



# Count Your Blessings Instead of Sheep

by Elizabeth Sindelar-Loy  
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In the 1954 debut of Irving Berlin's *White Christmas*, audiences were encouraged to "count our blessings instead of sheep" when worried and cannot sleep. Bing Crosby's mesmerizing voice was a gentle nudge to the listener to remember how blessed one is, instead of fretting about short-term problems.

Berlin penned the song after his own personal struggles with stress induced insomnia. After visiting him following a rough sleepless night, his doctor suggested, "speaking of doing something about your insomnia, did you ever try counting your blessings?" The outcome of that advice has become lyrical history. But is there truth to the doctor's theory that being grateful leads to a better night's sleep?

It's been 65 years since Berlin penned his iconic song and since then we have seen the creation of prescription sleep aids such as Ambien®, Lunesta® and Restoril®. In traditional medicine they have proven effective (although riddled with side effects) and in alternative medicine they are denounced as band-aids masking deeper issues. What if that deeper, unresolved issue keeping us from sleep is our lack of gratefulness?

We are lucky enough to live in a world with almost instant access to anything we want. Yet, 8 out of 10 Americans say they frequently or sometimes feel stress in their daily lives. As much as we hate to admit it, stress is a natural part of life. Yet, that very natural reaction can be extremely toxic to the body. This is why getting proper restful sleep each night is imperative. Only in a deep sleep can the body process cortisol build up due to stress. In normal levels this stress hormone acts as the body's natural alarm system, keeping things in check. Cortisol works with certain parts of your brain to control your mood, motivation and fear. When levels are increased and remain high for an extended period, serious health issues can manifest.

Although there have been limited studies examining the correlation between stress and gratitude, psychologists have in fact concluded that gratefulness leads to improved sleep. One study asked college students to write in a gratitude journal for 15 minutes every evening before bed. The students who participated in the exercise worried less and had longer, restful sleep. In a second study, patients with neuromuscular disorders were asked to make nightly lists of things for which they were grateful. After three weeks, participants in the study reported getting longer, more refreshing sleep. Following up on that study, researchers at the University of Manchester in England looked at how gratitude affected sleep. Their research asked 400 adults of all ages, with 40 percent of

them having sleep disorders, to complete questionnaires about gratitude, sleep and pre-sleep thoughts. Those that indicated they expressed gratitude were able to fall asleep quicker and experienced a longer, more restful sleep.

Even without research, it's not an unfathomable conclusion that gratitude improves sleep. Being grateful encourages celebration of the present, allowing us to become greater participants in our lives. Just imagine waking up feeling recharged and ready to take on the day. Think of how much more you could accomplish with positive motivation fueling your day. So, the next time you find that you can't sleep, try counting your blessings instead.

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