

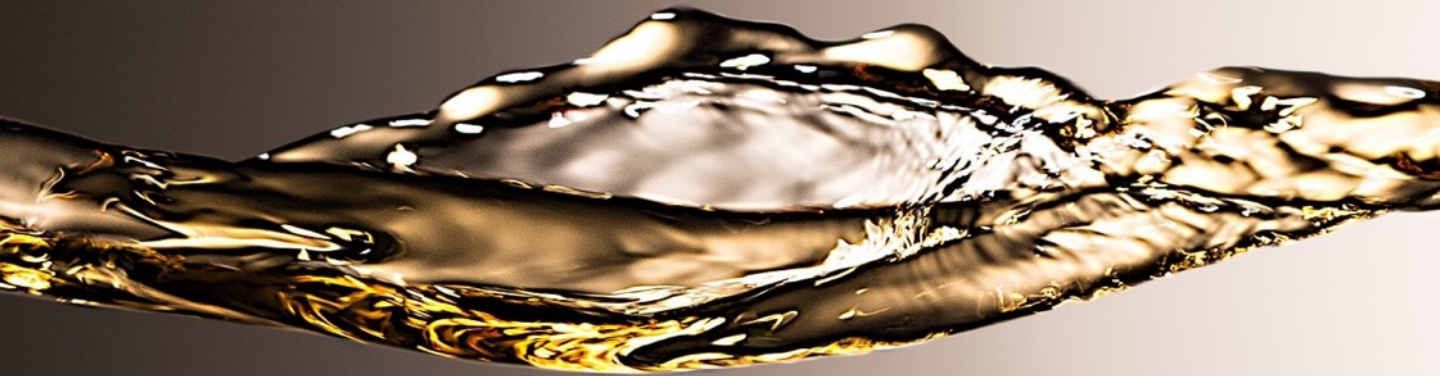
WINK

# How to Ride the Wave: Sleep & Alcohol

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How to Make Sleep Easier When Making a Change

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## Foreward

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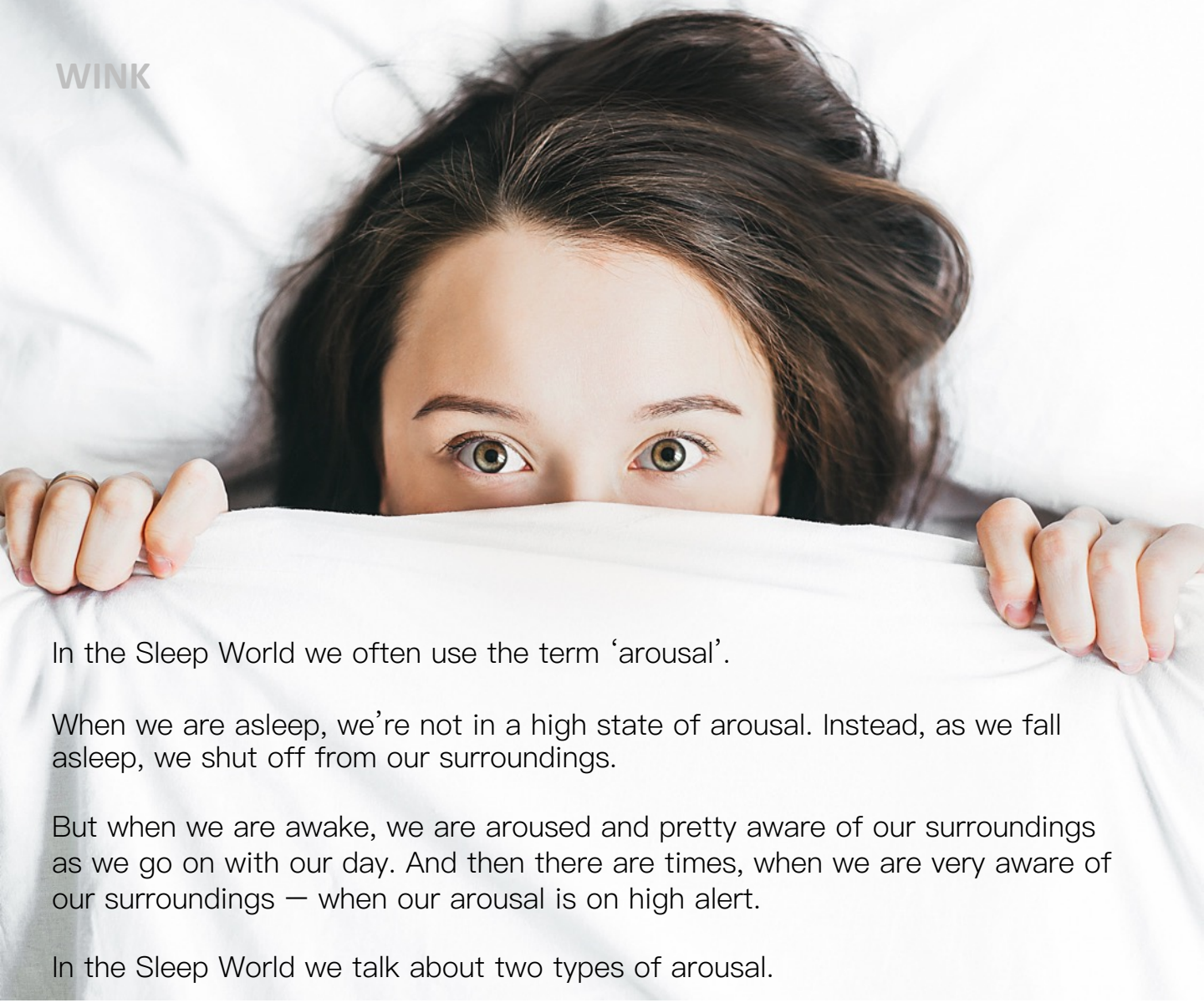
We have been treating insomnia and circadian rhythm sleep problems in adults since 2002. During this time we've also been doing a lot of sleep research. What we learn in our research feeds into our work with clients experiencing insomnia — and we get ideas about research to perform from what our clients say to us.

