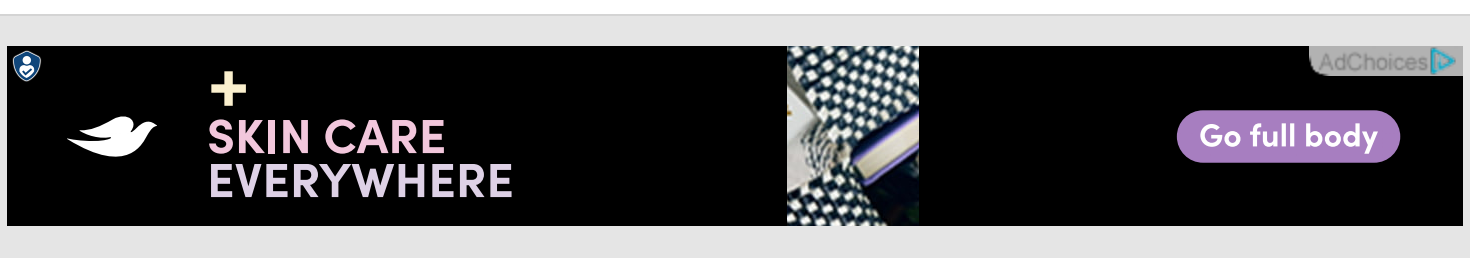
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What to Do at 3 a.m. When You Can't Fall Back Asleep

For the love of god, don't open Instagram.

By Jessie Van Amburg   Published: Jun 30, 2025 12:03 PM EDT

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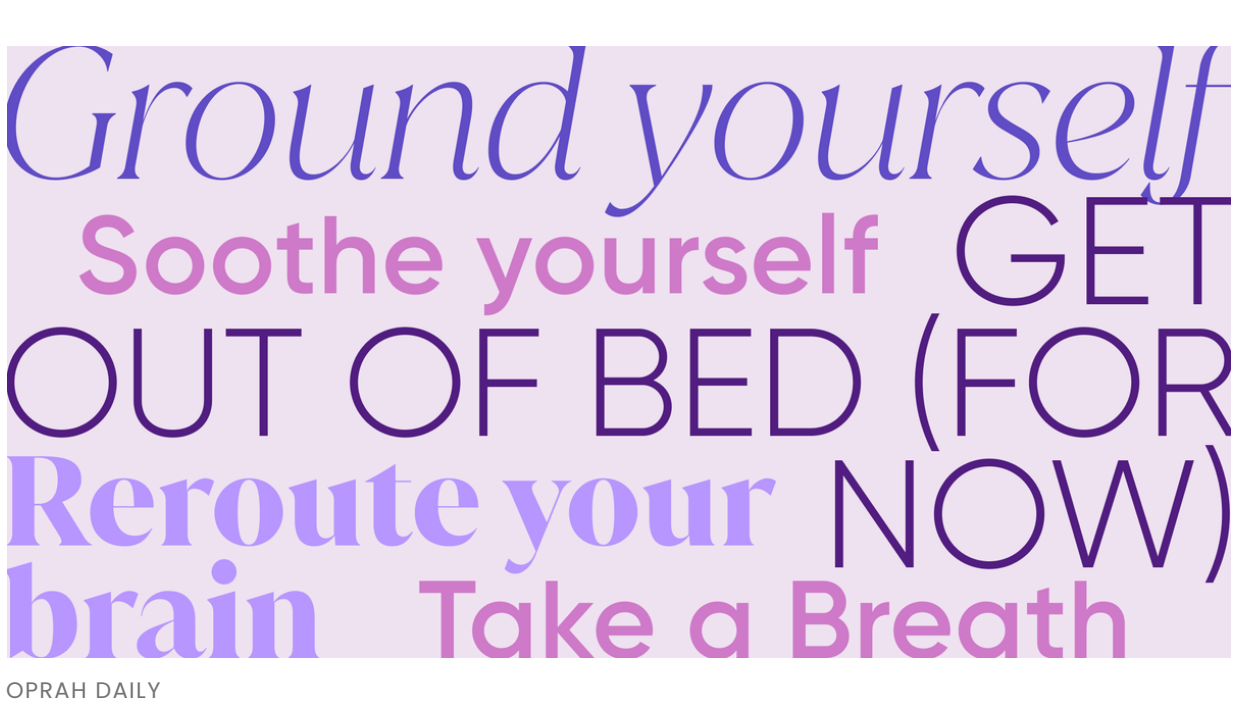

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My name is Jessie, and I am a Certified Sleep Struggler (patent pending).

