

Overcoming sleep problems



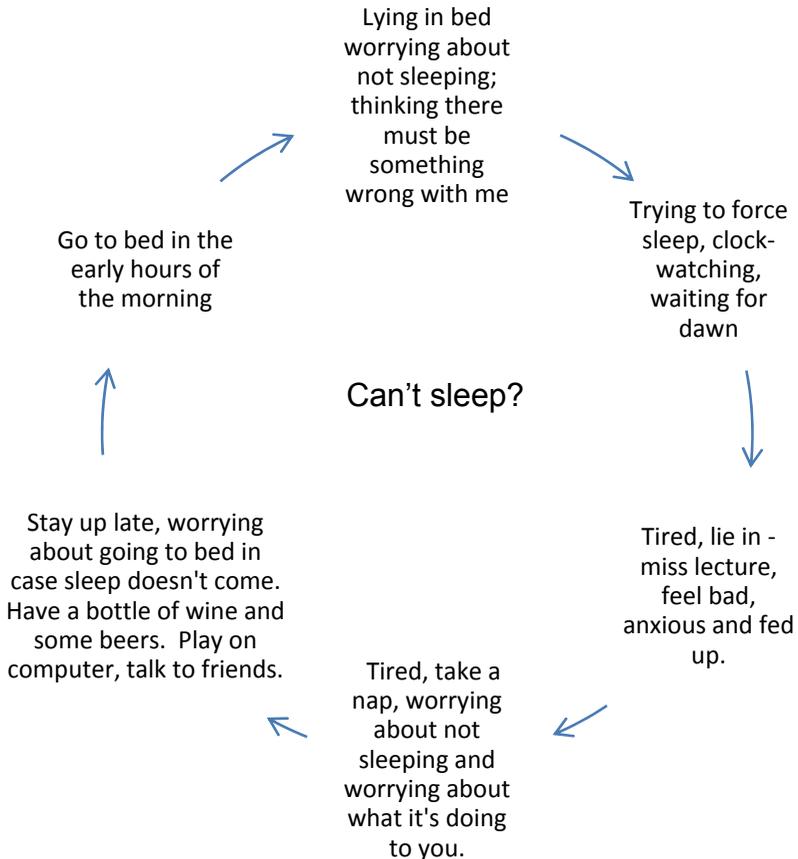
Student Counselling

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Overcoming Sleep Problems

Most of us at sometime in our lives will have had a sleepless night or two for one reason or another. It happens. Usually we can get back to our normal sleeping pattern without too much trouble. When sleeplessness occurs for a number of nights on the run it can make us feel miserable and irritable. A problem can start if we become worried about not sleeping, as this in turn can make it more difficult to sleep. And so we become caught in a vicious cycle, maybe something similar to the diagram below.



Does that diagram strike a chord with you? If it does, read on.

It is useful to have some facts about sleep itself so you can challenge any misunderstandings you may have about the topic. This leaflet will tell you how to get back to sleeping well: how to overcome sleeping problems by changing any bad habits you may have established. Poor sleep patterns will normally have taken some time to establish, so it will probably take several weeks to change these habits into better ones.

Facts about Sleep

We can describe sleep as that time in any 24-hour period when we are unconscious. There are two main types of sleep:

- **Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep**

One fifth of our sleep during the night is made up of this type of sleep. This phase occurs off and on throughout the night. During REM sleep our brain is very active and we dream but our muscles are relaxed.

- **Non- REM sleep**

During this type of sleep the body releases hormones into the blood stream and replenishes itself after the toil of the day. During this phase in sleep the body may be a bit more restless, moving about, but the brain is still.

There are four stages of non-REM sleep:

1. Pre-sleep, where the body temperature falls, heart beat decreases and the muscles relax.
2. Light sleep, during which time we can be woken easily and are not confused on waking.
3. Slow- wave sleep, when blood pressure falls. During this phase we could talk in our sleep or even sleep walk.
4. Deep slow- wave sleep, when it is hard to wake someone and they will on waking be very confused.

We alternate, approximately 5 times a night, between REM and non-REM sleep. We tend to dream towards morning. During the night we will normally wake for about 1 to 2 minutes every couple of hours but we don't usually remember those brief 'wakings' except if we are particularly anxious or we are disturbed by noise, e.g. a partner snoring!

How much sleep do we need?

Anyone suffering from periods of sleeplessness can get very preoccupied by this question and start ruminating about not getting the amount of sleep they think they must have. There are no set rules about how many hours of sleep we must have. Although most adults will be sleep for between seven or eight hours a night, what each of us needs varies from person to person. Age is also a factor in the amount of sleep we need: babies need about 17 hours a day; older children need about 9 - 10 hours; older adults need less sleep, and may have just one period of deep sleep during the night, after which they may wake easily. But we are all different, so there will be variations of the amount of sleep people can get by on in all age groups.

