

YOUR
story

The Dark Night

The Sinister Side of Sleeping Pills

By Alesandra Rain



I was not a drinker nor did I doctor-shop, and I always waited for a consultation with my pharmacist to confirm my combination of medications was safe. Yet after a decade on the pills, I felt consumed by this chemical straightjacket and wanted my life back.

All I was seeking was a good night's sleep and instead I became trapped by medications I initially believed were my salvation. It started with one prescription, and as my body reached tolerance and the pills stopped working, others were added. By the end I was taking Ambien, Klonopin (Clonazepam), Restoril (Temazepam), Sinequan (Doxepin), Effexor, OxyContin, and Norco (Hydrocodone). I rarely slept and incessantly paced my home, filled with anxiety. I aged rapidly and my pain level soared, but it was the all-consuming fear that I found most debilitating. I became agoraphobic and did not leave my home.

My cocktail of medications was similar to Heath Ledger's and it saddens me greatly that he lost his life to prescription drugs. I've read interviews where Ledger spoke of his raging insomnia, and I knew that he found himself in the same trap I had faced. Even his appearance deteriorated as mine had. How I lived through my debacle is a mystery, but it

Five years ago I quit a cocktail of sleeping pills and anxiety medications and felt my world implode. I've had 34 surgeries on my spine and legs and thought I was strong. But I was not prepared for the horrific withdrawals from these medications. For many months I questioned my sanity without any belief that I could regain my cognitive function or normal sleep patterns. I am a writer and I lost that magical connection to the written word. It was the blackest of times, filled with the deepest despair.



had such a profound impact that I began an organization to help others escape the clutch of this epidemic.

Ironically, mercury poisoning was the cause of my insomnia, but I would not discover this for many years. Instead, I became a willing participant to a chemical experiment that ripped through my world. Unfortunately the same is happening to millions of other people and often starts with insomnia.

The sleeping prescription pill market is an enormous industry and we are essentially supporting products that are slowly killing us. I didn't know that forcing my brain into submission was not true sleep, but that natural sleep is a complex mechanism triggered by a group of hormones that create a state of rest for the body and mind. As we sleep, consciousness is suspended while the brain undergoes a cycle of brainwave activity that includes dreaming. The heart and lungs slow and our normally active brainwave patterns diminish tremendously, until we dream. Our blood vessels dilate and the blood that is usually stored in our organs moves into our muscles for tissue repair. The growth hormone in children is secreted during sleep, as are critical chemicals that protect the immune system. So it is no surprise that

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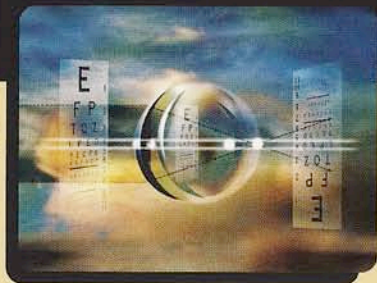
children placed on stimulant medication have stunted growth and weakened immune systems. I had reoccurring bronchitis and pneumonia and even contracted a staph infection in withdrawal.

Natural sleep doesn't just support physical health, but has a profound effect on our brain as it organizes and archives memories. It is also essential to the creative process. Rolling Stones' guitarist Keith Richards claims the riff in "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" came to him in his sleep, while Dmitri Mendeleev, the 19th century chemist, said he literally dreamed the periodic table of elements.

During the night, we shift from the predominant NREM (non-rapid eye movement) dreamless sleep to short segments of REM (rapid eye movement) state where dreams occur. Both NREM and REM sleep cycles are necessary to have restorative effects. But sleep medications dramatically reduce the length of time we spend in the dream stage and instead keep us in a light dreamless sleep. To make matters worse, sleeping pills (Ambien, Lunesta) and benzodiazepines (Valium, Klonopin, Restoril, Xanax, Ativan) do not actually improve sleep, but rather create an amnesiac effect that make us forget we are waking up. Unfortunately, most of us misinterpret this memory loss as deeper sleep. The longer we take the pills, even the dreamless sleep shortens in duration and leads to deeper exhaustion and anxiety. To compound matters, sleeping pills only induce sleep an average of 12 minutes quicker and 30 minutes longer than without them. But chemical dependency can occur within three consecutive nights of use, causing painful rebound insomnia, raging anxiety, and memory impairment.

