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## [Addicted to Being Awake](#)

[Constantino Diaz-Duran](#) - January 19, 2011



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Are you reading this in the middle of the night because you can't sleep, or can you not sleep because you're reading this in the middle of the night? The answer to that question could be the key to curing your [insomnia](#).

A [study](#) released in March 2010 by the National Sleep Foundation revealed that almost a quarter of Americans complain about "missing work or family functions because they were too sleepy." That's because only four out of ten of us are lucky enough to say that they get "a good night's sleep every night or almost every night." And the numbers of those who say they "rarely or never have a good night's sleep" are even more worrisome, reaching as high as 20 percent among whites, and 18 percent among African-Americans.

[Robert deStefano](#) used to count himself among the sleep-deprived masses. He was a chronic insomniac for almost 25 years. DeStefano, the former owner of an award-winning advertising agency, routinely found himself up at two o'clock in the morning, writing TV commercials. That rhythm, he says, was killing him. "I was going to be the guy that everybody said, 'Wow, he died of a heart attack? He was so young.'" Like many of us, deStefano excelled at working under that kind of pressure. "We had deadlines everyday," he says. "It was constant [cortisol](#)



release, constant grinding. I was very good at being stressed. I just needed to figure out how to be relaxed.”

Worried about his health and feeling exhausted, deStefano sold his agency ten years ago and set out on a quest to become a better sleeper. He sought certifications in yoga instruction and massage therapy, and attended retreats in the middle of the jungle. He read all the sleep science he could, and became something of an expert on the subject, but he still was having trouble sleeping. Then one day, he had a breakthrough. “I realized that there was an addiction in place,” he says. “An addiction to being awake.”

“This addiction to being awake,” explains deStefano, “is really an addiction to our day life—an addiction to what drives us. We experience all our value, receive all our congratulations, and enjoy all our interests during the day. That’s when we live our lives.” And many of us find it very hard to let go of that, even just for a few hours. He adds that “people say out of one side of their mouths, ‘I really need to sleep, I wish I could sleep, I hate being awake in the middle of the night, I feel like crap the next day.’ But on the other hand, there is something about this being awake in the middle of the night that’s working for them. They feel, for example, like they are at least getting work done.”

Perhaps lending some credit to this notion of an addiction to wakefulness, [studies](#) have suggested that mobile phone emissions stimulate your brain in ways [similar](#) to some addictive substances. This might be due to the release of a small amount of [dopamine](#), a neurotransmitter that, as [Dr. Carl W. Bazil](#), Director of the Division of Epilepsy and Sleep at Columbia University, explains, is connected to the brain’s reward system. “Cocaine and other stimulants also trigger a release of dopamine,” says Dr. Bazil. He makes it clear that there is not enough proof to say that insomniacs are addicts, but he acknowledges that “performing stimulating behaviors such as checking your iPhone before bed is one of the most common reasons for insomnia.”

After learning how to manage what he calls his addiction, deStefano entered the business of helping others become better sleepers themselves. He has become a self-styled “sleep guru,” a personal trainer of sorts, who specializes in teaching his clients how to overcome insomnia. He is one of many sleep coaches across the country who work with what he calls, “urban and suburban achievers,” people who are always on-the-go, but worry about the effects of sleep deprivation on their lives.

“I have a lot of clients that are hedge fund managers who are just hitting that wall, where they can’t think during the day, and it’s beginning to cost them money,” says deStefano. Another prominent demographic, he explains, is “the mom who can’t get to sleep because she has been so hyper-vigilant about her kids. She’s always going to be worrying about her kids and all the stuff they have to do—the doctor’s appointment, the school thing, the whatever.”

[Dr. Janet Kennedy](#), a licensed psychologist who specializes in sleep disorders identifies a third group suffering heavily from lack of sleep: freelancers and people who do contract work. “I work with a lot of people who live in studios and work from home,” she says, “and the challenge is figuring out how can they not live in their work 24 hours a day.” She employs cognitive behavioral therapy, which is based on the notion that it is our thoughts—and not external factors such as other people or circumstances—that control the way we act and feel. It is meant to work fast, and unlike other types of therapy, it is time-limited. Dr. Kennedy usually meets with her clients only six to ten times, but the results last, she says, “because it’s skills that you’re learning and it’s giving you back the control instead of giving the control to a medication.”

