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### Sleep Paralysis: An Artist's Best Nightmare

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Sleep Paralysis: An Artist's Best Nightmare

By

Ally Wills

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
University Honors Scholars Program  
Honors College  
and the  
Graphic Design Program  
College of Art and Design  
East Tennessee State University

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04/18/20

Alexandra R. Wills

Date

David Dixon, Thesis Mentor

Date

Kelly Porter, Reader

Date

## Sleep Paralysis, an Artist's Best Nightmare

The inspiration of an artist can come from many different sources. It can be born from mere intrigue, to a very personal experience, or anywhere in between. The topic that I chose to explore for my BFA Graphic Design Capstone Exhibit falls under the category of the personal experience. I have found that my best work tends to come from subjects that I do have a personal connection to. The first subject that came to mind was a condition that I suffer from, sleep paralysis.

I first developed this condition when I entered college, and it has persisted ever since. However, I did not have anything more than a base level of knowledge on the disorder. That is, aside from watching some scary YouTube videos on the subject before experiencing my first episode, I was virtually flying blind. I felt that I had not fully utilized the wellspring of inspiration that it could be. With this in mind, I decided to start from the ground up on my research so that I could eventually narrow the focus of my show in an informed way. What I was able to find helped me to do just that. It came to my attention that there is a lack of non-intimidating information on Sleep Paralysis. That is, most of the sources I found were either very complex scientific journals, or horror story forums online. I found this problematic, as it led me to deduce that an individual who wished to shed light on their condition would likely be led to become overly stressed and worsen their condition if they were only able to find the aforementioned sources alone. My project took shape to compensate for this, and I was able to craft a satisfying thesis statement to guide me: There is a lack of non-intimidating information available about the condition, Sleep Paralysis. This could lead those who experience it to catastrophize and worsen their condition entirely. In order to combat this, I will make a simple

and cohesive guide on how to cope with the disorder that utilizes illustrations and comedy to deescalate the situation in the sufferer's mind.

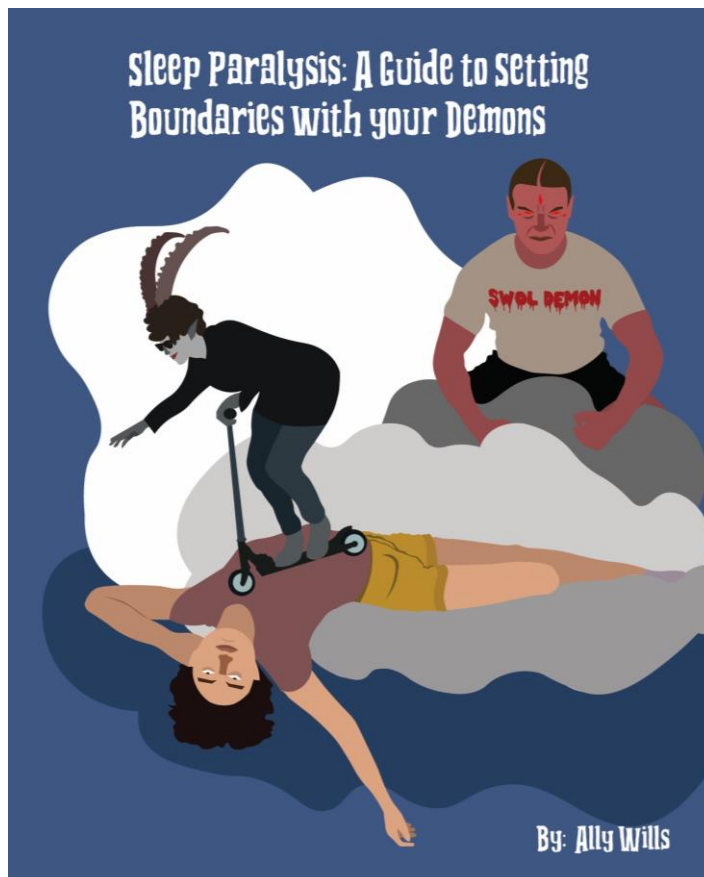
Before I could begin to design my idea, I had to comb through my sources to make sure that my work was well informed. The first source was a book titled "Sleep Paralysis: Nightmares, Nocebos, and the Mind-Body Connection" by Shelley R. Adler. This source gave a very in-depth explanation of the condition as it relates to various cultures. In addition to this, Adler was able to include both a scientific explanation as well as the many spiritual explanations that exist in many cultures (Adler). Through this source, I was able to find that the United States in particular lacks a significant cultural explanation of the aforementioned condition (Adler). The second source I found went further in depth on the medical and scientific explanation of sleep paralysis, and what parts of the brain are known to cause it (Olunu). It was useful in my own understanding, but far too detailed and wordy to include in my actual project. The third source I drew from was *The Nocturnal Brain: Nightmares, Neuroscience, and the Secret World of Sleep* by Guy Leschziner. In this book, a neurologist gives a specific account he had from one of his patients that suffered from Sleep Paralysis (Leschziner). I was able to find specific steps that an individual could take in order to lessen the symptoms of their paralysis through the account of the patient's experience. In addition to this, I conducted primary research through informal interviews of classmates to glean insight from their personal experiences. This gave me some direction in how I would be able to help my audience through my booklet. If I was able to make character representations of the negative aspects of sleep paralysis and walk the reader through steps to make their paralysis better with a visual aid, then I might have a shot at successfully helping them.

