

Sleep Problems

Sleep problems are common and affect large numbers of people. There is a wide normal healthy sleep range. Some people sleep only 4 to 6 hours a day whereas others can sleep for as many as 10 or 12 hours a day. Both extremes are quite normal. The amount of sleep each individual needs also varies throughout life. Babies and young children need a lot more sleep than older adults. By the time they reach their 60s or 70s, many people find that the amount of sleep they need has dropped by up to several hours a night.

Insomnia is an inability to sleep. Many people have problems sleeping from time to time. Insomnia often starts after an upsetting life event or can be caused by a person's lifestyle. A number of different psychological problems can also upset sleep. They include anxiety, depression, anger, guilt, shame and stress at work or in relationships. For example, a person who experiences depression may find that it takes them up to several hours to get off to sleep. They then may wake up several hours earlier than normal feeling unrested or on edge. A major cause of insomnia is worry about the imagined harmful effects of not sleeping. If this is a problem for you, talk to your guide or doctor – hopefully you will find that your fears are unjustified.

A Five Areas assessment of your sleep problem:

Area 1 > Life situations, practical problems, relationships – the 'Outside World' /

Is your bed comfortable? What about the temperature of the room where you sleep? If the room is either very cold or very hot this might make sleeping difficult. Is the room very noisy? Is there too much light to sleep? If bright lights such as streetlights come through your curtains, this can also prevent sleep. If you can, reserve your bedroom for sleep or other bedroom activities – don't fill it with things that may tempt you to stay awake such as televisions or computers.

Area 2 > Altered thinking

Anxious thoughts are a common cause of sleeplessness. Anxious thoughts may be about worries in general, or they can also focus on worry about not sleeping. You may worry that it will not be possible to sleep at all, or that sleeplessness will reduce your ability to be effective at work. These unrealistic fears prevent you getting off to sleep. Other common fears include worries that your brain or body will be harmed by lack of sleep. This is rarely, if ever, the case. In sleep, there is a reduction in tension levels leading your body and brain to begin to relax and drop off to sleep. In contrast, in anxiety the brain becomes overly alert. You end up mulling things over again and again. This is the exact opposite of what is needed to get off to sleep. Worrying thoughts are therefore both a cause and effect of poor sleep. If your worrying thoughts persist, try writing them down and tell yourself that you will tackle them in the morning and that you need sleep now to give you the energy to face your worries.

Area 3 > Altered physical problems

Symptoms such as pain, itching or other physical symptoms can cause sleeplessness. Tackling these physical symptoms will help sleep problems.

Area 4 > Altered emotions / feelings

A range of different emotions can be linked to sleeplessness. Anxiety is a common cause of sleeplessness. It is often associated with a triggering of the body's fight or flight adrenaline



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response. This can cause the person to feel fidgety or restless. You may notice physical symptoms such as an increased heart rate, breathing rate, a churning stomach or tension throughout the body. The anxiety therefore acts to keep you alert. This is the opposite of what you want when you are trying to fall off to sleep. Sometimes we may become anxious about sleeping (for example if we have nightmares or wake feeling panicky). Depression is a common cause of sleeplessness. For example, a person who is feeling depressed may find that it takes them up to several hours to get off to sleep. They may wake up several hours earlier than normal feeling unrested or on edge. Treatment of depression can often be helpful in improving sleep. Other emotions such as shame, guilt and anger can also be linked in with sleeplessness.

Area 5 > Altered behaviour: Unhelpful behaviours

Preparing for sleep > The time leading up to sleep is very important. Build in a 'wind-down' time in the evening when you are less active. Physical over-activity such as exercising, or eating too much just before bed can keep you awake. Sometimes people read or watch television while lying in bed. This may help them wind down, but for many people it can make them become more alert and add to sleep problems.

What about caffeine? > Caffeine is a chemical found in coffee, tea, cola drinks, hot chocolate and some herbal drinks. It causes increased alertness. If taken at high levels for several weeks it can cause physical and psychological addiction. Drinking as few as five strong cups of coffee a day on a regular basis is physically addictive. It also reduces sleep quality. There is a real risk that a vicious circle can occur where tiredness causes the person to drink more coffee to keep alert. Then the coffee itself affects the person's sleep and worsens the original tiredness. It is important to know that caffeine stays in our bodies for a few hours before it is broken down or leaves in our urine. This means that we should avoid drinking caffeine drinks in the few hours leading up to going to bed.

What about alcohol? > Sometimes people drink alcohol to reduce feelings of tension and help get off to sleep. One unit of alcohol is about half a pint of beer, one short, or one glass of wine. If you drink more than the recommended levels of alcohol (22 units a week for women and 28 units for men), this can cause problems such as anxiety, depression and sleeplessness. Finally, drinking too much will cause you to go to the toilet more than usual at night. This will keep you awake.

What about your sleep pattern? > If you are not sleeping well it can be tempting to go to bed either very much earlier or very much later than normal. Napping is another habit that can end up backfiring by upsetting the natural sleep-wake cycle. Try to get up before 9am unless you are on shift work that makes this impractical.

Key Point:

If you cannot sleep, get up out of bed if you are not sleeping after 20 minutes. Go downstairs and do something else until you are 'sleepy tired' again. Then return to bed. Do this again and again until you go to sleep. When downstairs don't do things that will make you more active e.g. watch scary films.

This idea of getting up if you aren't sleeping is such an important principle that it is sometimes called "The Golden Rule".

