

INSOMNIA what to do when you can't sleep

This booklet was produced by the Clinical Psychology Service of Northampton Healthcare [NHS] Trust. It forms part of a series of booklets that are designed to provide people with information that will reassure, advise and encourage them

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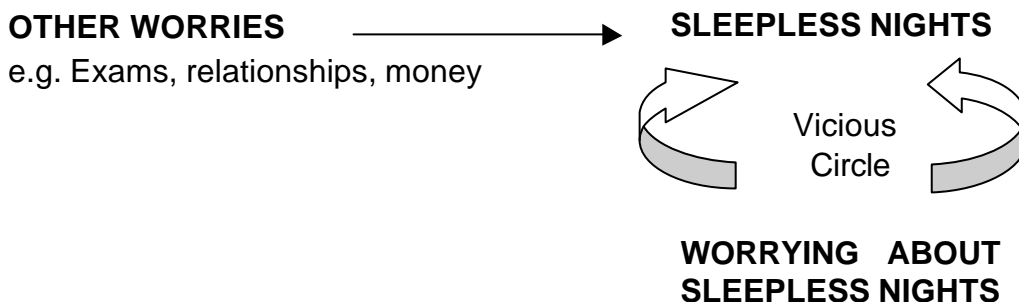
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INSOMNIA: What to do When you Can't Sleep

Insomnia refers to problems of *getting* to sleep or problems of *staying* asleep.

We all sleep, but many people wish they could sleep better. Most of us have experienced difficulties in sleeping at some time in our lives. Insomnia is a very common problem and can be distressing. Around 15% of all patients attending their family doctor complain of it.

Sleep is considered by most people to be essential to healthy functioning so difficulty sleeping can be a source of considerable worry. Often insomnia can start from a few sleepless nights caused by worries unconnected with sleep itself. However, for many people these worries that initially made sleep difficult can be overridden by ***anxiety about the insomnia itself***. Often these new worries centre around the effects the insomnia might be having on their health or on their performance the next day at work, school or at home.



Existing in this vicious cycle can be a miserable and exhausting experience. Your days may have become preoccupied with fears about not sleeping the next night. You might also be feeling isolated since at the times at which you are at your lowest – lying awake at night – everyone else appears to be asleep and thus unable to provide company and support. At these times it may be helpful to remember how common insomnia is. When you are struggling to get to sleep and feel most alone maybe remember that many other people are also struggling to get to sleep, probably someone in your street.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT INSOMNIA:

There are three main psychological approaches to dealing with insomnia:

1. Reducing worry about sleep problems

2. Providing the best possible conditions for sleep to occur
3. Reducing worry about events other than sleep problems [*Please note – this approach is not dealt with in this booklet*]

1. Reducing Worry About Sleep Problems:

If you are worried about your sleep for any reason, getting to know more about it is a good first step towards easing some of that concern and breaking the vicious cycle. Anxiety causing loss of sleep, and worrying about loss of sleep causing more loss of sleep.

How much sleep is “normal” and how much are you getting ?

Sleep is a bit like appetite. Some people need lots of food, others never seem to eat much. ***There is no “norm” where sleep is concerned.*** It depends on the individual. Many people feel that they have to have a “good 8 hours” and that anything short of this has to be made up. Other people are able to function on 4/5 hours a night. Your view of how much sleep you have had and how much sleep you need is personal/subjective. Only you know whether your need for sleep feels satisfied or not. Some people are more affected by the feeling of bad sleep than others.

A point which you may find reassuring is that while the personal, subjective estimate of how many hours and minutes you have slept is done easily enough, many research investigations have shown that volunteers are not very accurate in estimating the length of their sleep when their sleep is measured scientifically.

Research Findings:

- i. Some people who complain of not being able to get to sleep at night do in fact fall asleep within a normal period of time when their sleep pattern is measured.
- ii. Other people when woken in the early stages of sleep, say that they have not yet fallen asleep
- iii. Judgement of time becomes less accurate as one nears sleep. Each minute appears to take longer than it does when one is fully alert. So that may seem to be a long stretch of time trying to get to sleep may in fact only be several minutes.
- iv. In one research study, the sleep of 120 people who thought that they slept badly was compared. This was done by recording their electrical brain waves in the laboratory and by getting them to make their own estimates of how many hours they slept, or how many minutes it took them to fall asleep. While there were a few who took a couple of hours to fall asleep, they were only the tiny minority. Most of the volunteers fell asleep within a matter of minutes, even though they felt that they usually took much longer. Although there were some people who only slept for about 4 hours in the night, the majority of people who thought that they generally slept only about 4 hours, in fact slept considerably longer

So, if you are afraid that you are not getting enough sleep or that the sleep you are getting is poor, **REMEMBER.....**

You may in fact be getting more sleep than you realise, and your sleep may not be as bad as you think. We really are all very inaccurate in our judgements as to how much we sleep.

☐ Examining What you Believe About the Consequences of Poor/Lack of Sleep:

As mentioned earlier, it is very often worries about not sleeping that perpetuate the insomnia. These worries are based upon the beliefs that you have about sleep and how important it is to have a “normal” amount. Write down an answer to the following question:

Suppose the problem were to worsen over the next month, what is the worst thing that could happen ?

