

We're here to help.

# Improving Your Sleep

Everyone has trouble sleeping at some time. Often thoughts about events in your life can stop you relaxing into a sound sleep, prevent you from falling asleep readily, or make you wake through the night or too early. Occasionally there may seem no particular cause, and some people seem more prone to sleep disturbances than others.

At other times, specific situations can cause changes in sleep patterns. For example, stress can cause disturbing dreams or make you wake through the night. Often people who have Depression find that they wake very early and are unable to return to sleep, or spend too much time sleeping. Sometimes people find that changes such as grief, having an illness, being a new parent or doing shift work, disturbs their normal sleep pattern so much that it is difficult to re-establish a normal and healthy routine of sleep afterwards.

If you are sleeping poorly your energy, concentration and alertness will suffer and so you may have trouble concentrating in class and retaining information. It is also important to take care when driving or dealing with machinery or in any other situations which have the potential for danger if you are inattentive. Similarly, it may be best to defer making big decisions or acting on your feelings as lack of sleep can affect your mood and your judgement. For example, decisions such as changing or leaving a course are best made when you feel calm and clear-thinking.

## UNDERSTANDING SLEEP

Most deep sleep happens in the first 5 hours. If you sleep for 5 hours or 8 hours, you will have roughly the same amount of deep sleep. There is no ideal time length of total sleep – people need varying amounts and the amount usually decreases with age.

The human 'body clock' is a 24 hour cycle of hormones (circadian rhythm) that gives us energy through the day and allows us to wind down and sleep at night. When we are young the body clock works strongly, but tends to be more easily interrupted by environmental or physical causes as we age. The most basic advice for improving sleep centres around re-establishing a routine to strengthen the 'body clock' cycle. This means that we need to be active during the day and encourage rest at night.

Although there is no magic wand to cure sleep disturbance, there are a number of things you can do to increase your ability to gain an adequate amount of good quality sleep.

## PRACTICAL WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR SLEEP

The following tips may help you improve the quality and amount of sleep you have:

### Your routine and habits

- Get up at the same time each morning, regardless of whether you are still sleepy at that time. If you have trouble falling asleep at night, sleeping in late of a morning will only shift your sleep-wake cycle around the clock and entrench your habit further. The only way to change such a sleep time routine is to start with waking at the required time.
- When you wake, get up, be active, preferably go outside into the sunlight and do some physical activity, such as walking.
- Don't nap during the day as it will lessen your tiredness and probably make you take longer to fall properly asleep at night.
- Keep to a routine of an evening – this signals to your body and mind to prepare to sleep. Go to bed at a similar time each night and do something easy and relaxing for half an hour or so before bed.
- If you find you have not fallen asleep within around 20 minutes of going to bed, it is best to get up again and do something else that is calming and relaxing. If you toss and turn you can get into a habit of being restless in bed. Return to bed when you feel sleepy.

### Your body

- Be active during the day, but not close to bedtime. Get plenty of exercise, such as a 30 to 60 minute walk.
- Minimise use of caffeine, cigarettes, chocolate, stimulants and other medications, particularly in the evening. Alcohol can also cause sleep disturbance.
- Avoid heavy meals before bed. If you need a snack, a drink of milk may be helpful.
- It is best not to go to bed too early. Go to bed when you are tired and ready to sleep.
- Keep lights low toward bedtime, as bright lights (including computer screens) can make it harder for your brain to produce melatonin, the natural sedative which helps us sleep.
- Many people find relaxation or meditation helpful. A simple relaxation technique is to lie or sit somewhere comfortable and quiet and focus on your breathing. Slow your breathing down as you think about it. Breathe in to the count of 5, hold your breath for 5 and then breathe out fully. Make sure you are breathing deeply enough for your stomach to rise and fall slightly as you breathe. You can also add a progressive muscle relaxation technique to this by gradually tensing and then relaxing your muscle groups one by one, starting with your feet and working your way up your body to your face. Tense the muscles and hold them for a few moments then relax them, and keep checking that your breathing is slow and relaxed. Take care not to hurt any injured areas. Let worries and

thoughts float out of your mind, and keep your attention on what you are doing. This technique should take 10 to 15 minutes. If you practice this, you will find it becomes easier and you can return to that relaxed state quite quickly, perhaps with just a few relaxing breaths.

## Your mind

- Set aside 'worry time' if you need it – but not at sleep time. You might find it helpful to write your thoughts in a diary or talk them over with someone. A Worry Time strategy is to set aside 20 minutes each day where you allow yourself to think about the day's events and what faces you tomorrow. You can write down what you are worried about, and what you might do to help resolve the problem. At the end of the time, tell yourself the Worry Time is up and it is now time to rest and that you will have another chance to worry tomorrow. Record any outstanding issues for tomorrow's Worry Time.
- If you have a busy mind, write down things to do the next day so you know they are safely recorded and you can relax and sleep.
- Focus your mind on a relaxing word such as 'calm' or 'relax' or 'easy', or imagine a pleasant scene in your mind while you breathe in a relaxed way. What you focus on grows, so focus on how you want to feel and don't think about 'not sleeping'.
- Some people find it helpful to concentrate their thoughts upon something simple but boring, such as counting backwards from 500. It's important to make sure your breathing is slow and your body relaxed while you do this.

- If you wake through the night and feel unsettled after a bad dream, doing something a little different can help you switch back into a more relaxed mode. For example, turning your pillow over to the cool side can be refreshing, or get up for a short time until you feel calm and safe again. Thinking of a positive ending to the dream's story can help, especially with recurring dreams.
- Try to focus on getting some rest and relaxing rather than 'trying to get to sleep'. It can be frustrating to find sleep elusive and that tends to make you more stressed and less likely to sleep.
- Work on accepting those nights when you cannot sleep well. You will still be able to function the next day. The less you fight, resist or fear sleeplessness, the more easily sleep will come to you.

## Your environment

- Quiet music or some pleasant reading may help. Although some people find reading helpful, others find that their body rests too much while they read and then they feel restless when it's time to sleep.
- Don't take work, study, arguments or anything stressful to bed.
- Make sure your bedroom is an uncluttered, relaxing and soothing place that puts you in a restful mood. It should remind you of relaxation, calm and sleep, so keep it separate from other activities such as study and television. It should be not too warm or too cold, and needs to be quiet and dark or only dimly lit. You'll sleep best with some fresh air and a comfortable bed and pillow.

- If you have a partner who disturbs your sleep through snoring or movement, you may need to negotiate some changed sleeping arrangements.
- Remove the clock from your room, or face it away so you can't watch the time ticking by.
- If you are feeling stressed or upset or there are issues on your mind, work on these through the day by seeking help or taking action to improve things.
- There are many websites devoted to improving sleep and other issues such as stress management, depression and health.

## REFERENCES

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

*The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*,  
Edmund J Bourne, 2000, New Harbinger  
Publications Inc.

## NEED MORE HELP?

- Peruse/borrow books from the Support and Equity counselling resource library.
- Check out other Support and Equity fact sheets about issues impacting on your sleep, such as Stress Management or Time Management. Hard copies of fact sheets are available from your local Support and Equity office or they can be downloaded from the web.
- Seek counselling through Support and Equity to discuss your concerns, address issues, learn about relaxation techniques, or help you to identify and change negative patterns.
- If sleep disturbance is severe and/or prolonged, consult your general medical practitioner. In some cases, medication may assist with persistent sleep problems to help re-establish a normal sleep pattern. Alternatively, there are many herbal preparations which are readily available.