

Following is the full text of professional musician Jim Donovan's talk titled "How To Trick Your Brain Into Falling Asleep" at TEDxYoungstown conference.

Jim Donovan - TEDx Talk TRANSCRIPT

It's October 2010. I'm freaking out. Sirens are blaring above me. I'm laying on a stretcher in the back of an ambulance.

My doctor just told me I'm having a [heart attack](#). I'm trembling, my arms are tingling, and this pain in my chest is crushing me from the inside.

Tracey and the kids have no idea where I am. I might never get to hold them again. This can't be happening. My life cannot be over! And yet here I am, probably dying.

But it doesn't happen. Instead, I get extracted from my [good life](#) and thrust into a reality out of my control. I've got tubes jammed in my veins, sensors covering my chest, and a cold, silver bedpan waiting patiently beside me.

I also get to wear this unflattering hospital gown while they administer every possible test they can charge my insurance company for.

On the third day of this drama, my doctor walks in and announces, "*Well, good news, Jim. You're healthy as a horse. No heart attack, just some really bad anxiety.*"

And then he asks me, "*Now, what's a healthy man like you having so much anxiety for? What's your life like?*"

Well, then I got to confess about the morning routine I've developed being a drummer in a band on the road.

When I wake up in the morning, I crack open a can of Red Bull so that I can wake up enough to drink a pot of coffee. Then I drink several more cans through the day.

I also fess up about eating too much sugar — like four bowls of Lucky Charms before bed too much — and that for some reason, I have trouble [sleeping](#). Even though I am chronically exhausted, I usually get about four hours of sleep per night.

The doctor's face turned somber. He looks at me and he says, "*Jim, this is a get-out-of-jail-free card. I want you to know, there was a man who came in the day before you, a year younger than you, with a similar condition, and who died this morning. Today you have a*

chance to make changes that will let you see your kids grow up. Four hours of sleep per night is sleep deprivation, and there is no quicker way to die early than to skimp on sleep, especially with all the crap you've been consuming. You need at least seven hours to stay healthy."

Seven hours. I haven't gotten that much rest in a long time, and now my body's breaking down. I know I've got to do something, or my next trip here might not end well.

Soon I would discover something that changed my life from that moment on: **the key to falling asleep is rhythm**. This discovery came from my need to solve a lifelong problem.

Ever since I was a kid, at bedtime, I can never get my mind to stop thinking. Sometimes it will be a worry, other times a song would get stuck in my head and just loop around and around.

When I got home from the hospital, I decided to do some research, and so I researched sleep and the effects of sleep deprivation, which I learned include heart attack, [stroke](#), weight gain, and just as my doctor had told me, premature death.

I also read a Harvard Business study that shows the impairment that happens at four hours of [sleep](#) per night is similar to the impairment that happens when a guy my size drinks five regular beers.

Then I came across some startling statistics. In the U.S. alone, 35% of adults — that's 86 million of us — are sleep deprived. What's worse, 87% of teenagers. That's 36 million kids whose brains are still developing are chronically sleep deprived.

Worldwide, scientists are calling [sleep deprivation](#) an emerging global epidemic, with low-income people and women being affected the most. I know I've got to do something, and so I let go of the energy drinks, I cut way back on coffee, and I even give up my nightly Lucky Charm feast.

And it helps. A little bit.

But at bedtime, I still cannot get my mind to stop thinking. On my way home from work that week, an idea hit me. I don't know why I haven't thought of it before.

Since 1999, I've been leading drumming workshops. At the beginning of these programs, I lead an exercise where the group and I drum together a steady unison pattern like this: boomp, boomp, boomp, boomp, boomp. We do this for a few minutes.

At the end, without fail, people tell me that the exercise helps them to feel more relaxed. It had never occurred to me that I could do the exercise without my drum.

And so that night, I did an experiment. At bedtime, I sat at the edge of my bed, and I brought my hands to my lap, and I began doing my drumming exercise on my legs, very lightly.

