

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Insomnia and Sleep difficulties

Insomnia is difficulty getting to sleep or staying asleep for long enough to feel refreshed the next morning. This happens despite having enough opportunity to sleep. Nearly everyone has problems sleeping at some point in their life, and it is thought that a third of people in the UK have bouts of insomnia. This handout aims to increase your understanding of what can go wrong with your sleeping patterns and offers ideas that can promote a better quality of sleep.

Different sorts of sleep

Each night our sleep goes in cycles, waking up and going back to sleep deeply several times over. Waking up during the night does not mean you are having a bad night's sleep! However not being able to go back to sleep might be a problem.

- Awake
- Stage 1 – Drowsiness
- Stage 2 – Sleep
- Stage 3 – Deep Sleep
- Stage 4 – Rapid Eye Movement (REM)

Surprisingly, Stages 2 and 3 repeat backwards before REM sleep is attained. So a normal sleep cycle has the following pattern: Awake, Stage 1,2,3,2,REM.

Types of sleep difficulty

- Getting to sleep – This is the most common difficulty, and can sometimes take hours.
- Staying asleep – This is the next most common difficulty, when we wake and are unable to go back to sleep.
- Waking up too early – and then being unable to go back to sleep.
- Poor sleep quality – This is when we sleep lightly, dream frequently, and feel restless.

Factors which contribute to sleep problems

- Surroundings – Our comfort and safety, temperature, noise, familiarity and level of light;
- Routine – partying, study patterns, eating late;
- Stimulants – coffee and other forms of caffeine, smoking, drugs, alcohol;
- Stress and feeling low – homesickness, exam stress, friendship issues, life events and changes, bereavement and separation;
- Medical issues – needing the toilet, breathing problems ie. snoring, aches and pains, medication which affects sleep.

Tackling sleep problems

- Surroundings – Could you make any positive changes to any of the following?
- Noise – too noisy, too quiet? Why not try earplugs?
- Temperature – too hot, too cold?
- Light – too light, too dark?
- Comfort of mattress – too hard, too soft?
- Cleanliness
- Breathing problems, sneezing?

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- Safety – new surroundings, sharing a room, different neighbourhood?
- Lack of consistency
- Take note of your sleep routines – when and how do you fall asleep?
- Try a pre-sleep routine – Prepare the mind and body. Try reading, soft music, a warm bath prior to going to sleep.
- Use your bed just for sleeping and intimate moments – your bed space can easily be taken over by mobile phones, laptops, TV and friends, when you live, study and sleep in one room.
- Diet, Medicine and other substances
- Try not to eat a heavy meal late in the evening as this will affect sleep negatively;
- Remember, carbohydrates make you drowsy and proteins make you more alert;
- Do not drink coffee, tea, cola or energy drinks in the hours prior to going to bed;
- Cigarettes and recreational drugs can seriously affect your sleeping pattern, so should be avoided prior to going to bed if you are experiencing problems with sleeping.
- Do not drink alcohol late into the evening as although it will make you feel drowsy, it affects the quality of your sleep;
- Try natural remedies to promote relaxation and a good night's sleep, such as Valerian herb, Lavender, Camomile, warm milk and honey.
- Relaxation
- Self regulate anxiety to maintain a balanced and clear mind to study, i.e. if you are wakeful or wake up worrying about what you have to do the next day, try writing down what needs to be done on a piece of paper before going to bed.
- Try a simple breathing exercise – breathe in deeply focusing on counting from 1 to 5, then breathe out counting from 5 to 1. The more you practice the more effective this will be. □ Try a relaxation CD, there is one available at the Counselling service reception
- Low Mood - feeling low at times is natural and normal – if you feel stuck and your sleep is seriously affected you may benefit from talking to someone, such as a close friend, peer mentor, counsellor, tutor or your GP. Our mood, our thoughts and our sleep can all affect each other; disturbed sleep usually feeds low feelings, irritation and obviously tiredness.

Simple guidelines to improve sleep

- Do go to bed and get up at a regular time where possible;
- Do have a bedtime routine that you enjoy and wind down before going to bed;
- Do get up if you are worrying, or are not asleep after 30 minutes, and do something relaxing;
- Do something physical, such as a workout, walking, running, dancing during the day, but not too late in the evening;
- Do ensure that your bed and bedroom are safe and comfortable in terms of noise, light, temperature, and quality of mattress;
- Do check whether any medication you take might affect your sleep;
- Do remember that late eating, smoking, drinking of alcohol and/or coffee affect sleep in differing ways for different people;
- Do take notice of your thoughts and feelings with a self-accepting rather than rejecting attitude.
- Don't worry about not getting enough sleep. □ Don't lie in bed worrying about life's problems.
- Don't stay in bed longer to catch up on lost sleep.
- Don't go to bed until you feel sleepy.
- Don't take naps during the day if that then makes you stay up late.

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- Don't drink, smoke or eat close to bedtime on a regular basis.
- Don't become isolated for long periods with negative thoughts and feelings: talk to someone.

Further Information:

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Insomnia/Pages/Introduction.aspx

www.reading.ac.uk/medicalpractice

Books and audio

The Promise of Sleep by William C. Dement

The Good Sleep Guide by Sammy Margo

Deep Sleep (Audio) - Glenn Harold