in a handbasket right before you try to sleep. But we can't avoid the news because it's everywhere. It's on our devices, it's on our laptops, it's everywhere we look. Okay, fine.

So we set up ways in which we get the news earlier in our day, maybe even till 05:00, right before we cut out for the day's work. Somewhere around that. But after dinner, you don't want to know what's going on. You don't want breaking news popping in while you're watching your favorite comedy. And then all of a sudden you start doing that because you found out something blew up somewhere. So that's one of the things that we do during the day. We have to find ways to not get overstressed. There's plenty of stress to go around.

But in addition to that, we need to find ways to offload the stresses of the day as best we can before we're ready for bed at night. And I usually recommend people do that. If you've never done it before, take 5 minutes. Do it at least once during the day. And the place to start is during that circadian or that siesta dip time after lunch, one, two o'clock, three o'clock in the afternoon. Instead of reaching for that

cup of coffee, why don't you do some kind of relaxation exercise from something as simply as finding a quiet place, closing your eyes and just notice your breathing and give it a chance to slow down.

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And thoughts will come through. So you give your mind something to do like inhale, let go, and let the exhale go. And you just keep repeating that for 5 minutes. Set your little timer, 5 minutes. And what that will do is, one, it stops whatever stress has been built up to that point. It just stops it cold and it drops it. It may only drop it this much, it may drop it that much, but it drops it. And so now when you go back into the same stress built world, it will be lower than if you hadn't done anything.

And now if you get good at that and you're doing that every day, wait till that's happening every day, 5 minutes every day, then you try to extend it to 10 minutes. If you can do that, now, you know that first 5 minutes you're spending a few minutes getting settled, right? You're only getting a couple of minutes of benefit. If you extend it to ten now you're getting the five plus minutes of really dropping it down. Once you're good at doing 10 minutes a day, then you have a choice. You can go for 15 minutes or if you have a tight schedule, you do it a second time.

What's the best second time of the day to do it? Right before the evening starts. You drive home, stay in the driveway, turn the car off, lower the windows a little bit so you get a little bit of air, kick the chair back in the seat and do it there before you go into the house. Or if you're working from home, your work ends at 4:50 let's say, and you take 10 minutes right then before you go into the evening hours. So those are great practices to offload stress during the day.

Alex Howard

I think I'd love to ask a few questions on that. A firstly personal observation, which is when it comes to meditation practice, if I open my computer before, what I often do is I get to the office and then I will sit and meditate and then I will start work. But if I open my laptop, I'm finished. There's a sequence which is really important.

And the other thing that I wanted to point out is there can be a tendency, I think, sometimes when people can think well, I haven't done it for a week and so I'm going to do a whole week's worth in one go. And I'd love to hear you speak to the value of little and often versus the intermittent and then trying to make up.

Dr Ed O'Malley

Yeah, little and often is probably always preferred because what it's doing is it's teaching your body and your brain that this is a regular practice and it's much easier to remember a regular practice than to swamp it and try to do an hour and a half in one day. That hour and a half, number one, you're not going to be centered for an hour and a half, especially if you haven't been doing it all week. You're going to be totally all over the place.

You're probably only going to get the 5 or 10 minutes, the first 5 or 10 minutes benefit anyway. Always better to try to make it into a habit. And habits can take, you see all these things on the internet, 21 days, 30 days, it depends on the habit. It could take up to 6 months, depending on how difficult. Quitting smoking, for instance, is going to take a lot longer than having a glass of water in the morning to boost your hydration.

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But doing it every day, really important. If you do it at the same time every day, it's really important. Like you said, do it before you open the computer. Very important. That will get you going. But then during the day you do need some other time. I like the idea of doing it whenever you can do it. That's first. But afternoon is really important because you've already gathered a bunch of stress during the day, less so if you meditate first. That's true. You're doing pretty well. So instead of your slope being like this, it's kind of like this.

But by mid afternoon it's still higher than where you started. So that's a great place to take a second one, or the first one if you haven't done it. And doing it every day. We have these phones, these are like our third hands, right? May as well use it in our service. Set the cue at night, set the 5 minute every day at this time I'm going to take 5 and do my meditation, my relaxation practice, whatever works for you.

Alex Howard

And I'd love to just bring in a little bit as well on neurofeedback because there are those who may have done a struggle perhaps to do meditation practice or have sleep dysregulation that putting in the fundamental sleep hygiene maybe is helping, but maybe it's not enough to make a difference. I know this is an area that you've got quite a bit of experience.

I'd love you to say a few words about what neurofeedback is and then we can explore how it can be helpful for people with sleep.

Dr Ed O'Malley

Okay, Alex. That's great. I want to use that at the end of the practice for relaxation. Because what happens is let's say we try that 5 minutes and we're doing the breathing and we get through 3 breaths and we're thinking about who's picking up the kids from school and who's buying milk today and next thing we know the 5 minutes is up. And we can't even do that for 10 minutes. Or you've tried meditation, you're sitting on the cushion and the same thing happens. Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.

So for you, you might need some type of movement, meditative activity. So there are these great Eastern practices, Tai chi, Qigong, and light yoga. You might need to do that because that gives your mind something to focus on, moving the body, but it's moving in a way that's allowing everything to drop a few notches. Or even better, get outside. We know what nature does. We know what walking outside does. So just 5 minutes walking in nature, not pounding the trail to get from here to there, but rather to just meander for 5 or 10 or 15 minutes, looking at the flowers, trees, bugs, whatever is out there. That will help you unload your mind as well.

And then I say, well look, you've tried sitting, no good. You've tried walking, no good. Am I a failure? Am I done? Am I just going to have to suffer with this for the rest of my life? And I say, no. We have technological tools. So we bring this back in, and then we can go even further. But these devices, there are myriad apps, Calm, Mindspace, all these different ways, different ways of quieting down, different guided meditations. Maybe you're the type that needs someone talking to you in your ear, guiding you through a relaxed state. Fine, make use of that.

