

## CHAPTER 1

# In The Beginning ... Why We Still Sleep Like Our Ancestors

Growing up, I always wondered how people slept before we invented beds and houses. You know what it's like if the temperature is a bit off, the mattress is a bit lumpy or there's a mosquito in your room — you feel completely wrecked the next day from battling these elements. Imagine sleeping outside, exposed to predators, weather and insects every night. That was the reality for our ancestors.

Our very early ancestors likely slept in trees, much like modern great apes who build new sleeping nests each night around 9 to 15 metres above the ground (Koops, et al., 2012). Picture trying to get comfortable while clinging to branches three to five storeys up, knowing that one wrong move means plummeting to the ground. This arboreal lifestyle had obvious benefits, safety from predators, however, the idea of making babies and managing toddlers in treetops genuinely puzzles me.

Understanding how our sleep evolved from these precarious beginnings helps explain many of our modern struggles: why we wake at 3 am, why our sleep is so sensitive to safety, temperature and noise, and how ancient survival mechanisms still shape our nights today.

## Why You Sometimes Jolt When Falling Asleep

This ancient past is exactly why we experience those curious falling sensations that jolt you awake. They are called 'hypnic jerks', and

they're actually evolutionary holdovers from our tree-dwelling times — a reflex that once prevented us from falling while sleeping in branches (Coolidge, et al., 2006). You can still see this in newborns, called the Moro reflex, exhibited when they feel a sudden change in head position or sensation of falling, they rapidly spread their arms outward, open their hands and then bring their arms back inward in a hugging motion. The theory is that this hardwired reflex helped infant primates grab onto their mothers' fur or long hair when they sensed they were falling, preventing them from dropping from tree branches (Futagi, et al., 2012).

However, something monumental happened in our evolutionary journey 1.8 million years ago that changed the trajectory of humanity. Humans came out of the trees and moved to the savanna, and we became the only primates, other than gorillas, to sleep on the ground. Ground sleeping allowed our ancestors to enter deeper stages of sleep, as they no longer needed to maintain muscle tension to avoid falling. Some theorise that this deeper sleep enabled more efficient memory consolidation and mental processing, potentially contributing to the rapid evolution of human intelligence. The trade-off, though, was increased vulnerability to predators, which may explain why humans evolved to have 90-minute sleep cycles and are among the worst sleepers in the primate world (Samson, et al., 2015).

Humans get on average 7.5 hours sleep, or sometimes even less, whereas our closest relatives, chimpanzees, clock 9.5 to 12 hours of sleep. Some primates sleep for 15 hours a day (Reinhardt, et al., 2019)! These short sleeping cycles and fewer overall hours than other primates is theorised to be a defence mechanism so we have less cumulative time unconscious and vulnerable (Samson, 2021). While tree-sleeping disappeared for most, another fascinating historical sleep pattern emerged: the idea of biphasic sleep.

### **Tree Dwellers of Papua**

Curiously, this ancient tree-nesting practice hasn't entirely disappeared from human civilisation. The Korowai people of Indonesian Papua continue this traditional elevated living pattern today, constructing remarkable tree houses 6 to 25 metres above the ground, some reaching as high as a seven-storey building (Stasch, 2011). These are more than just sleeping platforms but entire family homes, complete with separate areas for cooking and living, built atop sturdy hardwood trees. The Korowai's architectural expertise offers us a living window into how our ancestors might have navigated the challenges of elevated sleep, from the selection of sturdy support trees to the sophisticated construction techniques needed to ensure safety at such heights. Their traditional lifestyle, while increasingly rare, demonstrates how humans maintained arboreal living patterns.

## **Why You Wake Up in the Middle of the Night**

There are several theories why humans wake at 2 or 3 am (which I'll explore throughout the book) including **cortisol** dysregulation, fluctuating blood sugar levels and gut-biome dysbiosis, liver activation (Chinese medicine), temperature dropping psychological rumination and it being a remnant of ancient sleeping practices.