With the direction of having character representations decided, I had to begin working on their designs. At first, I was going to go for a collage/photo manipulation angle. However, after attempting this, I realized that it would be very difficult to make a cohesive booklet while using this method. The first iteration of the cover speaks for itself on the matter.



While this cover does have a humorous aspect to it, the color palette is not ideal. In addition, the lighting is very dark, and I was having trouble controlling all the aspects of the picture. It was after making this design that I decided photo manipulation was both too time consuming for the idea I wished to make, and did not give me the control that I needed over the elements in the visuals. From there, I found a far better medium for the tone of my booklet: shape based illustration.

Shape based illustration is an illustration technique in which flat shapes of color are utilized to make an object or scene. Essentially, this would allow me to have a simple and clean aesthetic that would allow my ideas to easily be understood by the viewer. With this in mind, I moved forward by photographing reference pictures of myself and two other models to base my characters on. From there I was able to vector over the reference photos to create my shape based characters. I decided on three main characters to focus on for the booklet: the representation of





one who suffers from sleep paralysis, and two demons to act as manifestations of negative sleep paralysis episodes. At first, I simply vectored over the cover that had previously been a collage, with the addition of the new characters. In addition to this, I added the title of the book in what I had originally assumed to be an appropriate typeface decision.

While the new style was both more suitable for my show and less time consuming, I was still not entirely pleased with the results. Despite this, I decided to move on with the rest of the images I had intended to create and fix the cover later. The cover drew inspiration from Henry Fusseli's *The Nightmare*, and made light of the concept of having a demon crushing your airways as you sleep. My original plan for the organization of the contents of the booklet was to have my written portions of the booklet on one page, and my illustrations on the second page of each spread. With that in mind, I made the "wise" decision to throw myself into the illustrations and steadfastly ignore the typography as long as I could. I set up photos of the models for my characters and got to work transforming them into illustrations.





After I had created six of the twelve full page illustrations I had intended on making, it was brought to my attention that keeping all the illustrations to one page and all of the type on the other without any consideration of the way they would interact was, in fact, a poor decision. I begrudgingly admitted that I would have to work equally hard on the typographic aspect of the booklet as well as the illustrations if I wanted this project to be successful. With this new thought process, I began breaking up the illustrations and dispersing them throughout the type so that they would be better integrated into my booklet. With the intuition and grace of a charging



rhinoceros in a pitch black cave, I made what I had originally thought to be wise typographic decisions. This resulted in some unique problems with my work.



This particular spread somehow manages to have far too much going on with the typography, and also manages to be incredibly unimaginative and bland at the same time. The spacing is not consistent, and the typefaces do not work well together. To top it all off, the body copy that was chosen is too dense to be easily read. The problems of inconsistency, overuse of color, and generally poor typographic decisions were consistent throughout the rest of the spreads that I had completed as well.



After a particularly helpful critique from an industry professional, Meara Bridges, I had a plan in place for how I would chose a sensible body copy and have just one header typeface to compliment it. In order to find the best one, I copied my first spread a few times, and put different font pairings in each to see what worked best. With many helpful suggestions from my professors, and the addition of a grid on the document, I was able to finesse the work to something I could finally be proud of.



## SLEEP PARALYSIS

It is late at night, and you have gone to sleep after a long day of working. All is quiet, and you are gently dreaming. Suddenly, an owl outside your room hoots, and you stir awake only to find that your body will not respond to your commands for it to move.

### You begin to panic

Any attempts you have to call out for help come out of your mouth as a quiet wheezing, and your desperate attempts to make your body move only serves to highlight your vulnerability.

Then, it appears. The air in the room becomes heavy with an oppressive sense of danger as it begins to creep closer and closer. Perhaps it speaks to you. Perhaps it only makes guttural noises. Either way, you are certain that it desires only one thing: your vitality.



1



This is not a fictitious story. For those of us that suffer from sleep paralysis, the experience described is a standard occurrence at night. Because of this, going to sleep can seem like a monumental task that will only end in doom.