Alcohol is often intertwined with sleep problems, including insomnia. When we've looked at the research, we have learned what alcohol does to sleep. And from our clients, we have learned what happens when they cut back or cease their alcohol use to improve their sleep. But we were surprised that there is little information about what people can do to minimise the impact of alcohol withdrawal on their sleep in the first week.

So 'Riding the Wave' is a collection of techniques that can help people during that first week of alcohol withdrawal. The wave of 'insomnia' that occurs after alcohol cessation is inevitable, so it's best to ride it out, rather than have it crash into you. Whether you are intending to reduce or cease alcohol, or you work with people to assist them change their relationship with alcohol, this module in the *Blink* series is for you...

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In the Sleep World we often use the term ‘arousal’.

When we are asleep, we’re not in a high state of arousal. Instead, as we fall asleep, we shut off from our surroundings.

But when we are awake, we are aroused and pretty aware of our surroundings as we go on with our day. And then there are times, when we are very aware of our surroundings — when our arousal is on high alert.

In the Sleep World we talk about two types of arousal.

**Physiological Arousal** is when we experience sensations like increased heart rate and increased breathing rate. Our brain is also more active with neurons communicating a lot with each other.

Then there’s **Cognitive Arousal**, which is about cognition — or thinking. The more cognitively aroused you are, the more you experience a ‘racing mind’ or ‘intrusive thoughts’.

So over the course of the day, we naturally increase our arousal upon awakening, and in the hours before bed, we naturally have a decrease in arousal so that we are prepared for the entry into sleep.

Yet there are a number of things that can affect these natural changes — and one of them is alcohol.



## + Alcohol

Alcohol is many things. One of these is a depressant.

That's not meant to sound like alcohol causes depression (even though it can), but in terms of arousal, alcohol depresses arousal.

So when you drink alcohol in the evening, alcohol begins to amplify the natural decrease in arousal.

So what does alcohol do to sleep?

In the short-term:

Alcohol decreases the time taken to fall asleep. This is usually seen as a good thing, and often viewed as a 'reward' which in turn increases the chances we will consume alcohol again.

Moderate amounts of alcohol increase the amount of deep sleep in the first half of the night. People not only want to get sleep, but they want good sleep, so the deeper the sleep the better. Right?

High amounts of alcohol increase the amount of deep sleep in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the night. Again, the more deep sleep the better. Bonus! ... Maybe not.

It's very hard to wake up out of deep sleep, which is why we have not evolved to stay in deep sleep throughout the night. This is not the best design for our survival if there is a threat at night. Whilst that threat in the past may have been a sabretooth tiger, these days the threat could be not waking to the fire alarm (for example).

In short, alcohol places us at risk of harm if when we have high doses and have fallen into the depths of sleep.

But that's the short-term. What about the long-term?