You've probably heard the compelling story about how humans 'naturally' sleep in two distinct chunks during the night. According to this theory, before the Industrial Revolution ruined everything with electric lights and rigid schedules, people would go to sleep soon after dark, wake up in the middle of the night for an hour or two of quiet activities (prayer, sex, contemplation, light chores), then drift back into a 'second sleep' until dawn. It's called biphasic sleep. This idea has provided comfort and explanation to countless disjointed sleepers. Finally, a reason why you might naturally wake up in the middle of the

night. Your fragmented sleep may be just an ancient pattern trying to reassert itself, rather than a modern curse to be anxious about.

This idea gained serious traction thanks to historian Roger Ekirch (2001), who uncovered hundreds of references in pre-industrial European documents, diaries, court records and literature describing ‘first sleep’ and ‘second sleep’ with remarkable consistency. The evidence is genuinely compelling. However, digging deeper, I was surprised to find that just because something happened in historical Europe, doesn’t mean it represents universal human biology. When we examine equatorial-dwelling hunter–gatherer societies around the world, the biphasic sleep pattern is mixed.

### *Why Latitude Matters*

Winters in countries such as the Nordic countries (high northern latitudes) and Australia (low southern latitudes) see nights that stretch between 14 and 16 hours. That’s a long time to lie in bed, especially when your body needs only 7 to 9 hours of sleep. What *do* you do with the extra 5 to 7 hours of darkness? Before electric lights, options were severely limited. Candles and oil lamps were costly, smoky and provided minimal illumination, and burning them for extended evening activities was a luxury few could afford.

This is where the biphasic pattern emerges as a brilliant adaptation. Crucially, this mid-night waking period was a time for quiet, low-light tasks, like reflection, prayer, tending the hearth’s embers, simple mending, quiet conversation or intimacy. These activities leveraged existing dim light (moonlight, dying coals) or required none at all, minimising the need for expensive artificial light. After this interval, you returned to a ‘second sleep’ until dawn. This sleeping pattern structured unavoidable wakefulness around activities that inherently avoided costly lighting.

In addition, most European homes in winter were cold, really cold. Body temperature naturally drops during sleep, but in a frigid environment, people might have woken up simply because they were too cold to maintain deep sleep comfortably. A period of gentle activity

(moving around, tending the fire) could have warmed them enough to fall back asleep.

Now, contrast this with hunter–gatherers near the equator.

## Security in Shifting Sleep Schedules: The Sentinel System

When we examine hunter–gatherer societies' sleeping habits such as the Hadza of Tanzania, the San people of the Kalahari and the Tsimane of Bolivia, they give us a time capsule window into how our equatorial ancestors may have slept. They often sleep in groups of 20 to 30 people, and at any given time during the night roughly 30 per cent of adults are awake and alert (Samson, et al., 2017). This 'sentinel sleep' protocol is an effective strategy, creating a night-watch system that dramatically increases group survival. Different group members naturally have slightly different sleep schedules to ensure someone is always awake to watch for danger and tend to the fires (keeping the fires going is essential as the smoke was used as an insect and predator deterrent).

This sentinel system offers a compelling *potential* evolutionary origin for our varying sleep–wake preferences today, what we now call '**chronotypes**' — early birds versus night owls. The proclivity to early or later sleeping may be an evolutionary advantage that helped protect our ancestral groups. I must note, however, this idea of chronotype is under debate, which I will discuss in chapter 7.

## Rethinking Those 3 am Wake-ups

When I run sleep workshops, waking at the same time, be it 2 am or 3 am, and then having a terrible time getting back to sleep ranks in the top 3 most common sleep complaints.

How many of you can relate to this scenario? It's 3 am and you're wide awake, watching the minutes tick by on your phone, getting progressively more anxious as your precious sleep time is slipping away. You have to get up in a few hours and face a big day. The house is silent except for your racing thoughts and you're convinced you must be the only lonely person in the world staring at your ceiling right now. Well, you're not alone, a recent study showed that nocturnal wakings are

frequently experienced by 30–50 per cent of the population (Oros, et al., 2025). Due to increased societal pressure, working, family and caring duties, as well as the increase in information circulating in the media that sleep deprivation is bad, people are getting more sleep anxiety than ever. Anxiety about not sleeping, conflated with the stress of not sleeping, is a double whammy.