And if that's not working for you, we have Biofeedback. Now, Biofeedback is simply becoming aware of that internal stress that you have by externalizing it to a device that tells you. So you can put

something on your head. You can actually use these devices. You can put sensors on the body somewhere. So one of the great ways is to put some on your forehead. And that's where we hold a lot of tension, right here. So we hook it up to a tone. And the tone shows that when there's high activity, there's a high tone, and when there is low activity, there's a low tone.

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And I always say, you know what, just sit there for a few minutes and notice when the tone comes down. So now you've got somebody who can't relax at all. But, oh, I see the tones coming down when I'm doing this or when I'm thinking about this or when I'm happy or I'm going to my happy place, or whatever that is. So they learn because they get feedback about what's going inside and how to drop that down.

And then we have neurofeedback, which goes even deeper than that. It says, you know what, if I look at this guy with tension on his forehead, I can see brain patterns that are associated with that. Why don't we go right to the source and say, let's give feedback information about what the brain is doing. That's the neuro. The neurology. What's happening up here? What are those patterns?

If I feed that back to you, then you could learn to change those brainwaves, and it happens all the time. And when you change your brain patterns, you're changing the way the brain is, and that's permanent. So that's really powerful. And the last piece I'll throw in is that there's even a type of neurofeedback in which, the linear neurofeedback, it's a great tool, and it works. You hook up this guy's brain activity to Pac Man, and when he's all tense and we see those tense waves up there, Pac Man stops, but when he's starting to relax and we see the relaxed waves come in, Pac Man moves and eats all the little dots.

Or we can do Space Invaders or whatever works for you. I'm dating myself on those games. But the idea is that we're connecting you to a game, and for kids, this works great. For ADD, ADHD, works great. So they learn to do the game, and by doing the game, they're changing their brain activity. But then there's a type of neurofeedback in which it just allows you to sit there and it responds to the noise in your brain, which we all have plenty of, whether we notice it or not. And it just gives the brain feedback.

It's sort of directly talking to the brain at its level. And so for people who really can't do any of the above, I sit them in the chair, hook them up, they sit back, they listen to music, and they watch some fractal images on the screen, and their brain learns to change. That's another whole depth discussion. But it's really amazing.

And I got into it because of insomnia, because people who come in with complaints of not sleeping generally have other things going on. They have some anxiety, they maybe have a little depression, they may have a little bipolar, and we're all like this close to being on one side of that dividing line or the other. We all have some anxiety. It's just a matter of whether it's controlling our lives or not.

And so I didn't have to worry about giving them a specific protocol to get rid of this and that, especially when they have anxiety and depression. What do I treat first? If I treat the depression first, the anxiety gets worse. If I treat the anxiety first, the depression may get worse. So this is a way to just look at the noise in the brain, give feedback about that, and the brain self regulates.

And I say to people, did you someday sit down and go, you know what? I'm going to learn how to be anxious because, you know, I want to see what that feels like in my life. No, it's your response to the

world. The world is what it is. You do your best, and if that's happening, we can give your brain information about what it's doing. And it goes, oh, I didn't realize I was doing that. And it helps to right itself.

[00:35:30] Alex Howard

The real message of hope in what you're saying is that often people will say, I've tried everything. And I think the point you're making is there are often stages to intervention where if the more simple, self led things have not been as effective as we may like, there are other ways of working.

I guess what I'm curious to hear you speak a bit more about is someone that comes to you and says, I've tried everything. Nothing works, I just can't sleep. What do you say in response to that?

Dr Ed O'Malley

Well, then I start at the high end first and I say, you know what? I hear you. People have been coming to me for 30 years with that same or similar complaint. They've read the books, they've tried the patterns. And I say, one of the issues is a lot of times you'll try one or two or three, but you won't actually do them all together. That's one thing. If we can tackle this all together and someone is giving you feedback about what's working and what's not, from their perspective, we can guide you better than you just trying this on your own. That's one thing.

And the second thing is I do these neurofeedback type practices which allow your nervous system to quiet itself, to become more balanced. And when it's a little more balanced, it's easier then to implement maybe even some of the things you tried and that didn't work. All that level of anxiety was preventing it from working. Here, we drop it down a few notches first so that it can work, and then these other practices work. And I always work uniquely with each person.

Whatever your particular complaints are, we're going to work with that. We're not going to give you this standard protocol of you do this, you do this, and you do this. Because in your case, that may only not work, but may make it worse. So we're going to work with you within your life. You've got kids, you're going to be sleep deprived to start with. We're not going to get you eight, we're going to probably get you six and a half, seven, but let's get to seven first and then we'll work on ways to get to the eight.

Alex Howard

Fantastic. It's a great segue to ask you, for people that want to find out more about you and your work, what's the best place to go and what is some of what people can find?

Dr Ed O'Malley

I do have my website. My company is youoptimalnature.com, youoptimalnature.com One word. So your optimal nature really depends on you getting good sleep. And that's what I do. That's my website. I don't know if you provide phone numbers and emails, but they're on my website, so ways to contact me.

Alex Howard

Fantastic. And I really appreciate your time and you're a fountain of knowledge after so many years of working with people. I really appreciate your way of putting this together. Thank you so much.

[00:38:28] Dr Ed O'Malley

All right. Thank you, Alex. Great questions. And hopefully we covered the waterfront, and the most important thing you said was hope. There is hope. As we get older, we think, oh, that's just another sign of aging. We can't sleep. No, healthy aging means healthy sleep. We should be able to still get your sleep. So don't sit there and suffer. Find somebody who can work with you and get you better sleep.