As a kid, I could sleep anywhere, anytime. On long car trips, I conked out in the back seat before we even hit the freeway. In high school, I came home every afternoon and took a power nap before diving into my hours' worth of homework.

Becoming an adult seems to have ruined my sleep forever. I could give Goldilocks a run for her money with how particular everything must be in order for me to drift off: not too hot, not too cold, quiet but not too quiet, and god forbid there are any lights on within a two-block radius of my bedroom. Even when everything is *just right* at bedtime, I still wake up in the middle of the night, my mind racing like a cursed radio station that won't turn off.

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According to data from the CDC, 14.5 percent of adults have trouble falling asleep and nearly 18 percent struggle to stay asleep on most days. (Me, and me!) And considering that the menopause transition can also wreck your sleep, I'm willing to bet you're a fellow Certified Sleep Struggler too.

"Waking up in the middle of the night is way more common than people think," says Anjali Ferguson, PhD, a clinical psychologist and founder of Parenting Culture, an online community and resource for culturally inclusive parents. Aside from the obvious reasons we jolt awake (like hearing a car backfire down the street, feeling overheated, or needing to pee), the stress and anxiety we feel in our waking hours is also to blame. "Carrying this emotional load can cause a wake-up call in the middle of the night. It is almost like our brain is saying we have more to process," she says. Hence the racing thoughts.

The next time insomnia strikes, don't just toss and turn the hours away, says Haunani 'Iao, a licensed clinical psychologist and founder of 'Iao Mind Body Health. "If our brain associates our bed and bedroom with feelings of wakefulness, frustration, anxiety, and struggle, that environment will eventually trigger those same responses," she says. Instead, try these science-backed expert tips to lull yourself back to sleep. (Numbers 3, 7, and 8 have been game changers for me!)

Take a breath.

Breathing exercises can help you find chill in minutes.

1. **Diaphragmatic breathing:** Inhale for four seconds, then exhale for six. Repeat three to five times, suggests Sarah Silverman, a behavioral sleep medicine specialist. Easy-peasy.
2. **Box breathing:** Inhale through the nose for four seconds, hold for four, exhale through the mouth for four, then pause for four before taking your next breath. Repeat three to five times. "This technique helps regulate your nervous system and mimics the rhythm your body naturally flows in when you're in deep rest," says Ferguson.
3. **4-7-8 technique:** Breathe in through your nose for four seconds, then hold for seven seconds, says Rebecca Robbins, PhD, assistant professor in medicine at Harvard Medical School. Exhale through your mouth for eight seconds, pursing your lips and making a whooshing sound. Repeat three to five times. "Now you're in the driver's seat of your heart rate, blood pressure, and peace of mind," she says.

Ground yourself.

Get out of your head and back into your body.

4. **Body scan:** This form of meditation slowly brings your attention to each part of your body—from head to toe—as you release tension or soften muscles as you go, says Ferguson. Try this 10-minute guided option, or DIY with a step-by-step primer from Calm.
5. **Progressive muscle relaxation:** Also called PMR, this research-backed technique relaxes you by directing focus away from your stress and toward how your body feels. "You physically tense and release each major muscle group, working from your head to your toes," explains Silverman. This simple guided practice video can get you started.
6. **5-4-3-2-1 technique:** This exercise focuses on your senses. First, look around your bedroom and name five things you can see. "Look for small details such as a pattern on the ceiling, the way light reflects off a surface, or an object you never noticed," Silverman says. Next, identify four things you can feel (like your PJs brushing on your skin or the firmness of your mattress), then three things you can hear. Then find two things you can smell, whether it's in the air around you or something in your room that's scented, like an unlit candle. End with one thing you can taste. "Keep mints on your bedside table," suggests Silverman. "Pop one in your mouth and focus your attention closely on the flavor."