I ask my clients ‘But what if you flipped this problem and saw it as completely natural or, even better, welcomed this time?’ Think about it, some of your ancestors would have thought our modern expectation of sleeping through the night was the strange part.

Patricia is a CEO I worked with. Her story is very common and perfectly illustrates the problem of nocturnal waking. Every night, like clockwork, Patricia would wake at 2.45 am, the silence of her large house pressing in on her. And every night, she’d spend the next 2 hours tossing and turning, her anxiety mounting with each glance at her phone. She would eventually fall asleep only to be yanked out of that much anticipated slumber by her alarm at 6 am. As she got up, she felt like she’d been through emotional warfare rather than a night’s rest.

What made Patricia’s situation particularly frustrating was how the stress fed on itself. When you wake up and immediately worry about getting back to sleep and your mind seems out of control, your body produces cortisol, our primary stress hormone. Once cortisol enters your system, it sticks around. You’ll feel its effects, including that unwanted alertness, for at least 30 minutes, and it can take up to an hour to fully clear from your system. If you’re still awake and stressing after that first wave of cortisol, you might produce more, creating a cycle that can keep you up for hours.

The solution we found was, instead of fighting these wakings, to welcome them. This might sound counterintuitive, but it’s based on a profound truth: what we resist, persists. Instead of seeing her

night waking as the enemy, Patricia learned to view it as a gift, a quiet moment when the world was still and her mind was often at its clearest.

### Cortisol

**Cortisol** is a hormone released in response to stress. It follows a strong **circadian rhythm**: high early in the morning, low at night. Elevated cortisol during the night causes lighter, more fragmented sleep, increased alertness and earlier awakening. Activation of the stress response system sets off a hormonal cascade, which increases circulating energy (glucose) that feeds the fight-or-flight response. All of which signals inflammation and has a metabolic cost. The body shifts towards higher energy demand, which often leaves people feeling wired and prone to hunger the next day, with stronger cravings for salty, fatty and sugary foods. They may also experience reduced impulse control to restrict unhealthy food decisions. Learning to welcome night-time awakenings reduces stress activation and prevents the metabolic cascade. The result? Better eating habits, more stable energy levels throughout the day and improved sleep quality over time.

### Introducing the Welcome Practice

I developed the Welcome Practice to help clients like Patricia resist the natural inclination to be anxious about waking up. Instead of fighting nocturnal awakenings, use the time, when the rest of the world is quiet and your mind is clear, for gentle reflection. Think to yourself, when else in my day do I get to experience total silence, solitude, and get to be alone, uninterrupted with my thoughts? See this as a privilege, rather than an annoyance. It may take some mental gymnastics, but it eventually works. My only hard and fast rule is *do not look at your phone or alarm*

*clock* because the knowledge of time and the light from the phone will negatively affect your neurochemistry (see chapter 9). I realise this is hard not to do initially as we are all ‘**dopamine** crackheads’ when it comes to phones. So if you really can’t help yourself, hold your phone at an angle, don’t look at your phone face-on (so light doesn’t hit your retinas) and make sure it’s on (greyed-out) night mode, and resist the temptation to check emails or messages. Just understand that you have no control over what you’ll see on your phone, it could be an email or message about something you can’t deal with at 3 am, or a provocative ‘rage-baiting’ social media post that just exacerbates the cortisol activation. Ask yourself the question, would you invite the most irritating person you know into your bedroom and lie next to you, and allow them to blurt out whatever was on their mind? No of course you wouldn’t. But opening your phone is essentially leaving yourself open to this as you have no idea what content you will be exposed to. You need to protect your eyeballs.

I also advise my clients to keep a journal by their bed and write down any insights or ideas that come to them. (I recommend a nice leather-bound, heavy-paper journal.) I call this brain dump activity ‘name to tame’. One night Patricia told me she scribbled ‘Why *do* I keep agreeing to Monday 8 am meetings?’ and actually laughed out loud. Personally, I have found that solutions come to me at this time; innovative ideas and intuitive insights pop into my head. But I’ve got to remember to write the stuff down, as so many times I’ve had what I thought was a brilliant insight, only to completely forget it when I woke up later in the morning.

