I had a badly twisted knee that kept me off my feet for more than a week, during which time I got the flu. Multi-tasking two illnesses at once, I was having trouble sleeping through the pain and the worry about work piling up.

It hadn't been the initial getting to sleep that was the difficulty. Reading myself to sleep, though not recommended by experts, has worked for years. The problem was waking up during the night because of the pain. Then, once awake, the worry and anxiety would set in.

I had to cancel and reschedule a family birthday party. Delaying the party was going to impact a preliminary deadline for a book I was writing. A plumber on a remodeling project seemed to be overcharging me but I was too incapacitated to assess the problem. And one or the other of my children is always struggling with some crisis I can worry about.

When I start down the worry path like this, it is never ending. So there I am at 3 AM with my mind racing a million miles a minute. Wracked with pain and anxious worry, thrashing around on my pillow, I was suddenly aware of those insidious downer feelings that always precede a depression; that sudden downshift of a human spirit slipping into mortal agony.

I must get back to sleep, I thought. I have several mind exercises to use at times like this and my feverish mind was shuffling through them when another thought came to me: my brain was not being at all helpful. Why is my brain torturing me? Why isn't my brain helping me get to sleep? Because, I reasoned, my brain is stupid.

Well, of course that isn't exactly true. My brain was doing a great job of keeping my heart and circulation going and my breathing was okay. All the autonomic processes were working perfectly. It was the worry that my brain was doing that was not in my best interest.

Not that worry and fear aren't valuable instincts to alert us to danger. But it brought home to me, then, how some of the natural functions of our brain cannot be allowed to proceed, willy-nilly, on their own. Instincts are stupid in that they are not rational. Worry is an elaboration of the fear instinct that is often inappropriate and usually leads to depression

It's inappropriate if worry and deliberation go beyond the actual situation where some action is possible. It couldn't have been a more graphic example. How could I do anything about my concerns at 3AM, being sick and unable to walk? I could deliberate in the morning what to do. Now I needed sleep.

How many times have I written in my books that the mind cannot be trusted to be in charge of itself; that we must take charge of our own mind. At some point we have to take over. I thought, just then, of the hostile takeovers of companies. That's exactly what I needed at that moment: A hostile takeover of my own brain.

"O.K., Brain," I said authoritatively to myself. Listen up. This is a takeover. Takeover #1, Takeover #2, Takeover #3. I made it into a counting exercise. I visualized the word "Takeover" and the number sign and number in my mind like large cue cards on a movie set. When I got to Takeover #15, I started back at Takeover #1.

The cue card took up all of my mind's thinking space, completely replacing the anxious thoughts that had been producing adrenalin and keeping me awake. The first night I used the exercise I probably did 8 or 10 cycles before I started drifting off to sleep. Once or twice I started to drift off and then "came to." I simply resumed the exercise. The next two or three times I woke up during the night. I successfully repeated the exercise.

As I used the "Takeover Exercise" over the next few days, my brain was getting used to it and associating the exercise with going to sleep. Three or four cycles became adequate to get to sleep. That's because I was actually building, in my brain, a neural pattern that was growing stronger as I used it. The neural pattern was associating the exercise with the natural process of falling to sleep.

The brain works by learned association. Most people don't understand this. The brain is actually powered by learned association rather than by neurotransmitters. Think "black" and the thought "white" will fire up; think "salt" and the thought "pepper" sparks up. Any thought that is triggered in one neuron will cause similar, associated thoughts to spark up in other similar thought-related neurons, like attracting like, with increasingly wider participation by chance connections.

Neurotransmitters are simply the boats the neurons call up to carry the learned associations from one neuron to another. We all have specific learned associations with particular thoughts, images and words. And, as an act of will, we can make new associations anytime we wish. That's what I was doing with the exercises. By using it in the manner I was, I was continually associating it with going to sleep.

The mind does not hear all the brain chatter that goes on. As it moves from one association to the other, the mind hears only what it decides to "tune in on." And unlike tuning into some radio station, when our mind tunes in to something going on in our brain, it immediately begins to influence the brain. Whatever the mind pays attention to, the brain pays attention to.

We have the power to change our mind. When we change our thought and pay attention to something else, the brain changes and pays attention to something else.
If you exercise a muscle, it will become strong. If you exercise a thought by concentrating on it, it will become dominant. The brain always follows the direction of its most current dominant thought. If the thoughts are boring and repetitive, like Takeover #1, Takeover #2, Takeover #3, and associated with sleep, you will do just that — sleep.