The occasional loss of a night's sleep won't hurt. For example, the night before an exam people can manage on as little as 2 or 3 hours sleep for a couple of nights before reverting to their normal sleeping pattern.

Disturbed Sleep

Sleep can be disturbed by a number of problems. Below are some examples;

- Arthritis or other physical painful conditions
- An under-active thyroid; ME
- Side effects of some medications, e.g. diuretics
- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Street drugs
- Alcohol and nicotine
- A need to urinate frequently during the night
- Sleeping during the day
- Environmental conditions, e.g. a noisy, too hot or too light bedroom
- Eating too late in the evening
- Going to bed hungry
- High intake of caffeine (more than 5 cups of coffee/tea per day)
- Sleeping in an unfamiliar environment
- Worry
- Rumination
- Jet lag
- Shift work
- A traumatic experience

Disturbed sleeping can be described as one or all of the following:

1. Difficulty getting off to sleep
2. Difficulty staying asleep e.g. waking several times in the night around 2am or 3am
3. Waking early
4. Managing to sleep but on waking not feeling refreshed

For a person to be described as an 'insomniac', their sleep difficulty has had to have occurred on 3 or more nights per week and for this to be the norm for them for at least 6 months.

Tackling the problem

Keep a sleep diary so that you can gather some baseline details about your sleep pattern before you begin. The diary produced in this booklet is from the self-help book, 'Overcoming Insomnia and Becoming a Good Sleeper' by Colin Espie. A sleep diary will allow you to record the quantity as well as the quality of your sleep. It will help you to see what you're doing that is hindering your sleep, pointing to what you need to change. Photocopy the diary sheet so you can keep a record of each night's sleep.

Your Sleep Diary

Week Beginning

Measuring the Pattern of your Sleep

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
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<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What time did you wake up this morning?2. What time did you rise from bed this morning?3. What time did you go to bed last night?4. What time did you put the light out?5. How long did it take you to fall asleep?6. How many times did you wake in the night?7. How long were you awake during the night?8. How long did you sleep altogether?9. How much alcohol did you have last night?10. How many sleeping pills did you take?							
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Measuring the Quality of Your Sleep

<p>1. How well rested do you feel this morning?</p> <p>0 1 2 3 4</p> <p>not at all moderately very</p>							
<p>2. Was your sleep of good quality?</p> <p>0 1 2 3 4</p> <p>not at all moderately very</p>							

If you have kept a diary of your sleep for a week you will now have a good overview of your weekly sleep pattern. Can you see what changes you need to make? Sometimes people find, after keeping a sleep diary, that their sleep is not as bad as they had thought; they had overestimated the scale of the problem

If, however, the diary has highlighted some of your sleep problems, here are some suggestions on how to beat the problem.

- If you suffer with pain because of medical problems make an appointment with your GP. Your GP may not have been aware of your sleep problem and will probably be able to help.
- If you're woken by the need to urinate in the night, a common problem for those who are pregnant or older, make changes in your drinking patterns by spreading your fluid intake evenly throughout the day and limiting the amount you take in early evening. Do not drink anything for two hours before going to bed, especially alcohol or coffee, which should not be consumed three hours before going to bed, as these will make you urinate more due to their diuretic qualities. Caffeine is also a stimulant - not something you want when you are trying to sleep.
- If you are taking diuretics, commonly known as 'water tablets', do not take them in the evening. Check with your GP what time of day is best to take them.

- Urinate before going to bed.
- Don't drink alcohol as a means to aid sleep. Not only is alcohol a diuretic but it contains sedative properties which send you off to sleep at first but as it wears off you will wake up early and feel worse
- Check your mattress. Is it saggy and lumpy? If so change it. This might present a difficulty if you are away from home in rented accommodation but speak to your landlord/ letting agents about the mattress if it's a problem. Most good landlords will want to help you and may not have realised that the mattress is past its best. If all else fails it might be worth investing in a new one yourself in order to get a good night's sleep.
- Check the environment in which you are sleeping. Is the temperature of the room too hot or too cold for you? Make any necessary changes. Leave a window open for fresh air if at all possible. Is the room too noisy, e.g. from traffic or your flatmates or neighbours? Ear plugs can cut down traffic noise. Ask neighbours or flatmates to keep noise levels down after a certain agreed time. Be assertive about this.
- Is the room dark enough? Do you need blackout curtains or blinds?
- If your partner keeps you awake with their snoring, discuss this with them during the day time. They might need to see their GP if this is a major problem.
- Establish a regular routine by:
 1. Deciding at what time you want to be in bed.

2. Sticking to a set time for going to bed and getting up, even at weekends, to reset your body clock. Any variation in the timing will make it harder to get back to a good sleep pattern. This may be a challenge for some students who want to have very different weekend sleeping routines. You will need to be patient and persistent to break disturbed sleep. Don't expect immediate results. It may take several weeks.
3. Not taking naps during the day.
4. Getting up at the allotted time every morning even if you feel tired and have had a disturbed night.
5. Not succumbing to the temptation to stay in bed and sleep late as you will only prolong the problem. Later when you have cracked the problem you will be able to vary your sleeping time.
6. Not eating a heavy meal late in the evening but also not going to bed hungry. A warm, milky drink and a biscuit can have soporific qualities.
7. Dealing with urgent matters and anything that needs organising for the following day early in the evening, not just before bed time.
8. Not using the computer or working up to your bed time as you need to train your mind to start the wind down to bed.