### **Cognitive Shuffling Technique for a Busy Mind**

The practice of ‘cognitive shuffling’ is where you choose a neutral six to seven letter word — for example, ‘slumber’. For each letter, visualise unrelated, low-emotion objects starting with that letter — for example, shoe, library, umbrella, mat, bike, egg, rug. This occupies working memory with non-threatening content and reduces rumination. This technique is perfect for when you just can’t seem to wrangle your wayward thoughts into submission.



The key to the Welcome Practice is removing the anxiety about being awake and replacing it with acceptance and even appreciation that this is one of the few times you will be uninterrupted. The biochemical result is lower stress hormones that drive this unwanted wakefulness.

The perceptual transformation may not be immediate but it can be remarkable. For Patricia, within about 10 days, her wake periods shortened from hours to just 15 to 20 minutes. Even more encouragingly, she actually started to look forward to these peaceful moments of reflection. 'Sometimes I'd actually miss it when I sleep straight through', she told me, laughing at how different this was from her previous middle-of-the-night anxiety.

Of course, it helps to be practical about these wake periods. I advise you to go to bed 30 minutes earlier to compensate for typical awake time. This simple adjustment means you can welcome your night waking without worrying about losing total sleep time. The trick is being disciplined.

### **Night Waking Assessment**

Answer each of the following questions by selecting the option that best describes your experience.

How often do you wake up at the same time each night?

- ☐ Rarely (once a month or less) [1 point]
- ☐ Sometimes (few times a month) [2 points]
- ☐ Often (one to two times a week) [3 points]
- ☐ Almost every night [4 points]

When you wake up at night, how anxious do you feel about getting back to sleep?

- ☐ Not anxious at all [1 point]
- ☐ Slightly concerned [2 points]

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## SLEEP FIRST

- ☐ Moderately anxious [3 points]
- ☐ Very anxious/panicked [4 points]

How long does it typically take you to fall back asleep?

- ☐ 15 minutes or less [1 point]
- ☐ 15–30 minutes [2 points]
- ☐ 30–60 minutes [3 points]
- ☐ More than an hour [4 points]

How do you feel the day after a night of interrupted sleep?

- ☐ Normal/fine [1 point]
- ☐ Slightly tired [2 points]
- ☐ Noticeably fatigued [3 points]
- ☐ Extremely exhausted [4 points]

Do you find yourself worrying about work/life issues during these wake periods?

- ☐ Rarely [1 point]
- ☐ Sometimes [2 points]
- ☐ Often [3 points]
- ☐ Almost always [4 points]

### Scoring Your Assessment

Total your points from all five questions.

#### **5–8 points: mild night waking**

Your night wakings are infrequent and have minimal impact on your sleep quality and daily functioning. This pattern could be completely normal and may even reflect natural sleep cycles similar to our ancestors' biphasic sleep patterns.

Advice: Embrace these brief wakings as part of your natural sleep pattern. Use them as quiet moments for reflection or gentle

mindfulness. Keep your bedroom comfortable and avoid checking the time, which can increase anxiety. The Welcome Practice would be perfect for you, simply acknowledge these brief wakings without stress.

### **9–12 points: moderate night waking**

You experience regular night wakings that are beginning to affect your sleep quality and may occasionally affect your daytime energy. Your anxiety about sleep is starting to become part of the problem.

Advice: Start implementing the Welcome Practice to reduce sleep anxiety. Keep a journal by your bed to jot down any thoughts that arise during these wakings. Ensure your sleep environment is optimised for quick return to sleep (cool, dark, quiet). Consider going to bed 30 minutes earlier to compensate for wake time. Limit screen exposure before bed and practise a calming bedtime routine. Chapters 6 and 8 will provide additional strategies that will be particularly helpful for you.

### **13–16 points: significant night waking**

Night wakings are frequent and significantly affecting your sleep quality and daily functioning. You're likely experiencing a cycle where anxiety about sleep is perpetuating the problem, and daytime fatigue is noticeable.