Reroute your brain.

Play mental games to stop midnight worry spirals.

7. **Brain dump:** Jot down all of your stresses or worries, suggests Robbins. It's simple but effective. "Putting it down on paper gets it out of your mind where it can't interrupt your sleep or cause more stress, and then that can be your to-do list for the next day." (Also known as constructive worrying, this tactic is a staple of cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia, or CBT-I.)
8. **Cognitive shuffling:** "Think of a series of random, unrelated words or images—just enough to keep your mind gently occupied without getting emotionally involved or problem-solving," says Silverman. (Pilot studies show it's pretty effective for sleep issues.) She recommends picking a neutral word with four to six letters, like *stone*, *jump*, or *river*. Take the first letter and think of other unrelated words beginning with that letter. (If stone was your word, look for other S words, like *sun* or *soothe*.) Move to the next letter in your starting word and repeat. Pause to visualize each word as you go, and if you're somehow still awake at the end of your word, pick a new one and repeat.
9. **Categories:** Similar to cognitive shuffling, think of as many items as you can for two or three different categories—like animals, countries, cities, celebrities, books, TV shows, movies, sports teams, cars, foods, says Silverman. Or try naming items in a specific category alphabetically (so if you're working with fruits, say "apple, banana, cherry," etc.).

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10. **Name that thing:** Silverman suggests naming all of the objects you see in your bedroom, or listing out all of your family members, their ages, and their go-to hobby or activity.
11. **Countdown:** Not sheep, but actual numbers. Count backward from 100 in intervals of 7, Silverman says. (So, 100, 93, 86, 79....) It's hard enough to distract you from your worries, but boring enough to knock you out.
12. **Backward spelling:** Not a numbers person? Challenge your brain with spelling instead. Silverman suggests spelling out your full name, and that of three other people, backwards.
13. **Get glad:** Counteract anticipatory panic ("Tomorrow is going to suck if I can't get back to sleep!") with a prayer or reflection on something good from your day, Robbins says. "Sleep is so psychological," she says. "Keeping it positive is really important."

Soothe yourself.

Bore yourself to sleep. Really.

14. **Read something dull:** What book made you nod off in high school English class? Keep a copy on your nightstand in case of insomnia emergencies. The snoozier, the better, says 'Iao. (An audiobook is fair game too.)
15. **Autogenic meditation:** 'Iao recommends this relaxing meditation practice, which is effectively a form of self-hypnosis. This beginner's exercise is a great place to start.
16. **Zone out with music:** Alpha or theta wave music can help you conk out too, says 'Iao. "Sixty to 70 beats per minute induces relaxation or meditative states," she says. You can easily find playlists and albums on Spotify, Apple Music, or other streaming platforms.

Get out of bed (for now).

When all else fails, get up to wind down.

17. **Legs on the wall:** Lie on the floor with your legs resting up against a wall. Keep your arms relaxed at your side or on your stomach. Inhale for four counts, then exhale for six. Repeat as desired. "This activates your 'rest-and-digest' response, or parasympathetic nervous system," says Silverman.
18. **Stretch it out:** Roll out a yoga mat and work out the tension in your body with a few gentle stretches or yoga moves, 'Iao says. Lay off the headstands, though—you're trying to relax, not send all your blood to your brain.
19. **Walk softly:** Slow, light walking in place can also help, says 'Iao. (Just keep it soft to avoid waking the rest of your household.)
20. **Bust out a puzzle:** Or any other calming activity will do. (Needlepoint, folding laundry…whatever is simple and turns off your brain.) Return to bed when you feel your eyes droop, says Ferguson.

