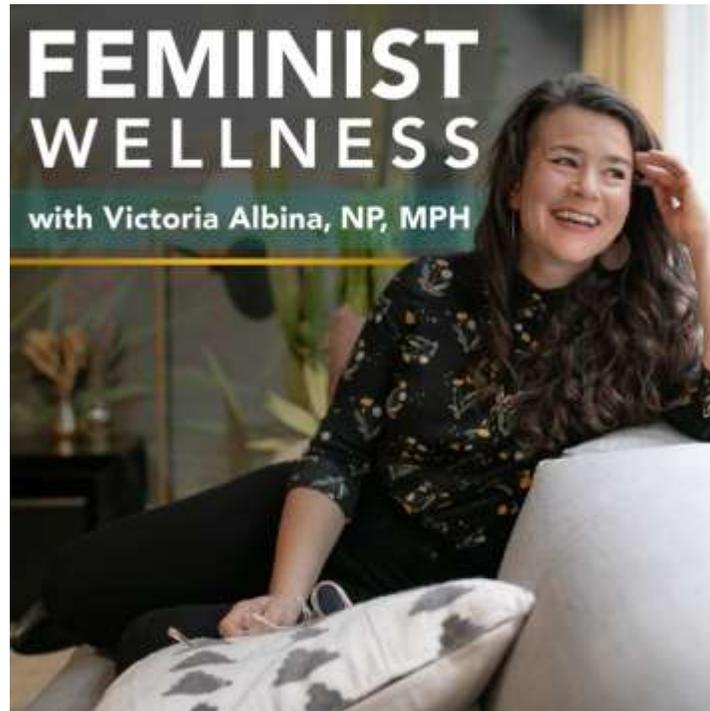


Ep #12: Sleep



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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Sleep, and lack thereof, is a major issue for our mental and physical wellness. When we don't get enough sleep, it's hard to show up with our best selves, to not be irritable, sad, angry, and brain fogged. If sleep is elusive in your beautiful life, if you're getting in bed for enough hours but are waking feeling not really well rested, I'm here to share some of my favorite remedies to help get you counting the sheeps before you know it, all without scary pharmaceuticals with potentially dangerous side effects.

You're listening to Feminist Wellness, the only podcast that combines functional medicine, life coaching, and feminism to teach smart women how to reclaim their power and restore their health. Here's your host, nurse practitioner, functional medicine expert, herbalist, and life coach, Victoria Albina.

Hello, hello, my loves. I hope that everything is magical in your beautiful world. I'm so excited today because I love presents. I love to give them, I love to make them, I love seeing people getting them, and I get to announce the winners of my handmade essential oil roller giveaway. I'm giving away a set of two of these rollers to five lucky listeners who left a comment on iTunes and sent me an email all about it. There's this fascinating thing with podcasts in the iTunes. If your show doesn't have a lot of subscribers, ratings, reviews, it literally doesn't show up in the search function.

The reason I'm doing this show is to spread all of this free information as far and wide as humanly possible. And thus, my constant plea is for you to subscribe, rate, and review on iTunes. It's vital for spreading the message about this resource to folks who wouldn't otherwise know about it. And one of the key tenants of feminism for me is building community and sharing information. So I think that sharing this podcast is a feminist act, so there you go, and everyone likes presents.

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I'll be doing another giveaway soon, so do make sure that you're signed up for my mailing list, and I'll put a link in the show notes, and that you follow me on the Instas and the Book of Face. It's the same little name thingy, handle, I think that's what the kids call it, at both, which is @victoriaalbinawellness. So you'll be the first to know all of the things. And without further ado, the winners are, drum roll, please, Nurse Charis D, I love that she identified herself as a nurse in her email, Karen Z, Cara V, or maybe it's Cara, either way, sorry, Andrea G. of Brooklyn, and Amy F, who got her entry in just under the wire yesterday.

So keep an eye on your emails, my loves. I'll be asking for you address so I can send you your presents. And thank you for taking the time to help spread the Feminist Wellness love. I appreciate you so much. I'm also so excited to hear what you think of both my energizing formula, Rise and Shine, and my sleepy time formula, Easy Now. Both are made with organic ingredients and are just so lovely to have on hand. In honor of the giveaway and the Easy Now roller, this week, we shall be discussing the magical transformational experience that can be so elusive and annoying for so many of us.