Advice: Prioritise the cognitive decoupling techniques in chapter 6. Consider tracking your sleep patterns to identify potential triggers. Establish a consistent sleep–wake schedule, even on weekends. Evaluate your caffeine, alcohol and meal timing as these may be disrupting your sleep cycles. The Welcome Practice is essential for breaking the anxiety cycle, but you'll also benefit greatly from the environmental optimisations in chapter 9 and the relaxation techniques in chapter 16. If your wakings occur at similar times each night, check for potential disruptions in your sleep environment at those hours.

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**17–20 points: severe night waking**

Your sleep is frequently disrupted with extended periods of wakefulness, causing significant anxiety and daytime impairment. This pattern is likely affecting many aspects of your life.

Advice: While the Welcome Practice can still help reduce anxiety, your sleep disruptions may benefit from more comprehensive intervention. This could signify that you have a life situation that you are not addressing during waking, but which is creating emotional disruption when your brain tries to make sense and categorise the thoughts during the REM period (see chapter 3). Consider consulting a sleep specialist, as underlying issues like sleep apnoea or restless leg syndrome might be contributing factors. In the meantime, establish a consistent pre-sleep routine, eliminate all screen time 90 minutes before bed and create a sleep sanctuary free of distractions.

*Remember:* Night wakings were common among our ancestors and can be a natural part of sleep architecture. The goal isn't necessarily to eliminate all night wakings but to change your relationship with them, so they don't trigger anxiety or extended wakefulness. The Welcome Practice is your first step towards transforming your night wakings from a source of stress to a peaceful pause in your night.

Tonight, instead of dreading that 3 am wake-up, see it as your ancestors might have: as a natural pause in the night, a moment of quiet contemplation in our otherwise busy lives. You might find that the less you fight it, the less power it has over you, and the sooner you drift back into peaceful sleep.

The journey from our tree-dwelling ancestors to modern sleep science reveals an interesting paradox, while we've gained unprecedented understanding of sleep's mechanisms, we've simultaneously lost touch with its natural rhythms. Our ancestors' sleep patterns, whether the

sentinel system of equatorial hunter-gatherers or the biphasic cycles of pre-industrial Europeans, recognised sleep as dynamic and adaptive rather than a fixed 8-hour block. Modern sleep anxiety often stems from fighting natural patterns that once served important survival functions. If we can learn to reframe these phenomena as our nervous system's ancient wisdom expressing itself in a world that no longer requires such vigilance, it will feel less problematic. The Welcome Practice and understanding of biphasic sleep patterns offer a bridge between ancestral flexibility and contemporary life, suggesting that the solution to modern sleep problems may lie not in forcing rigid schedules but in embracing the adaptive intelligence that has guided human sleep for millennia. By honouring these evolutionary patterns while applying modern sleep science, we can hopefully transform our relationship with sleep from one of anxiety and control to one of acceptance and natural rhythm. This transformation begins with understanding where you currently stand. The Sleep First Formula helps you map your current patterns before attempting any changes.

## Sleep First Activity

1. When you compare your current nights to the patterns in this chapter, which description matches most of the time? Choose one.
  - ☐ Mostly one solid block of sleep
  - ☐ Two-phase night with a middle-of-the-night wake that often lasts 20–120 minutes
  - ☐ Light 'sentry' style sleep with frequent brief wakings
  - ☐ Highly irregular pattern that changes a lot from night to night
2. Think back to your childhood and teenage years. What did you think about sleep during those periods? Did you look

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## SLEEP FIRST

forward to bedtime or try to avoid it? How did nights feel in your sleeping space? Note any regular noise, conflict or responsibilities that might have trained your nervous system to stay on guard.

3. How often do hypnic jerks or falling sensations appear as you drop into sleep? Are they related to being overtired or stressed?
4. Drawing on the Welcome Practice and the evolutionary ideas in this chapter, write one new sentence about what your nocturnal wake-ups mean. Aim for a sentence that treats the waking as your brain's old safety system doing its job, rather than proving something is wrong with you.  
*Example: 'This 3 am waking is my brain running an old night-watch program, not a sign that I am broken.'*
5. Write down how your sleep environment or life situation may have changed now, and give your mind permission to come 'off guard'.

*Add your answers to your notebook or notes app to help build your Sleep First Formula.*