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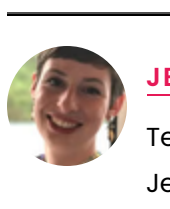
JESSIE VAN AMBURG
Temporary Deputy Health Editor
Jessie Van Amburg is a health journalist with over a decade of experience covering mental and reproductive health for some of the top media brands in the country, including SELF, Well+Good, Glamour, Women's Health, TIME, and Wondermind. She lives in Beacon, NY with her husband and cats, and is passionate about '90s television shows, climate justice community organizing, and the *Real Housewives of…*
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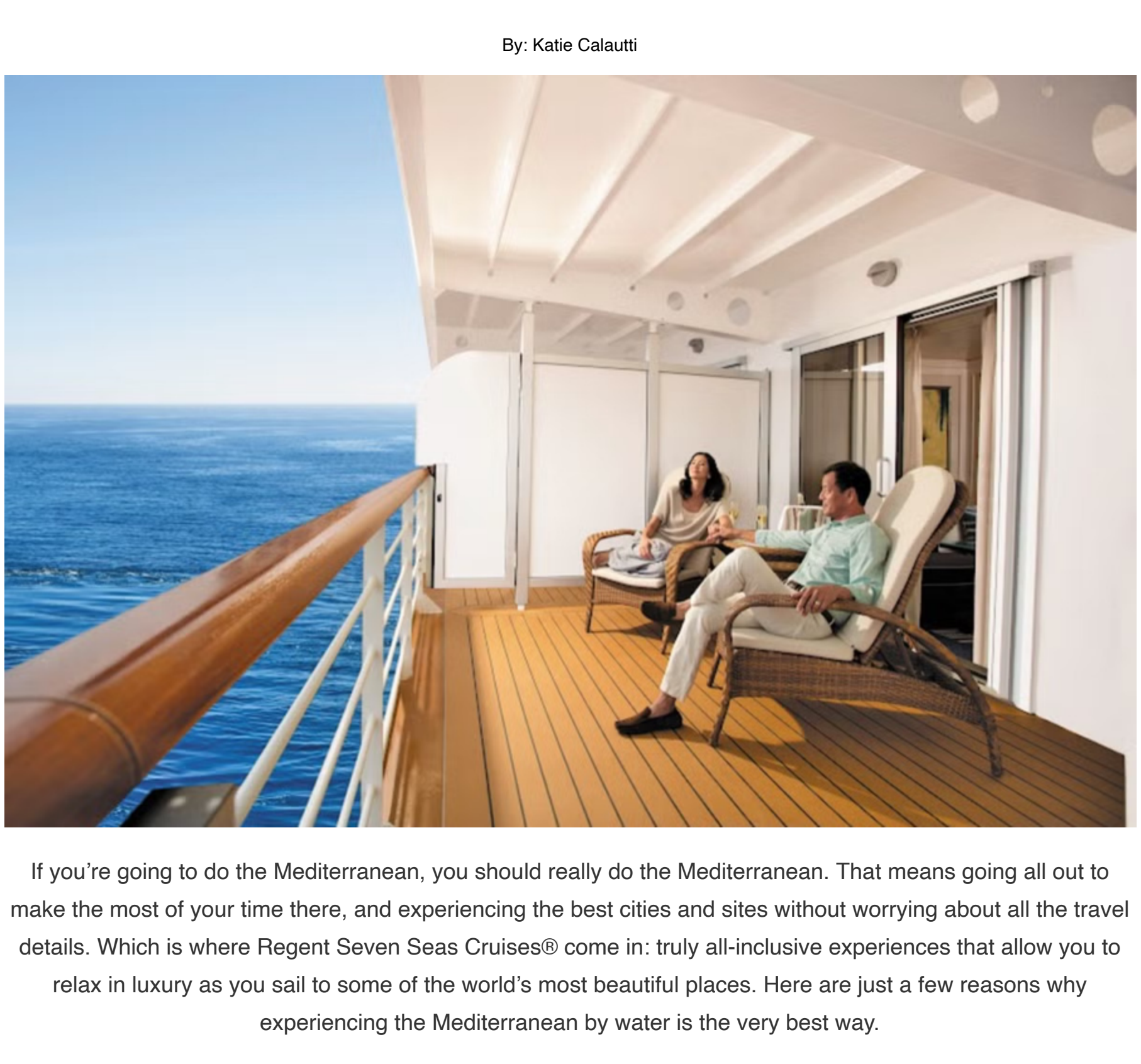

