

## **Self-help for sleep problems**

### **How much sleep is enough?**

The amount of we need varies from one person to another and varies throughout our lives, but it may be as little as 4 hours a night or as much 10 hours or more. As children grow older they need less sleep and by the time we get into our thirties we may need less than 8 hours. Many people in their seventies need less than 6 hours a night. Also as we get older our sleep tends to be lighter and we may wake more often, so it often feels more restless, but it should still be refreshing.

There are 3 components to improving sleep quality: 1. make sure you are getting the basics right with good sleep hygiene; 2. acceptance; 3. mindfulness exercises. Restricting time in bed can also be helpful.

### **Sleep Hygiene**

1. Try to reinforce your natural rhythm of being alert during the day and sleepy at night. Do not go to bed until you feel sleepy. Rise at the same time every morning.
2. Provide a proper sleep environment appropriate to your needs - dark and quiet, not too hot, not too cold, not too humid.
3. Set the mood for sleep by establishing a regular bedtime routine. Have some quiet, relaxed time before bed, such as reading a book, taking a warm bath or having some decaffeinated herbal tea and watching television.
4. You can improve your sleep by ensuring that you have a consistent sleep schedule. Avoid staying up late on weekends and sleeping in, then trying to go to bed at your regular time on Sunday night.
5. Get up at close to the same time every day, even if you haven't slept very well.
5. Reserve the bedroom primarily for sleep. Do not use it for eating, working or watching television.
6. Avoid anything that could interfere with sleep close to bedtime such as caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes and some medicines (asthma reliever inhaler or migraine treatment). Alcohol can help people to feel sleepy and get off to sleep but can affect the quality of sleep. Avoid strenuous exercise later in the evening

7. If your mind is pre-occupied by worries, try to take time to solve these before going to bed. If you cannot, try and leave them until the next day. Use relaxation techniques if you have learnt any.

8. If your mind is active at nights thinking about work, relationship or other things then consider getting out of bed and sit down with a pen and paper to write down some of the problems you have been thinking about and write down everything you can think of that may help you to solve the problem. Choose the best solution and write down the steps needed to take action. When you have finished say to yourself: "that's it for now. There is nothing more I can do. I am not going to think about this anymore. I am now going to get some sleep."

9. If you're not tired enough to go back to sleep, consider getting out of bed, going somewhere else to spend a little time reading or listening to music until you feel sleepy enough to go back to bed.

10. If you feel very tired during the day and need a catnap, then give yourself 20 or 30 minutes at the most to rest, set an alarm and get up when it goes off. You may find this difficult for the first few times but most people find it refreshing as long as you don't go into deep sleep.

### **Acceptance and trying not to worry about sleep**

For most people with sleep difficult, anxiety is a big problem in triggering and maintaining sleeplessness. When you worry about not getting good sleep or feeling tired and not coping the next day, you put a lot of effort into getting sleep and feel more anxious at night. This makes you more alert and less likely to fall asleep.

You may be getting enough sleep, even if it is less than you would like.

Regular mindfulness practice helps you to notice your worries objectively and without judgment, and let them go.

Welcome your fears. No one wants worrying or strong emotional thoughts, but when you battle to rid or change them, you actually fuel them further and this wakes you up more. Welcoming unwelcome thoughts and emotions may mean describing what is happening in your mind and body such as 'I am having the thought that... if I don't sleep I won't be able to cope tomorrow' or 'I can feel anxiety in my stomach right now'. Paradoxically, when you are open to experiencing them, the power of these thoughts lessens, allowing you to get to sleep naturally.

There is more on this in the Mindfulness exercises section below.

### **Mindfulness exercises**

The simplest mindfulness exercise is a breathing exercise such as 4/7/8 breathing. You can practice this during the day and use it when lying in bed. Lying or sitting quietly, focusing on your tummy so that you breathe from your deep diaphragm rather than your chest, take in a breath over 4 seconds (counting in your head). Then hold your breath for 7 seconds. Then breathe out slowly for 8 seconds before repeating and breathing in for 4 seconds. Repeat for 4-6 times until you are feeling relaxed, tired, or no longer concerned about your sleep.

Another exercise is using the touch of your duvet on your toes or the gentle movement of your chest as you breathe to ground yourself in the present moment and as a place to return your attention when your mind wants to wander off. You can't push worrisome thoughts out of your mind, but you can choose how much you let them affect you.

If you use a smartphone there are a relaxation and mindfulness apps that you could download, some of which are free, including:

### **Restricting time in bed**

The strategy aims to reduce the number of hours in bed to improve sleep. First work out how many hours you spend in bed and how many hours you think you are asleep for. You can use a sleep diary or your smartphone to work this out.

Then restrict the time in bed to the average sleep time plus an additional 30 minutes but with a minimum of 5-6 hours. So if you spend 6 hours asleep, then try to give yourself 6 ½ hours total in bed. Continue this for 2 weeks before making any adjustments.

There is good evidence from research that this can substantially improve sleep quality.

### **What about sleeping tablets?**

Nytol is a range of products to promote sleepiness. Some people find the herbal treatment valerian can be helpful.

Sleeping tablets such as temazepam and zopiclone often work well in the short term. These may work by helping people to feel less anxious about not sleeping. Unfortunately they interfere with the quality of sleep and can alter sleep patterns. Research evidence shows that the use of this type of medication for 90 days or longer (not necessarily continuously) is associated with an increased risk of memory and task processing problems.