

# I Went to Sleep Boot Camp to Find Insomnia Cures That Actually Work

Now I'm sleeping like a comatose little angel.

By [Sarah Wu](#)



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My beauty routine may change every time a [shiny palette](#) catches my eye, but my morning routine is consistent: I roll out of bed after little to no sleep, trip over my slippers, then blearily scroll through a new batch of unread emails. It's been like this for eight years. On a recent Monday morning, however, though I was still bleary-eyed and sleep-deprived, my morning routine involved a medical assistant attaching electrodes to my chest while thick snow coated the Bavarian Alps outside. This was highly unusual.

The jolt in my routine came courtesy of a stay at [Lanserhof](#) resort in Tegernsee, Germany, a wellness retreat known for its high-end detox programs. I checked in to investigate their newly launched [Lans Better Sleep](#)

[Program 2.0](#), which promised to diagnose the causes behind my insomnia over the course of a single week. (You can opt for a longer stay, should you so desire.) The clinic attacks sleep woes from just about every possible angle, employing experts specializing in naturopathy, stress reduction, cardiology, psychology, urology, and gastroenterology, to offer sustainable sleep solutions.

Before you pelt me with helpful suggestions like using night mode on my phone or trying deep-breathing exercises, allow me to add this: I've had nearly a decade to pit my sleeping problems against [various cures](#). Still, I struggle to get enough zzz's. I've consulted sleep specialists and relied on supplements and medication to muscle through. I've alternated between melatonin, magnesium, lavender pills, L-theanine, adaptogens, Unisom, NyQuil, Xanax, Lorazepam, [CBD](#), Kratom, therapy, a few acupuncture sessions, some admittedly halfhearted meditation, and even downing a full bottle of wine before bed. (OK, that last one was not my best effort.) My devices switch to amber-tinted screens at night, and I keep them on silent far away from my bed. I also regularly mist my pillow with an assortment of calming sprays, slip on an eye mask, and wear earplugs.

Nothing has stuck. Inevitably, everything I try stops working after a month or two, tops. I end up rotating through different supplements and medications, switching back and forth when one ceases to be effective or another starts giving me side effects. (Melatonin taken too many weeks in a row gives me extraordinarily vivid nightmares featuring my own decapitation, while some of the prescription options I've tried make me feel foggy and disoriented the rest of the day.) I don't mind [reaching for medication when it's needed](#), but I'm tired of taking increasingly high dosages and still feeling my mind stubbornly fight to stay awake. I needed a more sustainable cure.

"There are many different kinds of sleep problems, but you can build two main groups," says Jan Stritzke, M.D., deputy medical director at Lanserhof Tegernsee. The first is sleep apnea, a nocturnal breathing issue often related to obesity, he explains. For those who have sleep apnea, frequent drops in oxygen during the night disrupt the deep sleep cycle, leading you to feel tired when you wake up the next day. "The other is a stress-related problem, when you can't switch off and are thinking the whole night," Dr. Stritzke says. Yep, that's me.

After being pegged as a stress sleeper by doctors who specialize in this stuff, I was ready for a science-backed solution. Here's what a week of insomnia cures looks like--and what actually works.

## Meditation

I loathe [meditation](#). It's been suggested to me multiple times, but I'm even worse at meditating than I am at falling asleep. At Lanserhof, meditation is an

unavoidable part of the deal. My teacher here is much better than my last one—who memorably yelled at me for not trying hard enough—which makes me feel at least a little hopeful. To start, she encourages me to identify a feeling of confident calm (for me, this usually happens during one of my favorite workouts: intense-contact combat sessions) and call it up when I'm feeling restless. But perhaps more important, she says I shouldn't expect to switch my mind off or empty it during these moments—instead, I should simply allow myself to notice thoughts and noises and let them go.

It's actually helpful advice (the lack of yelling, I assume, also helps). With deep breathing and regular practice, I find that my thoughts get much calmer at night. I should note I don't bother doing any of this in a seated position with my eyes closed, but the principles still apply when I'm lying in bed. Really, that's where all meditation should be done, in my opinion.

## A (Surprise) Detox Diet

The cornerstone of Lanserhof is their [Mayr cure](#), a lifestyle makeover based on six pillars: rest, cleansing, training, substitution, exercise, and mindfulness. [Christiane May-Ropers, M.D.](#), who specializes in rehabilitative medicine, manually examines my abdomen and tells me my digestive system is overly stressed, impacting not just my overall health but also my sleep.

To remedy it, Dr. May-Ropers starts me on the strictest diet Lanserhof offers. Breakfast and lunch consist of a small serving of yogurt along with a serving of "chewing trainer"—hardened bread that produces a whole lot of saliva to allegedly aid in digestion. Dinner is a cup of watery vegetable broth, to be eaten with a tiny spoon between 5:00 and 6:30 P.M. Alternately, I can have a cup of decaf tea.