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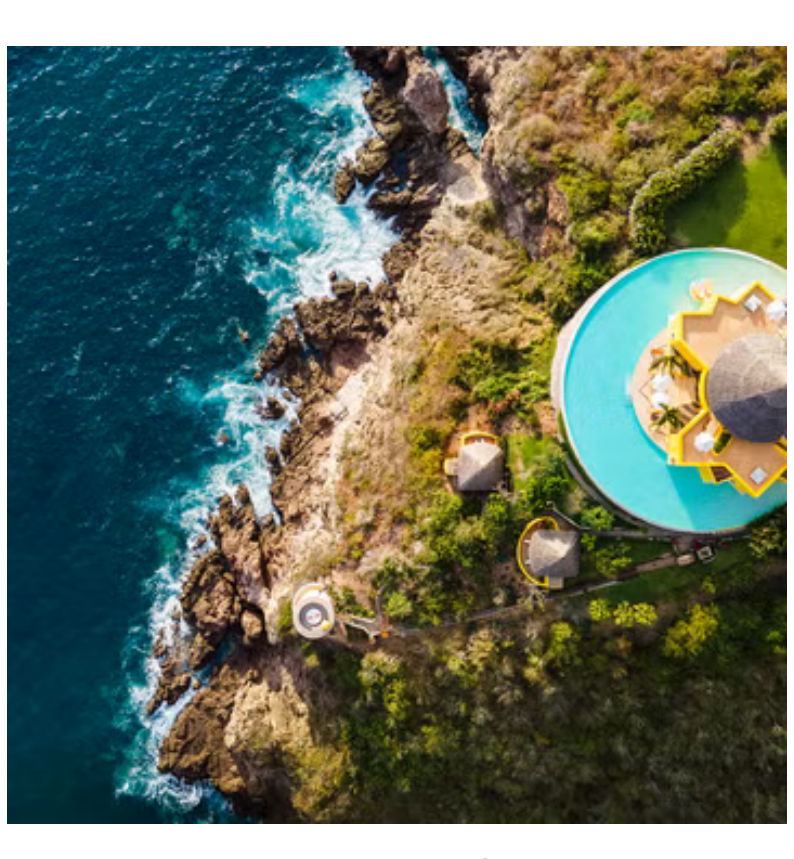
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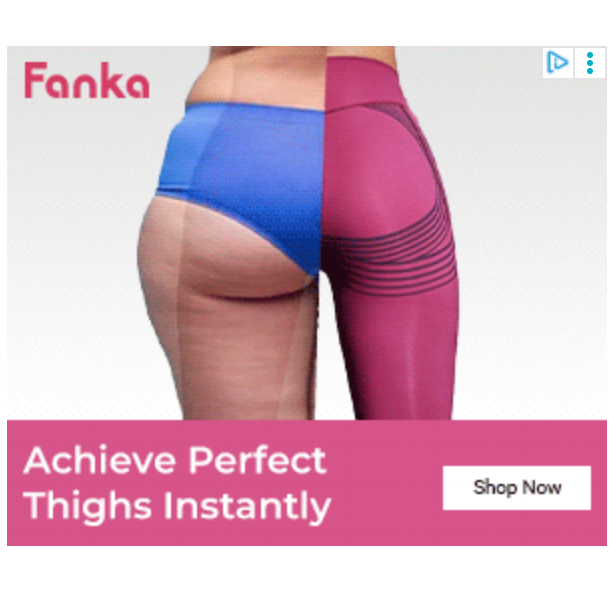
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