However, I am here to say that there is hope! With this guide, you too can learn to set healthy boundaries with the eldritch beings of your deepest nightmares.

To make things simple (as they should be in humble booklets,) We will break this up into two parts: Preventative Measures and How to Cope. Each part will have five simple steps to follow to lessen the primal fear for your life whenever your sneaky little demon appears.

Before we begin to list tips, it should be noted that not every person is alike. Because of this, certain methods of coping might be more or less effective for you. In the end, it is up to you to test these out for yourself to see what works.

### Pleasant dreams!



2

## PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

### Step 3: Sleep on your side

The quintessential representation of sleep paralysis is a picture of a person lying on their back with a demon sitting on their chest, crushing their airways.



How does one avoid this clichéd scenario?

7



As simple as it sounds, sleeping on your side can help curb the frequencies of your episodes. That's not to say it will completely stop them, as many (myself included) still experience sleep paralysis while sleeping on their sides. However, this slight change in position makes sure that you are a lot less comfortable of a seat for a demon.

### Don't be a seat for a demon.



The difference in the beginning of my typographic choices is wildly contrasted by the final result. I picked far more appropriate typefaces: Bree Serif as the heading type and Lato as the body copy. These both lent themselves to a far more pleasant reading experience. I was more mindful of being consistent in my placement of the type, as well as the spacing between elements on the page. Before, the type was competing with the illustrations. After the revisions they became far more complementary of each other. With the type seeming to be in a finessed and satisfactory spot, I turned my attention back to the cover of the booklet.

The cover of the booklet needed revisions after the inside of the booklet became more clean and organized. The inside of the book had developed a cohesive color palette, and the dark blue of the cover did not fit in. Furthermore, it became apparent after test printing the cover that the elements on the page were slightly cramped and cut off. The illustrations needed some updates in order to be in line with what I had developed within the booklet, and neither the typeface nor its placement on the page was working. I first worked on fixing the type, and making it so that the title's typeface did not clash with the rest of the booklet. Once finished with that, I focused on updating the illustrations and making them fit better into the space of the cover. Lastly, I changed the color of the background to a light blue that was in my color palette.

# SLEEP PARALYSIS

A Guide to Setting Boundaries with your Demons



The changes that were made greatly improved the cohesiveness of my project, and in turn made me more confident about how the final project was shaping up. My original idea for how I would set up my gallery space to best expand on my concept was a mock bedroom. I had additional objects made (such as body pillows, sleep masks, and a lamp with stickers of the demon characters put on the lampshade) to further aid this concept. As the campus was shut down due to public safety issues brought on by the recent outbreak of Covid-19, I had to alter my idea for how to best showcase my booklets and materials I had prepared. The solution was simple: to make a horrid and cheesy infomercial of my products. I was certain that that delivery method would best compliment the heart and soul of my project: to be as comedic in my delivery method of helpful information as possible.

The making of the infomercial was interesting to say the least. The cast had to consist almost entirely of my family, and the set had to be my house. The constraints were limiting, but I was still somehow able to make a cohesive infomercial that I thought was at least semi in line with the rest of my project. It was a learning curve to edit an entire video, as I had not touched video editing since I was thirteen. Because of this, it is certainly not a professional video. However, I do not think that it is necessary for it to be entirely professional. Having it look like an at home project adds to the campy charm that I would like to think my project is rich with. The infomercial also gave me a chance to further showcase my sense of humor with the condition of sleep paralysis, and how you don't necessarily need to take it seriously.

After all of the work and revisions that went into this project was virtually over, I found myself reflecting on the project that I was able to create. It is my belief that this project was successful, and I am entirely satisfied with the work that I put into it to achieve the final product. As a designer, I made huge strides in my ability to work with type, as well as my ability to illustrate in a shape based manner. The concept of the project (to use humor to inform those who suffer from sleep paralysis on the ways they can alleviate their symptoms) was generally successful as well. This has been one of the most rewarding projects that I have completed in my years as a student at ETSU, and has allowed me to become more confident in my choices as a graphic design student. I chose an issue that I was passionate about because of my own experiences with it, and because of that my interest in the project never wavered. With the help and support of both my classmates and my instructors, I made a booklet that I could be extremely pleased with. My project set out to aid those who experience intense episodes of sleep paralysis by deescalating their terror with humor and wit, and it succeeded in helping me to grow as an artist and designer.

Link to infomercial: <https://youtu.be/JKVf-6tpmjA>

Link to finished booklet: [https://issuu.com/reidthefineprint/docs/wills\\_sleep\\_paralysis\\_booklet](https://issuu.com/reidthefineprint/docs/wills_sleep_paralysis_booklet)

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