

Skills to master for a better night's sleep

Being under stress of any kind can disturb the sleep-wake cycle, which in turn, can have serious consequences for your sense of wellbeing. Sleep disturbance can take one of several different forms:

- Sleeping less.
- Sleeping more or oversleeping.
- Waking early in the morning.
- Trouble getting off to sleep at night.
- Waking up frequently during the night.

Besides stress, sleep problems can also be caused by:

- Physical tension.
- Mental tension, spending time thinking and worrying in bed.
- Bed is not associated with sleep: you are more used to *not sleeping* rather than *sleeping* in bed.
- Disturbances to the body clock: shift work, rotating shifts, jet lag, irregular hours.
- Environmental disturbances: temperature, air noise, day light, mattress, bedding.
- Life events: divorce, bereavement, moving house, new child etc.
- Anxiety. Those with insomnia are more likely to be worriers and have more difficulty getting off to sleep.
- Depression: especially associated with middle insomnia and early morning waking.
- Poor sleep habits.

Poor sleep leads to:

- Daytime fatigue.
- Poor concentration.
- Irritability.
- Musculo-skeletal aches and pains.
- Reduced immune function.
- Prolonged depression.

Wanting to improve quality of sleep is one of the most common desires of people suffering from mood and anxiety disorders.

12 tips for better sleep

Disturbed or poor quality sleep is a common problem among adults but even more so in people suffering from anxiety or depression.

These skills take considerable effort to master, and the effects are not immediate. However, within a few weeks of solid and consistent application many people report significant improvements in the quality *and* duration of their sleep. The biggest barrier to the effectiveness of these tips for better sleep is inconsistent effort and application. Try selecting two or three tips to practice first before moving on to mastering the next ones.

1. Lie down to go to sleep ONLY when you are feeling very sleepy

If you stay up until you are extremely sleepy, you give yourself the best chance of falling asleep quickly, staying asleep and sleeping more deeply. For example, don't try to go to sleep early with the idea that you had such a bad night the night before you might catch up on sleep tonight. If you are not really, really, really tired there is little chance you will sleep.

Following this recommendation may mean that you go to bed a lot later than usual, this is OK. It may mean that you don't go to bed until 3am. Again, it's OK. It's better to sleep for a solid 4 hours than a broken 4 hours.

2. Do not use your bed for anything except sleeping

Do not read, watch TV, listen to the radio, or eat in bed. People who suffer from insomnia have spent many, many hours awake in bed. To them the bed has become associated with *no sleep* rather than *sleep*. Even the thought of going to bed for an insomniac will create negative thoughts and tension. By following this rule you are aiming to refocus your time in bed ONLY around sleep and nothing else.

3. During the 30 minutes you are trying to go to sleep practice some form of mental relaxation or distraction

Worrying thoughts are usually strong and difficult to ignore. Practice some form of mental activity that requires significant concentration such as counting backward from 100 by three or seven, choosing a letter of the alphabet and thinking of as many words as you can that begin with that letter. If your mind wanders on to worrying thoughts, bring it back to the task at hand. This 30-minute period is also a good opportunity to use your PMR relaxation tape.

4. Get up at about the same time every morning, seven days a week, regardless of how long you have slept

You are trying to retrain your body to have sound, unbroken sleep during reasonable hours. If you get up only 1 or 2 hours after having fallen asleep, you increase your

chances of falling asleep at a reasonable time the next evening. This might sound difficult, and it is. However, imagine that by following the rules above you fall asleep at 3.00 am and sleep through till 9.00 am. Most people need 16 hours from the end of one major sleep session before they are ready for another. At this rate, you won't be ready to sleep again till 1.00 am. However, our aim is to reprogram your sleep to fall within the *usual* hours when most other people are asleep. Therefore, if you get up between 6.00 am and 7.00 am irrespective of the time you fell asleep you will be more likely to fall asleep the next night at a time closer to 11.00 pm. This reprogramming doesn't happen quickly, it may take a number of weeks of consistent effort before noticeable gains occur.

5. Do NOT nap during the day or early in the evening

The plan is to increase your tiredness in order to increase the likelihood of you sleeping at night. Naps during the day take the edge off your tiredness and reduce the chances of you sleeping at night. As just mentioned, most people need 16 hours from the end of one major sleep session before they are ready for another. If you nap, even when exhausted, you reduce the likelihood of falling asleep at a reasonable time. For example, a nap at 4.00 pm means that you are very unlikely to fall asleep properly at any reasonable time.

People without insomnia can get away with napping, people with insomnia simply cannot.

6. Avoid large meals, tea, coffee, cola drinks, cigarettes and strenuous physical and mental activities in the evening

These all stimulate the body and therefore make it harder to go to sleep at night.

7. Develop a routine in the 30 minutes prior to bed

Children sleep better when they have a night-time routine prior to sleep. In this retraining stage you may benefit from developing a similar routine that prompts the body to expect sleep 30 minutes from now. It doesn't really matter what the routine is: it could be a gentle shower, brush teeth, warm milk and 15 minutes of reading in the lounge room.

Whatever the routine, you are cueing your body to wind down and expect sleep soon.

8. No sleeping medications produce normal sleep

Whilst sleeping tablets have a useful role to play in acute and crisis situations, they are not effective answers to long-term insomnia. Consult with your doctor on this matter.

Although sleeplessness can make you feel tired, exhausted and irritable, it is important to understand that it is not harmful. You cannot die from lack of sleep, nor will lack of sleep cause any long-term mental or physical damage. The body has an inbuilt mechanism that will ensure that you do sleep if the need becomes excessively great. Individuals differ in how much sleep they need. A popular idea is that everyone must have 8 hours sleep, and that if you are sleeping less than this you are suffering "sleep loss". This is not correct.

People need different amounts of sleep according to their age and activity levels. As people get older they require less sleep.

9. Change the way you think about NOT sleeping

Ask yourself *What is the worse thing that could happen if I don't sleep at all tonight?* Say to yourself *I will be very tired tomorrow. This will be unpleasant but I won't die from it. In fact, I will probably make it through the day, just as I have always made it through the day in the past. Worrying about it will only make it worse. I will just lie here and rest now, and as long as it is peaceful rest, that will be helpful.*

Learning to reprogram your sleep habits takes time. Most of the patients we have worked with have had to adopt these new habits for 5 to 6 weeks before they observe significant improvements in the quality of their sleep. You might find it useful to take the page with the ten sleep tips and place it on your refrigerator, so that you see it daily and remind yourself of what to do.

10. Natural Light

It is important to obtain at least ten minutes of natural light per day (preferably in the early morning or late afternoon in summer).

11. If you are unable to sleep do NOT stay in bed

If you do not fall asleep within about 30 minutes after turning out the light, get up out of bed, go to another room, and do something that is boring such as reading a magazine, watching a bad movie on TV or doing the ironing. This is a follow on from the rule above and our desire to break the association in your mind between the bed and *no sleep*.

Further, all bodies function on cycles or waves of energy. That is, the body goes through cycles of high to low energy that seems to run over about 90 minutes. If you have not fallen asleep at the time the body is on its low energy phase of the 90 minute cycle you will not do so probably for another 80 - 90 minutes. If you haven't caught this *tiredness wave* there's absolutely no point in being in the bed tossing, turning, worrying and getting frustrated.

12. If you return to bed and are still unable to sleep after a further 30 minutes, then repeat rule 2

Likewise, if you wake up during the night and cannot go back to sleep, follow rule 3 again.

Stay up until you feel sleepy enough to return to bed.