Self-empowerment is also at the core of what deStefano teaches his clients. He emphasizes that an insomniac’s goal should not be “to sleep better,” but rather “to become a better sleeper.” The difference between the two is analogous to the old adage about giving a man a fish and teaching him how to fish. Taking a pill will allow you to sleep better for one night, but taking the reins of your addiction to being awake will help you sleep well for a lifetime.

The services provided by professional sleep gurus like deStefano tend to be more varied than those offered by psychologists and therapists. Many of

them draw large crowds at workshops held at spas and wellness centers. DeStefano runs several of these workshops every year. Tickets go for anywhere between \$2,000 and \$4,000 for a three-to-five day seminar at a spa. For those who prefer individual attention, deStefano offers phone sessions for \$150 for a package of three, as well as more expensive in-person sessions held either at his office in San Francisco or during his trips to other parts of the country—he serves the East Coast, for example, by camping out at a spa in Connecticut for a few weeks every year, meeting with executives from New York City and other metropolitan areas.

Another interesting service provided by sleep gurus is what deStefano calls “home audits,” in which he actually visits a person’s home. He claims these constitute “a huge part of [his] work,” even though they are very expensive because he requires a minimum of three meetings and the client covers the cost of travel. What he does, he says, is go into his client’s house and “measure its level of sleep friendliness.” His clients reenact their evening routine with deStefano, down to which lights go off when. He provides them tips on how to better make the transition from daytime to night time, and will go so far as to remodel parts of their house. “I redo the bedrooms if need be,” deStefano says. “I have them paint the walls. We change the whole environment to make it more conducive to sleep.”

Dr. Kennedy, however, is skeptical about the necessity of going to that extreme of involvement with a client. “I just think that’s silly,” she says. “That’s not what it’s about. That doesn’t treat anything. If someone is not able to sleep even with cognitive behavioral therapy, then there’s probably something else wrong—an underlying psychiatric disorder, like a severe [anxiety disorder](#), or a physical problem.”

What deStefano and Dr. Kennedy do agree on is that, ultimately, becoming a better sleeper requires you to make fundamental changes in habits and in the way you think about night and sleep-time. The first step, says deStefano, is to accept that when you go to bed you need to “let go of the day, of your life, and your issues—all that stuff. Just put them on the shelf for eight hours and return to them the next day.” Once you’ve made that change, you can begin to focus on adjusting your behavior and acquiring the habits that will allow you to get the rest you need every night.

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## 5 Responses to “Addicted to Being Awake”

- [\*Noapte:\*](#)  
[January 19, 2011 at 9:13 am](#)

I could say for me, when i'm sleeping it's like it's another life of mine, i can do things and things just like in normal life

[Reply](#)

- [\*Peuterbed:\*](#)  
[January 19, 2011 at 3:05 pm](#)

Insomnia is no laughing matter. I can get by on 6 hours a night but I know a former insomniac and its such an awful thing. Good article!

[Reply](#)

- [\*Method 21:\*](#)  
[January 20, 2011 at 2:15 pm](#)

I know I'm guilty. I'm a designer, so I'm up at 2 and 3 in the morning. It really works for my creative flow, but I know it's not healthy.

I'm working on it, though.

[Reply](#)

- [\*Essex Weather:\*](#)  
[January 23, 2011 at 1:04 pm](#)

I can usually get by with 6-7 hours a night, but find some of my best creativity occurs around 2 in the morning! While I'm still young I can get away with it I suppose!

[Reply](#)

- [\*Steve:\*](#)  
[February 24, 2011 at 2:39 pm](#)

I admit. I am an insomniac! I just don't understand why my mind is so alert and full-throttled during the night, and when daytime strikes, it becomes sleepy. But, thanks to this article, I realized that this schedule is definitely not good. The night was designed for rest, and it should be! I'll be sleeping after I post this comment.

[Reply](#)

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