This is extreme, *especially* paired with the laxatives the clinic recommends to flush me out. Wary, I try them but almost immediately realize my body cannot handle this (nor should it have to). I tell Dr. May-Ropers this and she switches me to a much milder laxative, but I end up skipping them altogether. Many health experts will warn against this strategy—the Mayo Clinic specifically [cautions against](#) using laxatives to "clean out your system," and the National Eating Disorders Association warns that [laxative abuse](#) can lead to problems ranging from nutrient imbalances to severe dehydration and even organ damage in extreme cases.

Even without the laxatives, I get so deliriously hungry that I text a former foodie colleague to ask if she thinks it would be OK for me to nibble at the decorative plant in my room. (She advises against it.) Restricting calories to the point of contemplating DIY foraging is *definitely* not healthy. And it actually makes my insomnia worse: Digestive distress does not exactly make

for a peaceful night of sleep. I voice my concerns and switch to a meal plan that doesn't leave me feeling faint.

This is my first (and last) "detox," and it's clear the detox life is definitely not for me. I know that my habit of 4:00 A.M. pizza outings probably weren't helping me get to sleep, but I didn't really need to deprive myself of food to learn that.

## Sleeping in the Perfect Bed

Putting my food woes aside for a moment, Lanserhof knows what they're doing when it comes to bedroom design. The rooms in the Better Sleep Suite are pitch-black at night, blissfully quiet, and equipped with Freshbeds—fancy-schmancy sleep systems—that allow you to control both the temperature and the ventilation levels of the bed. The air that circulates throughout the bed is constantly and silently filtered. The pillows are perfectly fluffy, the duvet comfortingly weighted, and the mattress topper a memory foam triumph.

I can't exactly lug these back with me, but they do make me reconsider my own sleeping situation. The six months I struggled most with insomnia uncoincidentally coincided with some of my toughest in New York, when I was sleeping atop a thin lining of trash bags on my apartment floor because I didn't have time to get a bed. My current situation is not so dire, but I've noticed that my spring mattress sounds as though it's about to snap in half every time I sit down and my pillows are inherited from the previous tenant. I decide to upgrade as soon as I return home: a plush [memory foam mattress topper](#) and a [Joy Mangano Warm/Cool Pillow](#). I also resolve to bring back a pair of [Dagsmejan pajamas](#) from Lanserhof; they are unbelievably comfortable.

## Listening to Music

At Lanserhof I also undergo a 24-hour heart rate variability (HRV) monitoring test (this is where the electrodes came into play). [Darius Chovghi, M.D.](#), a general practitioner, analyzes my results and advises me to do something less stimulating a full hour before my bedtime. He tells me it doesn't matter so much what time I go to bed, as long as I block out a full 60 minutes beforehand to wind down.

This sounds like one of the easiest insomnia cures to implement back home, so I try it out right away. I put together a snooze-inducing playlist on Spotify, hit play, and walk around my room stretching, drinking tea, and doing absolutely nothing else. It feels great—peaceful and not stimulating in the slightest, but not so mind-numbingly tedious that I dread it. My whirling thoughts gradually slow down by the hour's end and I find myself feeling positively dreamy.

# Osteopathy

When my HRV test comes back, I glumly learn that my "biological age" is 12 years older than my actual age—I'm exhausted and stressed and it's shaving years off my life. Multiple years of ignoring this problem have crept into my limbs; my neck, upper back, and shoulders are in a perpetual state of tension, which is not a relaxing way to lie in bed.

The solution, according to Werner Schierl, M.D., who works with me to find naturopathic solutions, is [osteopathy](#). Osteopathy is a treatment method that uses manual touch to alleviate site-specific pain in your joints, muscles, or soft tissue while also considering the body as a whole. And luckily, Lanserhof happens to have plenty of practitioners on site.

During my session I learn my body woes are worse than I thought. I've gotten used to ongoing tightness at the base of my neck and in my shoulders, but I've also gotten really good at doing nothing about it. [Tobias Walter](#), who has a background in both osteopathy and chiropractic care, recommends myofascial release, applying sustained pressure to relax contracted muscles. We start by testing the flexibility of my right shoulder. I already know it's going to be bad, but we're still both a little shocked at how locked up I am.

I do feel better after that one session, but I ask Walter for additional exercises to do later and at home, since I clearly need the extra help. For those familiar with sore necks and stiff backs, try placing one arm on the wall and fully extending it behind you for 20 seconds. The second stretch: Tilt your neck to the side as far as you can, holding that position for another 20 seconds. Do it regularly, and I promise you'll sleep much more comfortably.