And that, my loves, is sleep. Nearly 60 million Americans are affected by sleep disorders every year. Sleep problems are run the gamut from taking too long to fall asleep, called sleep latency, waking up too early, having restless or lousy quality sleep, waking up too much overnight, or too early in the morning. As a nation, we are sleeping far less than we used to. Studies show that at a minimum, we should be getting an average of 7.5 hours of sleep each night. Well, the average American is now getting six to six and half hours a night.

Getting the appropriate amount of sleep allows our bodies the proper time to detoxify from the day, allows our brains to go through every sleep cycle necessary for stress recovery, and to take some time in the REM, or rapid eye movement, phase of sleep, which is when our brains are activated from memory and learning. In my clinic, I talk to folks on the daily who are

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fatigued, brain foggy, not recovering from life like they would like to, people who are not sleeping well enough through the night, folks who are freaking exhausted. And when they go to their primary care provider, they're given the option of pills or more pills.

Rarely, in my experience, are folks really told the dangers and limitations of these drug options. Pharmaceutical companies are raking in over 2.7 billion US dollars every year on sleep medication with some pretty intense known harms that are at best a half-assed treatment. That is, they often don't even work, or they may work for a short time, but they mess up your natural sleep cycle, your sleep architecture. By using these drugs, you're not only masking your problem, you're unable to get to the root cause of why you can't or aren't sleeping enough, and coming off of these drugs, or when they stop working on their own, can leave you with more problematic sleep than you had before you started them.

Sedative drugs, like the benzodiazepines Xanax, Valium and the like, and the hypnotic drugs like Ambien, are associated with what we nerds like to call increased all-cause mortality, that is a shortening of your lifespan, even when someone is prescribed only 18 of these pills per year. And benzos, Xanax, Klonopin, et cetera, are incredibly addictive, wildly hard to get off of, and are associated with a significant increase in dementia. Sorry to be the bearer of this bad news, but the pharmaceutical options for sleep management are just not great.

Meanwhile, having a consistent sleep schedule isn't just vital for physical health, but for mental and emotional health as well, because science. The side effects of not getting enough sleep, or having interrupted sleep, or not getting into those deeper levels of sleep include the sort of obvious fatigue, right, you don't sleep, you're tired, anxiety. Right? When you're tired, you get more anxious, and then some things that folks don't really think about as much, like digestive issues, metabolic imbalances, autoimmune conditions, having more flares, more pain, more discomfort. Heart disease

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can be linked to not getting enough sleep, as well as increased cancer rates, decreased memory, and dementia.

The top contributors to less than delightful sleep, based on both studies and what I see in clinic, what follows are the top contributors to lousy sleep. And yes, this will all be written out for you in a beautiful handout. The first is what I call lifestyle factors because you can lump a bunch of stuff in there. That includes blue light exposure, which we're going to get into detail about, stress and anxiety, melatonin dysregulation and circadian dysregulation, environmental issues, waking to use the bathroom, which can be hormone-related, due to IBS, or can have a structural or other etiology, blood sugar fluctuations, generally a drop in blood sugar overnight, cortisol imbalances, food sensitivities and leaky gut, because you know, that's got to be in every episode, sleep apnea, inflammation and pain, neurotransmitter and hormone imbalances, nutrient imbalances including B vitamins, choline, and iron.

To address all of these issues, I'd need about a month and a half to talk through each of those, but without actually stopping or sleeping, just talking continuously. I think a month and a half might scratch the surface. So today, I'm going to not do that to you or Pavel, my amazing podcast producer. I'm going to start with addressing those issues I see most often in clinic, and really the ones that are most actionable for the average bear.

The first step is the most important. You need to understand the route of your insomnia. Much like there is no perfect diet for all humans, there is no magical sleep cure that works for everyone. Play around with the following tips, figure out what works for you, knowing it may not just be one thing that you need to shift or change. There may be several, and that's okay.

