

Are you afraid of the Dark?

By Kevin Estela



Change into a dry sleep suit before hitting the rack. Depending on the weather, this can include a hat, buff, gloves, lightweight fleece top/bottom, dry socks and powder for your feet.



Comfort items can help make sleeping easier. Pictured: Memory foam pillow, stuffed animal, flashlight, down booties, hot water bottle in sock, hand warmers.

Humans spend approximately 1/3 of their lives sleeping. For this reason I don't skimp on pampering myself at home in my bedroom with a comfortable mattress, down comforter and plush pillows. Sleep comes natural to humans as it allows the body to recover from injury, fight off sickness and rests the mind. While sleep comes naturally in comfortable environments, the inverse isn't always true. In natural environments, it is often difficult to get comfortable. In my experience as a Survival Instructor, I have heard the line time and time again, "I just couldn't get comfortable." The phrase is common but the explanations are varied from person to person. How can you help yourself or help others to become more in tune with nature and comfortable when the lights go out? Here are three common reasons more sheep are counted than necessary.

1.) Familiarity Did you have a binkie or woobie as a child? Remember that security blanket (literally or figuratively) you carried around and found comfort in? It was familiar and an object you had control over. You recognized it in an unfamiliar setting. For this reason, many camps suggest campers bring their own pillows with them on overnight stays. For the outdoorsman of any age, having an object like a sleeping bag can make your

night in the outdoors more enjoyable. Compare this to having no sleeping bag stuffed into a natural debris shelter. If you never tried it before, it will not sit well with you and will be a constant mental process impairing your sleep. Your body can't sleep if your mind isn't at rest.

If you have children, the thought of sleeping outdoors may frighten them. Don't consider bringing kids outdoors unless they are given some aspect from home to turn to in the night. A stuffed animal, a blanket or pillow from their bed and don't forget you not far from them. If they have a rigid routine they follow at home, try to incorporate a modified version of that in the woods. If Friday night is pizza night, don't let your ego get in the way of bringing some slices in a cooler only to heat up on the rocks or grill. Think about how awesome this will be for them. Make homemade pizza in a reflector oven and think of how awesome this will be for you!

2. Insects There are more people who are

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Sometimes, drastic measures are needed to snuff out unwanted noise. Empty handgun casings will work in a pinch.

annoyed by insects than there are those who understand and tolerate them. Insects and creepy crawlies are common complaints among campers of all types. Picnickers complain of ants, bushcrafters of ticks and just about everyone complains of mosquitos and black flies. These pests can be bothersome in the daylight but they can wreak havoc on a night's sleep when darkness falls. With some clever precautions, the bed bugs won't bite your body and won't walk around in your mind.

On advanced survival courses I run through the Wilderness Learning Center, students build natural shelters and spend the duration of a field exercise in them. Even if properly bug doped, students tend to point out hearing insects around them, feeling them on them and obsessing about them in their dreams. Even the strongest repellent won't deter large insects whose take off and landing on your skin is more bothersome than harmful. Wise students make good use of insect head nets for both sleeping and as makeshift fish nets. Coupled with a wide-brim or baseball hat, the mesh is pulled away from the face. Insects CAN sting through bug netting; it is the space that protects you. These same students also favor long sleeves, doubled up shirts, tucked pant legs into socks and full-finger gloves. Your whole body is a target for skeeters. Exposed

skin is just as tasty to them around your ankles and wrists as it is your back. Having peace of mind you're more protected from what you can't see allows for much needed sleep. To counter the sound of mosquitos, a disposable pair of foam earplugs has helped a few of my good friends. Don't laugh; we've even used spent .40 caliber pistol brass in a pinch!

3. The Unknown: The human mind is an amazing tool. It can provide deep understanding of complex concepts during the day and at night it can amplify sound with its imaginative ability. How often have you heard a friend insist a bear or raccoon was outside their tent or shelter when in reality tracks and signs reveal it to be a

mouse or vole? Even in environments where there is absolutely no threat of dangerous game, outdoorsmen have a hard time with sleep. Amazingly a simple squeeze flashlight or small campfire can soothe the active mind. Just as a nightlight sheds light to a dark room, a cheap LED squeeze light worn around the neck or a headlamp suspended in a tent can be an "easy on" if a mental question is raised in the dark. What is on me? What's outside? I thought I heard something! All these concerns can be answered with a squeeze or click. Let your outdoors companion use their light whenever they want. Simple psychology will habituate them to their environment. Enough flashing of light with no payoff will slowly ensure them there is in fact no reason to be afraid of the dark. This of course is only if you remember to bear bag when you need to and resist the temptation to hide candy bars in your friend's sleeping bag. Also unknown to people is the expectation of sleep in a new setting. A common line I hear is, "I've slept in tents plenty of nights, just never like this!" Don't force anyone who isn't comfortable to rough it more than they are willing to try at incremental steps. I wouldn't dare take a person on a minimalist trip if they first didn't spend a night in a tarp shelter in their backyard or safe location. I wouldn't force someone





The author wearing a baseball cap and mosquito net off of his face as the sun goes down.

to winter camp unless they tried camping in warmer weather. I wouldn't recommend pushing for too much change from what IS known without an understanding a horrible night's sleep is almost certain.

In Conclusion: It is easy for a seasoned outdoorsman to simply shut a person off and yell out "JUST GO TO SLEEP!" It's easy to consider a member of a camping group's problems to be his and his alone. However, the sleep deprived output delivered by one person will most definitely be the weak link in the group. The beauty found in the outdoors and recreation possible is better enjoyed on a good night's sleep. What isn't always easy for the outdoorsman is understanding and helping your

fellow man/woman/child enjoy the woods the way you have learned to. Yes, I said "learned." You have to remember you've had experiences in the past that have shaped your ability. Your companions may not have. It is your responsibility to take care of them. Often, this requires staying up with them and paying close attention to their needs. After helping introduce countless people over the years to camping and survival skills, I've found providing necessary sleep accommodations to students is as appreciated as a well-cooked fireside meal. Help someone adjust to the dark instead of fearing it and make them learn to appreciate the 1/3 of the day they previously didn't enjoy. You'll find everyone will sleep better if you do.