Many people add herbs and over-the-counter medications in an attempt to gain a few hours of needed rest. It is not that herbs are dangerous—that is a misconception. But most people do not realize there is risk of a serious interaction when sleep medications are combined with items like passionflower, valerian, or antihistamines. Sleeping pills and benzodiazepines accentuate the GABA neurotransmitter, which keeps the nerve cells in the lung tissue from firing. That is why sleeping pills combined with over-

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the-counter medications or herbs that accentuate GABA or intensify the effect of the pills will overly suppress respiration, causing asphyxiation. This is what killed Heath Ledger.

But GABA doesn't just affect the lungs. It is an amino acid that naturally occurs in our nervous system. There are approximately 45 million GABA receptors in the body, and 75 percent are affected by sleeping pills and benzodiazepines. GABA regulates our sleep cycles, body temperature, muscles, and all hormone functions of the body. It's no wonder the withdrawals from these drugs are deemed the most challenging—even more than heroin or cocaine. I remember clearly wishing I had been an illegal drug addict, as the cold-turkey withdrawals would have passed quickly. The only safe way to withdraw from these medications is through a gradual taper, which allows the brain and body a chance to adjust at each level of reduction.

It wasn't my path to have an easy withdrawal, and I firmly believe the reason was to help address this epidemic of pill usage. I've worked with people from all over the world who are addicted to these medications. Most are taking one or two prescriptions and suffering the same intensity of symptoms I did on a cocktail of drugs. I realized long ago that any dose of sleep medication is dangerous.

In spite of the fact that I made every step of my medication journey improperly, I also made it back to complete health. I no longer suffer from pain, anxiety, or insomnia. My sleep patterns have returned, and at the age of 50, I feel better than I have in 20 years. You see, what I've also realized is that our bodies are amazing machines with a symphony of chemicals that yearn to be healthy. It has a remarkable capacity to heal if given the right nutrients.

So now, in spite of the fact that I have chosen to help people in their darkest hour, I also get the privilege of watching them regain what I now have—freedom.

Alesandra Rain is the author of Deeds of Trust. She is also the co-founder of Point of Return. For more information, visit www.PointofReturn.com or call 866-605-2333. yhc

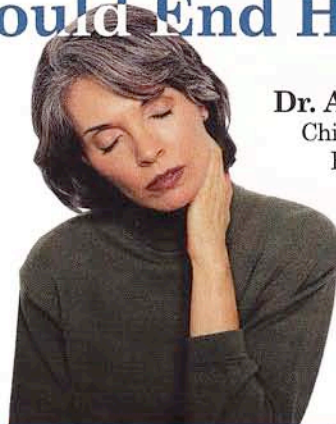
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Alesandra Rain before treatment admission (2003), and today prescription-drug free.



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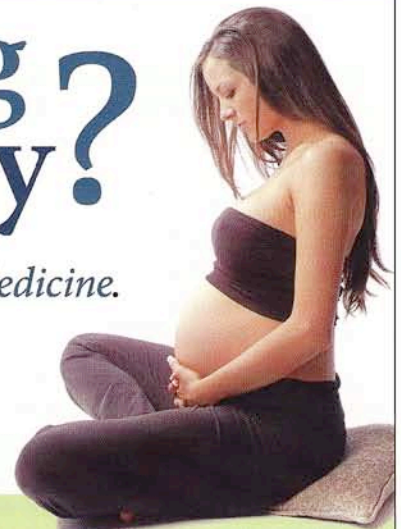
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