Let's get started with blue light exposure. I start there because it's the newest threat to our sleep as modern mammals. There is a blue light sensor in our brain called melanopsin, which absorbs the blue light in the world through our eyes and uses the presence or absence of that blue light

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to adjust and set our internal clocks, our circadian rhythm, by telling the pineal gland, also in our brain, to put out melatonin when there is no blue light, and to halt melatonin when there is blue light.

Let's think back to our prehistoric ancestors. Their lives were distinctly lacking in iPhones, tablets, big-screen TVs. They got blue light from the sun during the day, and they were outside most of the day, what with all the hunting and the gathering. At night, they got little to no blue light because candles and firelight are lousy sources of blue light. So that is, when the lions were awake and on the prowl, the humans were awake with spear in hand. When the sun and the lions went to sleep, so too did the humans. They had to rest up for tomorrow's possible wild animal attack, and it makes so much sense.

In 2019, our brains are trying to do this whole blue light, no melatonin, no blue light, yes melatonin thing. But our poor, sweet little melanopsin sensors get jacked because we have bright lights indoors either from lamps or machines with screens, and our pineal gland, that little lovely that puts out melatonin, is not getting the right signals. So it would follow that blue light at night is bad for you, and getting daylight during the day is super important. Sunlight is, after all, my favorite antidepressant in addition to being my favorite sleep aid. But the problem is, most of us are stuck inside offices all day and expose our eyes and brain to blue screens far into the night.

Daylight truly is the best way to synchronize our internal clock to the outside world, to get the best sleep, and to have the best daytime energy possible. We also know that when our circadian rhythms are off, our adrenal glands and cortisol management can suffer, our sex hormones can suffer, our thyroid can get out of whack, and there's mounting evidence that we can be at increased risk for certain types of cancers. That is to say it's important for our bodies to sleep during the night when it's dark out and be awake and in the sun when the sun is out.

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The key is to get at least 30 minutes of daytime sun exposure. When possible, take your lunch break outside, walk a little more outside, either to or from work, or do whatever you need to do to get that face of yourself into the sunshine. I'm writing this very podcast on my roof deck right now, and I work out here on the roof in the dead of winter in New York City in January because getting sunlight is that important to me. At night, do your best to avoid bright or blue light for two to three hours before going to bed to get optimal levels of that magical sleep hormone melatonin, which will help you fall asleep and stay asleep.

I know you can get it in a pill, and that's great, like, I actually, I love melatonin in a pill for grown-ups', not for children's, but when we can get an endogenous, or made by our body hormone, it's always going to be the better opinion, and getting a good circadian rhythm again is not just about getting appropriate melatonin. It's about keeping your body in line with the earth, and the moon, and the stars, and it's super-duper important for your health overall.

Okay, so here's the thing. I really want you to try to not get blue light for two to three hours before you go to sleep. I know that sounds ridiculous. I mean, I live here too, you guys. I have an iPhone, and a TV, and a computer, and all of the things. So we do harm reduction, right? We get those gizmos and apps you put on the machines that block the blue light. I wear those super dorktastic blue blocker glasses on the market. They're called Swannies. Actually, there's dozens of them, but I've tried them all, and I like Swannies the best. I'm obsessed with them because they really, really help.

I do all the harm reduction stuff, right? I try to block blue light every time I can, but I know it's not enough. We really need to not be looking at these blue screens, not just the blue, but the moving images. It's all very neuroexcitatory, and that's frankly the last thing I want in the evening or nighttime. So start small. Little steps add up. Start with 30 minutes of no

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screen before bed, and see after a week, or two, or three how much better you may feel.

In addition to cutting the blue screens off at night, make your bedroom as dark as you can. Block out that blue light. Wear an eye mask. If it's loud where you live, wear earplugs, and keep your bedroom nice and cool. Studies on the Maasai, the hunter-gatherer people of modern-day Kenya and Tanzania who have amazing health overall, found that the biggest deterrent of sleep induction for them is actually the shift in body temperature from daytime hot under the sun to evening cool and nighttime cold.

So I keep my bedroom between 60 and 67 degrees Fahrenheit because it's that drop in temperature that tells your body it's sleepy time. A great trick to spark that body temperature drop is a nice, warm shower or bath, which makes sense. You're hot under the water, you get out, your body temperature drops. And while we're discussing sleep environment, I think it bears saying that insomnia, and lousy sleep, and interrupted sleep can be an even bigger burden for parents of human babies or fur babies, and especially single parents who don't get to tag someone else in at 3:00 AM.