Upon seeing my strange behavior, my wife, Tracey, looked over at me, rolled her eyes and just turned out the light. But I kept at it. I wanted to find out if I could get the exercise to work.

And at first, nothing happened. But then, after about four minutes of persistence, I noticed my eyelids starting to get heavy. I was yawning, and I decided just to lay down and shut my eyes for a minute.

When I opened them again, it was morning. I slept a solid seven-and-a-half hours with no struggle falling asleep. And most nights, since 2010, I've been getting the best sleep of my life.

I do it using an exercise I'm going to show you today that I call **brain tapping**.

Now, this exercise uses a phenomenon that happens in the brain: it's called the **frequency-following response**. This is a very fancy way of saying that your brain loves to follow repeating, rhythmic patterns.

Essentially, your brain, first, notices that there's a pattern, it connects with it, and it begins to follow it. Whenever you listen to your favorite music and do this, that's the frequency-following response happening.

What we're going to do is we're going to help that frequency-following response to occur; we're going to activate it, and then we're going to help to slow the speed of your brain activity down by slowing down the rhythm.

Now, there might be a few of you out there right now that are thinking to yourself, "Does this hippie really want me to believe that I can use rhythm to help me fall asleep? Really?"

And what I'd say back to you is "What if I could? What if I could show you how to fall asleep tonight in less time than it takes you to eat a bowl of cereal?" Would you try it?

Now, here's the great news. You do not need to be good at rhythm for this to work, only

willing to try.

Here's what happens. The exercise, it's 30 seconds. What we're going to do is bring our hands to our lap like this. We're going to be tapping at the speed of a ticking stopwatch — so right left, right left, right left — very lightly.

As we do this, we're going to breathe slowly. At the end, we're going to slow the rhythm down.

So, if you're willing, I'm going to invite you just to settle in. Take a big breath in. Begin very lightly tapping on your legs at the speed of a ticking stopwatch — right left, right left, right left.

If you're comfortable, I want to invite you just to close your eyes so you can get the full experience.

Next, we're going to do a very slow breathing technique. Your job is just to do your best and take breaks if you need them. So eyes are closed, we're tapping lightly, and let's start the breathing.

Breathing in slowly, two, three — it's very slow — four, and slowly out, two, three, four.

Breathing in — doing great — two, three, four, and slowly out, two, three, four.

Breathing in — almost there — two, three, four. And slowly out, two — very good — three, four.

And now, slow the tapping down, and slow it down again. Four, three, two, one. And relax.

Take a moment to notice how your mind feels. Let's take a big breath in, and let it go. You can open your eyes.

And I saw a couple of you yawning. I take that as a compliment, so thank you.

If you got the exercise to work the first time, congratulations. You've got a new friend you can call on tonight to help you get to sleep.

If the exercise didn't work as you hoped it would, don't worry, you're not broken. Sometimes it takes a few tries to get used to the exercise. Please [don't give up](#).

Now, imagine getting great sleep from now on. Imagine how much better you'll feel, and then imagine people all over the world doing this exercise and getting better quality sleep. Imagine how that might affect peacefulness everywhere.

I've got a challenge for you: for the next five nights, I want to invite you just to run the exercise for at least three minutes. Remember, tap like a ticking stopwatch, breathe slowly, and at the end, slow the rhythm down.

Once you're comfortable with it, I want you to feel free to teach it to anyone who needs it, especially kids.

Good luck and sweet dreams.

Thank you.

Resources for Further Reading:

[How to Get Your Brain to Focus: Chris Bailey \(Full Transcript\)](#)

[Brain Activity Revealed Through Your Skin: Stress, Sleep, & Seizures: Rosalind Picard \(Transcript\)](#)

[Mehdi Ordikhani-Seyedlar: What Happens in Your Brain When You Pay Attention? \(Transcript\)](#)

[Guiding Difficult Decisions from "Monkey Brain" to "Wise Mind": Lance Pendleton \(Transcript\)](#)