

SLEEPING WELL:

A. IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT SLEEP

The way we *think* about sleep (and not sleeping) has a big impact on us. In particular, it affects our mood and can also be unhelpful for our sleep.

If you are distressed emotionally about your difficulty sleeping, then you may need to alter some of your thoughts about the need for sleep and how bad it is not to sleep. This information will help you to worry less about sleep the better you sleep. In fact, the less you try frantically to sleep, the better you sleep.

- Everyone has periods in their life when they don't sleep well (some people worry about that and focus on it more than others).
- Need for sleep varies from person to person. That is, despite popular reports, not everyone needs 8 hours of sleep a night, some need more and some need less. Also, our needs for sleep change as we get older.
- You are probably sleeping more than you think. Study after study (in sleep labs) has shown that people who experience sleep disturbance sleep more than they realise. It is often broken and light sleep but their brain does go into sleep-activity. We just don't realise it for a few reasons: (a) how can you 'know' you are asleep?; (b) there is no clear waking moment because the mind is 'chattering' as we wake up.
- A person CAN function on just a few hours a night (or even no sleep). It is not pleasant but it is not too bad for you medically or physically to miss out on sleep.
- The body will right itself over time. The human body will restore sleep functioning through its own self-regulation when it is ready – your job it to do all the right sleep hygiene things and not get into any bad habits. Those things won't guarantee good sleep, but they enable it to happen as quickly as possible.
- Sleep is not one long, solid period of unconsciousness. We cycle through lighter to deeper (stages 1-4) and dreaming (REM) sleep throughout the night in approximately 90 minute cycles. As such, brief awakenings during the night are *normal*.
- People who have difficulties staying asleep during the night, may experience anxiety upon a normal nocturnal awakening as a result of thoughts about the awakening (e.g. “oh no I’m awake again, I’m never going to get a good night’s sleep”). This activates our anxiety system which essentially tells our body we need to be alert and awake.
- **Your brain** controls when and how your sleep more than **you** do. That means, give your brain the best opportunity to be ready for sleep. Read the suggestions over the page on 'sleep hygiene' to know what to do.
- It takes more than one or two nights for the body to restore a normal sleep-wake cycle; so be patient and have modest expectations in the short-term.

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B. SLEEP HYGIENE

The essence of 'sleep hygiene' is creating the right environment to sleep in and creating habits and patterns so that your body and brain learn to expect to sleep when in bed. If you can do the following strictly for three weeks – it will be effective. After that, you don't need to be so strict. Give this a go for 14 to 21 days – it is a gift to yourself.

Before bed:

- Get some daily exposure to outdoor light or bright indoor light.
- Get regular exercise each day, preferably in the morning. There is good evidence that regular exercise improves restful sleep.
- Use a physical relaxation exercise just before going to sleep. Such as muscle relaxation, imagery, massage, warm bath etc.
- Use some de-stressing strategies about an hour before bed. For instance, write a to-do list for tomorrow (so your mind does not have to remember) or write out the things that you are worrying about (so your mind does not have to process that in the night).
- Tell your mind it's okay to let go of ALL worries for the next 10 hours.
- Put some helpful thoughts in your head – especially accepting that sleep is never perfect and it will come when it is ready. People who sleep well, don't worry about sleep, they accept that sleep is different every night and that is okay.

In Bed:

- Keep the temperature in your bedroom comfortable (not too warm; not too cold)
- Keep the bedroom dark enough and quiet enough to facilitate sleep.
- Go to bed at the same time and get up at the same time every day (this one's important!).
- Only use your bed for sleep and sex. If you work in bed, your brain will associate bed with work and be wakeful there. If you watch movies or play e-games in bed, then your brain will associate bed with being entertained and be wakeful there.
- If you are awake in the night for long periods and getting agitated, then get up and do something boring until you feel tired again. Again, the idea is to avoid associating bed with being agitated (about not sleeping).
- Turn your clock away so you can't see it.

DON'T:

- ...nap or sleep during the day, or sleep-in late in the morning (even on the weekend and even after a terrible night's sleep) as it will make it harder to sleep the next night!
- ...have any electronic devices in the bedroom that might alert in the night (e.g a phone)
- ...engage in stimulating activity in bed or just before bed, such as exercise, competitive game, using a computer, watching exciting TV, or having a difficult discussion.
- ...have caffeine in the evening (coffee, some teas, chocolate, soft drinks etc).
- ...use alcohol to help you sleep or take another person's sleeping pills
- ...go to bed too hungry or too full
- ...command yourself to go to sleep, this only makes your mind and body more alert.