Given that the birthing parent is often the one getting up to feed baby in the middle of the night, and because of that early bond and the totally normal, healthy baby dependency on their lactating parent, the burden of overnight childcare can be so much heavier on the person feeding their milk to their kiddo. I mean, adoptive parents don't get a break either. Someone's got to feed the tiny person through the night, and soothe them if they have a bad dream, too.

If this is your story, that your nighttime should-be asleep hours are not really your own because of tiny humans, cats, dogs, or other babies in your life, I want to implore you not to despair. This too shall pass, and until then, you can engage in as many of the sleep supportive techniques I'll go into

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detail about to help you get as deep a sleep as possible in the hours you are able to get some Zs.

All right. With that said, stress and anxiety are also at the top of my list of common sleep disruptors. I've talked a lot about anxiety management, the power of journaling, mindfulness, and meditation to create space between us and identifying with our thoughts. When you finish this episode, go back and give the episodes on being your own watcher, anxiety, and future self planning a listen. They will be very helpful in your quest to reduce stress before bed so that you can get better sleeps. There's also a really helpful meditation that's available for free just for podcast listeners if you go to victoriaalbina.com/bodyscan, B-O-D-Y-S-C-A-N.

It's a body scan meditation, and it's super helpful to do right before bed. The top thing I recommend for creating a supportive sleep environment is a bedtime routine. For many of us, there was a whole bedtime process as children, a bath, a book, a song, and few of us are still engaging in these nighttime rituals. I think they're really important. In the evening as I wind down from work and start to turn my screens off, I love a cup of calming tea like chamomile or tulsi, which is also called holy basil. I love to diffuse some essential oils, take a bath or shower, meditate, journal.

These little things all add up, so see what you can add to your evening, and see how it might help. Speaking of journaling, neuroplasticity, or rewiring your brain to think new thoughts and behave in new ways, can play a supportive role here too. When sleep becomes this elusive beast, when insomnia is something you hate or are mad at, you set your body up to think of sleep as something that's not for you.

An exercise I love, because I'm such a massive fan of journaling and planning our future thinking today, is to practice the thoughts you want to live into. I recommend a writing practice that should take you about one to two minutes, in which you right out believable facts about your sleep. For example, I have slept before, and I will sleep easily again. My body was

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built to sleep each night. Sleep comes naturally to me. Tonight, I will be calm and centered when I get in bed. Tonight, I won't let my anxious thoughts take me away.

I'd recommend doing this before bed every night, and in the morning every day when you wake up. This specific practice was inspired by my dear friend Becca, who had a little bout of insomnia that she cured with this technique plus some other lifestyle modifications. See how these statements aren't wild or fantastical? They're thoughts that your brain can hopefully believe, and if your brain can believe you on these new thoughts you're trying to teach it, it won't fight you. That's really important because we don't lie to our brains in this family.

Give this little practice a try. It really will take like one to two minutes before bed and in the morning, and it's worth giving a shot. The final environmental lifestyle note is about food and beverages. That big sigh was because I'm about to dive into something super unpopular. I recommend anyone with sleep issues do a proper 30-day elimination diet to see if there's anything you're reacting to. If you haven't listened to the episode on intuitive eating yet, when this is done, go ahead and listen to that one as well. I really recommend that you spend some time getting in touch with yourself and your intuition. Give it a week, two, three till you feel pretty good about knowing your body's own reactions to food, and then step into an elimination diet for 30 days.

I'm going to be focusing today on the three things people groan the most about when we talk elimination diet, and that's caffeine, alcohol, and sugar. Caffeine, sorry, my loves, it would be unethical for me to do an episode about sleep and not talk about caffeine. Did you know that caffeine has a half-life of five to seven hours? That is, if you drink coffee, tea, a Coke at 2:00 PM, it's as though you drank half a coffee, tea, or Coke at 8:00 PM. Would you drink a coffee at 8:00 PM? PS, I know there are some of you who are like, "Yeah, I drink coffee and then go right to bed." You, my loves,

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have a very special genetic code that most of us do not have. You can just fast-forward about 30 seconds until we're done with caffeine.