## Relaxing Self-Care

My visit to Lanserhof may be all about sleep, but my waking hours are plenty busy. In between sleep tests and consultations, I have deep tissue massages, reflexology treatments, full-body algae masks, light therapy, and steams. At night I dab my pulse points with aromatherapy cream from [Bynacht](#), which reminds me of my favorite pillow sprays back home. I even indulge in something called a [Royal Fern](#) facial, which utilizes a line of dermatologist-created glow-enhancing products.

In short, it's self-care on steroids. I'm not sure whether it actually helps me sleep better, but at least it helps me convincingly fake well-rested radiance. I remind myself to do more sheet masks.

## Craniosacraltherapy

Every doctor I meet with at Lanserhof tells me I need to consider craniosacral therapy, an alternative medicine that uses gentle touch on your skull to relieve

pain and pressure. Although there is plenty of debate over its scientific efficacy, I leave Lanserhof convinced that it is the truth and the way.

My therapist, Katharina Mai, who talks to me extensively about naturopathy, lifts my head up and slowly rolls it this way and that for less than five minutes before I immediately pass out into the most peaceful sleep I have ever experienced. I don't even realize this until I wake up some time later and pop out of her hands, quietly screaming, "Ah!" and scaring both of us. This has never happened to me before, and she is my new favorite person because of it.

Mai tells me that one craniosacral therapy session a month is sufficient to help improve my sleep, and the second I get back to my room, I look up practitioners back home. As a bonus, Mai shows me where to press on my jaw (where it meets my neck) to release tension. At night I've been clenching my teeth so hard from stress that my previous dentist told me I had successfully ground tiny holes in them. This tiny technique helps immensely.

## Exercise (Which I Have Apparently Been Doing Wrong)

I will forever be a big believer in using exercise to release everything I bottle up. Every day I'm at Lanserhof, I alternate between swimming laps in the outdoor pool surrounded by snow and spending 45 minutes in the gym. Unfortunately, I continue my habit of working out close to my bedtime, which I soon find out is not a good idea.

"Exercise helps to reduce the stress hormones," Dr. Stritzke tells me. "But you should not do it too late because that will influence your sleep. Four hours before going to bed is a good cutoff time." I think about how hyper I feel after my favorite Krav Maga classes and conclude he's right. I make a mental note to push my workouts earlier in the day, when they can help me chill out but won't keep me up for hours.

## Zeroing In On the Problem

After multiple rounds of tests, I discover that my deep-sleep quality is surprisingly excellent. Once I'm able to knock out, I'm very peaceful until my alarm goes off. The problem is everything that comes before that. Dr. Chovghi explains that because I normally have to wake up before clocking a satisfactory amount of deep sleep, my body doesn't have enough time to regenerate each night. This leads to a sleep-killing cycle: exhaustion throughout the day and a spike in cortisol levels at night, which forces me to stay awake when I *really* need to pass out. Aside from implementing the tips and tricks I've picked up, he recommends adding a second block of sleep to my 24-hour cycle, even if it's just a 30-minute power nap.

Routine is also key, says Dr. Stritzke. "Get up at the same time, breakfast and lunch at the same time, have a small dinner, and go to bed at the same time."

He also disagrees with the notion that there is such a thing as an optimal bedtime or amount of sleep for everyone. In fact, he believes the most important thing is to figure out what works best for you. At Lanserhof, this is done thoroughly by their team of professionals, but there are ways you can try it at home. "Go to bed when you're tired and sleep without an alarm clock," he says. Do this three or four times, and note how much sleep you got—most people need between six and eight hours. If you use a sleep tracker, you can also get data on each different sleep stage, he adds—this can be super helpful info for a sleep doctor.

One week after leaving Tegernsee, I was pleasantly surprised at how well-rested I still felt. (I was also pleasantly surprised at the reappearance of cheeseburgers in my life, which I am never giving up again.) In my shared apartment, I'm no longer surrounded by the soothing, optimally designed oasis that is Lanserhof. But even after returning home, I'm sleeping more soundly than I have in nearly a decade.

There are habits I've chosen to leave behind in the Bavarian Alps, but also ones that have been effortless to keep up. It takes only the tiniest tweaks in my routine to exercise earlier in the day, incorporate more myofascial release, eat dinner earlier, and enjoy my new hour-long pre-bedtime ritual. I've got a fresh pillow on the way and another craniosacral therapy session in my future. Granted, there are many people who might balk at this amount of work just to achieve a basic human function. In my mind, though? It's a small price to pay to sleep like a comatose little angel.

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<https://www.glamour.com/story/i-went-to-sleep-boot-camp-to-find-insomnia-cures-that-actually-work>