9. Organising a relaxing bedtime routine about 1 ½ hours before your bed time. If this includes taking a bath make sure that water is not too hot as it will be too stimulating. Listen to soothing music if this helps. Use a relaxation exercise or meditation. Get to know what works for you.

- Remember bed is for sleep and sex. Do not read, watch TV, play on your computer or speak on the phone in bed, common habits amongst some with sleeping problems. Carry out those activities in another room, otherwise bed becomes associated with anxiety and arousal. Not what you need. If you have a study/bedroom, is there a common shared area that you can use to carry out these activities?
- Ask friends and family not to call you after a certain time in the evening.
- Keep your bedroom tidy and free from study/work books, so the bedroom is an inviting place to retire to at the end of the day. If you have a study bedroom this can be more of a challenge but it is worth having a quick tidy up at the end of the day so the room does not look chaotic and uninviting. Put the books that you are studying neatly out of your line of sight when you're in bed.
- Have a morning routine so when the alarm goes you get up and know what you have to do, e.g. have a shower,

make a cup of tea, dress, have breakfast and think about the day ahead.

- Build exercise into your regular daily routine. This does not mean joining a gym or doing sport, if that's not your thing. A 30-minute walk each day is all that's needed. Avoid exercise late in the evening because even if it tires you out physically it will stimulate you mentally.

What if you do all of the above but you still can't get to sleep? What can you do?

- Don't lie in bed worrying or trying to force yourself to go to sleep. This will only increase your frustration and make you more anxious. Paradoxically you will increase sleep by practising trying not to fall asleep. Try saying to yourself, 'I'll stop trying to sleep and just focus on some relaxing feelings in my body.'
- Practice relaxation techniques. The Student Counselling Service offers Relaxation Workshops. We also have Relaxation CDs which you might find helpful. Look at our website to find out more details.
- Some people find counting games helpful as counting is monotonous and can cause sleepiness.
- If after 15 minutes of being in bed you are still awake get up and go into another room. Write down any negative thoughts you have. Do they seem valid? Make a note of any worries and tell yourself that you will deal with them

during the day time. Whilst you are up do something soporific and not stimulating until you begin to feel tired. For example you might try doing a jigsaw puzzle, the ironing, light reading. Do not put the television on or turn on the computer as the light from these is bright, very similar to a bright mid day light, so the brain gets the message that it's the middle of the day! When you feel tired, return to bed. You must repeat this exercise as many times during the night as you need to until you fall asleep. You must, however, still get up in the morning at the time you have set yourself. You may feel tired but it is important that you do get up and get on with your day. It will take some time to train your brain into falling asleep when you go to bed, so expect to repeat the above exercise for some while, maybe for a week or so. The worse you will feel is tired for a while, which is not the end of the world.....

- If you wake in the night, write down anything that is worrying you and tell yourself that you will deal with it in the day time. Night time is not the time to problem solve. Don't stay in bed awake and clock watching. Practice relaxation techniques. If you haven't fallen back to sleep after 15 minutes get up and follow the routine discussed in the previous point.

Medication – will sleeping tablets help?

Sleeping tablets may help in the short term but they can make you feel very drowsy and tired the following day. They can only be used for brief periods as they are addictive. Your GP will be able to discuss medication with you in greater detail.

Over-the-counter medication often contains an anti-histamine that can make you sleepy well into the following day.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) has been found to be a helpful approach for those struggling with sleep problems and, unlike sleeping tablets, the benefits are not short-term. If you would like to talk to a CBT therapist about your sleeping problems, look at our website www.plymouth.ac.uk/studentcounselling for further details of all the services we offer.

Further reading

Butler, G & Hope, T. (2007) *Manage your Mind; The Mental Health Fitness Guide*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press

Brosan, L. & Todd, G. (2009) *Overcoming Stress: A self-help guide using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques*. London: Constable & Robinson.

Espie, C. A. (2006) *Overcoming Insomnia and Sleep Problems: A self-help guide using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques*. London: Constable & Robinson.

Meares, K & Freeston, M. (2008) *Overcoming Worry: A self-help guide using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques*. London: Constable & Robinson.

Leahy, R. L. (2009) *Anxiety Free: Unravel your fears before they unravel you*. London: Hay House.

Other resources of help:

Mind leaflet: *How to cope with sleep problems*. Mind 2008

Web: www.mind.org.uk

Self-help, free, confidential website www.livinglifetothefull.com

www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthproblems/sleepproblems

www.plymouth.ac.uk/studentcounselling

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