For the rest of us, drinking half a coffee at 8:00 PM is like a super recipe for being up and wired all night. The thing is, drinking that coffee at 2:00 PM is the same thing. So at the very least, please don't have caffeine after about noon, or even 11:00 AM. Just give that a try, and see if your sleep is a little better. I want to be clear, I'm South American. I love my coffee. I love yerba mate. That's how we say it, the drink of my people. Yerba mate is how you may have heard it. There's tons of studies showing that coffee is great for brains, that it increases metabolism in helpful ways.

And this is all true for bodies that tolerate coffee and caffeine. If you've never taken a break, then how do you know how caffeine is affecting you? Even if you're sleeping just fine, maybe you could be sleeping even better. If it's the ritual that you love, consider decaf, or herbal tea, or something like Dandy Blend, which just has the best name, and is a blend of dandelion and some other herbs that's like, I mean, come on. Nothing is coffee. Let's not BS ourselves. I miss the taste of coffee, but I do not for a millisecond miss the way it makes me feel. So sometimes, I'll drink decaf. Sometimes, it's too much caffeine for me, or I'll make some really yummy and complicated loose herbal tea because I love the ritual.

I love the ritual of drinking yerba mate from a mate, the gourd or cup you drink mate from is called a mate, so I drink other herbs from a mate with a bombilla, that's the little straw, because I'm a creature that loves ritual, and that satisfies that part of me while keeping me off the caffeine.

Next up is alcohol. Man, folks love their alcohol. While alcohol might make it feel easier to fall asleep, boy oh boy, does it mess with your sleep architecture, which means it can make your sleep restless or agitated, especially after your liver turns on to do its thing in the second half of the night. And finally, sugar. Sugar is not only inflammatory, it's taxing on your liver and can mess with your sleep, especially if you have sugar or other

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quick carbohydrates close to bedtime. Just like our brain goes to sleep, our pancreas also goes to sleep at night.

Two to three hours before we go to bed, as our melatonin levels begin to rise with the falling darkness, pancreatic function is slowed, and so your pancreas doesn't make as much insulin. That is, if you're eating close to bedtime, you're likely to have a glucose or blood sugar spike, and a blood sugar drop while you're sleeping can lead to restless or fitful sleep, or can even wake you in the night if your brain panics about your plummeting blood sugar levels. Meanwhile, our digestion also goes to sleep, and we don't break down food or absorb food at night as well as during the day. This means that eating late at night can be stressful for your organs as they don't get time to repair and recover properly overnight. This is one of the reasons why I love caloric timing, also called intermittent fasting, or doing our best not to eat for the two to three hours before bedtime.

It's amazing for our metabolism and for getting good sleeps. This said, one thing that can be helpful for folks who chronically wake at 3:00 to 4:00 AM or with low blood sugar, is having a little fat before bed. I recommend one half to one tablespoon of organic, good quality coconut or olive oil before bed. I just eat it right off the spoon. That good fat won't mess with your fasting state, and is such a slow burn in your body that it can often help balance blood sugar and can help you stay asleep overnight. Quick little note on that, start with like half a teaspoon and work your way up till you find the right dose for you.

There's no elegant way to say this, so I'll just say it. Remember that fat, well, it's a lubricant, and so it'll lubricate your intestines. I'm just going to say it. If you eat too much fat, you'll get the poops, so don't do that to yourself. Start low and go slow. All right.

I hear how ridiculous I am, and I just spend my entire life laughing, with love and kindness, but just laughing at the things that come out of my mouth. Oh, being my own watcher. All right. My best advice if you would

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like to sleep better is to take a loving step away from caffeine, alcohol, and processed sugars for 30 days to see what your body feels like. You can do them all at once and then add them back in slowly, or you can take each away on its own. It doesn't matter.

What matters is that you get in touch with how these substances make you feel. Keep a journal, I love data, so you know what's causing what. If you have better sleep or more daytime energy off of caffeine, alcohol, sugar, quick carbs, then you get to look at your life and ask yourself, "What's most important to me, the substance or the sleep?" No judgment from me. You're a grown-up, and you get to do what feels best for you.

Other common reasons for impaired sleep that I want you to explore with your healthcare providers are thyroid or cortisol imbalances, and you can go back and listen to the episodes on hypothyroid and adrenal health, liver or gallbladder detox impedances. Your liver detoxes from about 10:00 PM to 1:00 AM nightly, and issues with your liver can make it hard to fall asleep, and deficiencies in both calcium and magnesium can keep you from sleeping properly.

In shocking news coming out of my mouth, the health of your digestion is wicked important, or hella important for my Californians. Healing a leaky gut is an important first step in supporting your sleep, my loves, but you knew I'd say that, right?

The best thing about all these lifestyle-in-mind management options is that they're free and have no nasty side effects, like you know, no dementia risk or whatever. Sigh. And finally, to stay true to my witchy woo routes, let me pair my science talk of livers, gallbladders, and circadian rhythms, and CBT talk, with a note on the chakras, or energy centers of the body. Sleep relates to the crown chakra at the top of your head, where your crown would go. Physically, the crown chakra is related to the pineal gland, that little darling that puts out our melatonin, and this chakra also connects us to

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each other, to our thoughts, and to our connection with spirit, faith, and something bigger than us.

When our minds are clouded with worry or fret, the crown chakra gets bogged down too, and makes it hard to truly rest. Whether the chakras as like a system or a thing resonates for you or not, bringing more love to this energy center literally cannot hurt you. And to do so, I recommend taking 10 deep belly breaths and repeating an affirmation like, "I trust my inner-knowing to guide me through life. I trust that everything happens for a reason to teach me and help me grow. I am in balance with myself and the universe." Gosh, just saying that is super calming and feels really sweet and tender with myself. Why not incorporate something like this into your nightly bedtime ritual?

Finally, finally, supplements. I'm about to rattle off a list like I am want to do, so worry not. I made you a handout. Head on over to my website to grab that handout. You can find it at victoriaalbina.com/12, and that's the number 12, like one followed by two, and not the word. Here are some top tips on supplements for sleep. First, please make sure that you aren't taking anything with B-12 in it after like noon-ish o'clock. B-12 gives you energy, which is great if you take it at 7:00 AM, but can really interfere with your sleep if you take it later.

Magnesium glycinate is amazing for supporting sleep, and I take it nightly, as are herbs like tulsi, ashwagandha, and the rest of the adaptogens. Melatonin is super useful for many of us, but can leave some folks feeling too groggy in the morning. If that's the case for you, reduce your dose or switch to a sustained release option, or try taking it earlier in the night. If you want to be asleep at let's say 10:00 because I think that would be awesome, but most of you are like, "Ha, ha, more like 11:30." But let's say you want to be asleep at 10:00, try taking your melatonin not at 10:00, but at like 9:00, and see if that makes you drowsy in the morning.

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L-theanine is magnificent for anxiety, and can help if your brain is racing before sleep. I use 200 milligrams as a dose. I also love the nonaddictive, non-drowsy-making supplement Calms Forté, to help you fall asleep, and as a go-to for those who wake in the middle of the night. Leaving one to two little chewable tablets, that was one or two chewables, those words sound a lot alike, on your bedside table makes them easy to grab if your brain comes back online at 3:00 AM.

As always, not a single one of these supplements stands a chance if they're all you're doing, if the rest of your lifestyle isn't dialed in. While sleep is a vital part of your mental and physical health, your mental and physical wellness are part of your body's being able to sleep or not. And it may take more than just one of these tools to completely change your sleep ability. It make take a dozen. Remember to be patient, to be kind, gentle, and loving with yourself, my loves, and to keep breathing deeply. You'll be getting those Zs in no time.

Thanks again for tuning in to this week's episode of Feminist Wellness. I hope it's been helpful for you. I really want you to get a good night's sleep, my love. And if you or someone you love aren't sleeping, please do make sure to check out that handout, share this podcast with the people you love, share it on the social medias so we can get into the hands, or the ears rather, right, so we can get it into the ears of people who it can help.

All right, my loves. That's enough out of me. Be well, and remember that when we heal ourselves, we help heal the world. Be well, and take good care. See you next time.

Thank you for listening to this week's episode of Feminist Wellness. If you like what you've heard, head to victoriaalbina.com to learn more.