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO REMEMBER IS THAT YOU WILL NOT COME TO SERIOUS HARM ON ACCOUNT OF YOUR POOR SLEEP

In a research study to monitor the effects of losing sleep, volunteers were kept awake day and night. After about 72 hours of continuous lack of sleep, the one thing that the volunteers all had in common is that they fell asleep whenever they had a moment undisturbed, even walking along the street. The lesson to learn from this is that when we are short of sleep, nature takes care to look after our interests, and if we really need sleep, and have taken or are given the opportunity to sleep, then we can rely on nature to give us rest.

While you may suffer from, irritability and/or depression due to prolonged lack of sleep, ***it must be emphasised that you cannot die from loss of sleep, nor will you suffer long-term mental or physical ill effects as a result.***

You can take comfort from the fact that sleep is a self-regulating system so that when we really need it, we get it and almost nothing will stop us.

A man believed that, if deprived of sleep he would die of fatigue. He read the description of the experiment where volunteers were kept awake. After initial surprise that the experiments were allowed, he realised that this indicated they were not harmful. He laughed when he read that subjects eventually went to sleep; his belief rating that lack of sleep could kill changed from 90% - 0%. A flash card was constructed on which the following thought was printed:

***Not Sleeping will
make me go***

to sleep

Write yourself a reminder on a card

Do any of your beliefs/worries go against the research evidence ? If so you may find it helpful to write the research finding on a card and put it somewhere in your bedroom so that you can read it as you prepare for bed to remind yourself that your worry is not realistic.

Another example illustrates a worry in relation to performance:

A bank clerk believed that lack of sleep impaired her arithmetic ability, possibly leading to major problems at work. She agreed to test this out by doing pre-arranged mental arithmetic tasks [in a set time] on days when she had slept well the night before and on days when she had not. She was surprised that there was no difference. This was followed up by keeping a diary of her mood, errors in her work and trying to relate that to tiredness; she found that lack of sleep could affect her mood but not her performance.

Very long sleep deprivation can affect performance somewhat – for example studies on doctors – but this was 70 or 80 hours of very little sleep !

There is more to sleep than just its duration. What has research found to support the claims of people who say that they don't sleep well ?

- ☞ It has been found that the laboratory sleep of those who believe they are poor sleepers does indeed contain more frequent awakenings through the night.
- ☞ Moreover, the body temperature of poor sleepers does not fall as low in the middle of the night as does the temperature of good sleepers. This is a sign that the poor sleepers are not getting as profound/deep a degree of rest and are therefore unlikely to be getting such good conditions for a refreshing night's sleep
- ☞ Corticosteroid hormones hinder the renewal of the body's tissue during sleep. They are normally low during the night, begin to rise before sleep usually ends, and rise to high levels after breakfast. Some people at least who feel that their sleep is of poor quality have higher levels of corticosteroids all through the night, and by day too, than do those who feel that they have good quality sleep.

So it is possible that poor sleep may provide less than ideal conditions for renewal of mind and body. However, this doe **NOT** mean that you will run down like a car battery that is being drained of energy without sufficient recharging. ***Your body and brain will restore themselves adequately whatever the quality of your sleep but may have more of a battle to do this.***

2. PROVIDING THE BEST POSSIBLE CONDITIONS FOR SLEEP TO OCCUR:

Research has shown that there are things you can do to make it more likely that you will get to sleep and sleep better:

i. Reinstate a regular sleep pattern by going to bed at a regular time:

We all have within us a biological clock, or biorhythm. This works on an approximate 24 hour cycle. This cycle is called the ***circadian rhythm***, deriving from the Latin ***circa diem***, meaning “about a day”.

The body’s tissues are continually being broken down and rebuilt. While we are awake and active, more tissues are being broken down than are being rebuilt. But during rest/sleep the renewal of tissues catches up and overtakes the breakdown of tissues.

The circadian rhythm is also related to body temperature. Our temperature rises during the day and probably reaches its peak during the afternoon or evening and then it drops during sleep, to reach its lowest level in the early hours of the morning.

The circadian rhythm affects our performance. We tend to perform better by day when our temperature is higher, and do less well at night if our temperature has fallen.

People who do not stick to a regular time for going to bed and for getting up, do not have such a sharply defined rise and fall of body temperature, or rise and fall of their tendency to be sleepy. If irregular hours are forced on people and their circadian rhythms are upset, through, for example, shift work, many will feel that they are less happy, have less energy and a poorer quality of sleep, and that they are slightly less efficient during the day. This is why if you have been sleeping badly and are feeling tired and low throughout the day, you should strengthen your biological clock, so that it will help you to drop off quickly to sleep at night and enable you to be really efficient by day.

Always go to bed at about the same time each night and always get up at the same time in the morning: The time that you get up in the morning determines the time you will be feeling tired at night. So if you want to fall asleep more readily at night, then get up earlier in the morning – and do so regularly. You will get sleep of a better quality and feel happier if you keep it all regular.

DO NOT TAKE NAPS DURING THE DAY HOWEVER TIRED YOU MIGHT FEEL DUE TO A DISTURBED NIGHT’S SLEEP.

ii. Pre-sleep Routines:

☞ **Unwinding and Relaxing:** Before going to bed try to direct your attention away from the pressures of the day. Some find practising a hobby is a good way of winding down in the evening; others prefer to watch television [obviously it makes sense not to watch the late-night horror film], and for many a hot bath helps relaxation.

This is the time, if you can, to avoid emotional arguments, excitement and intense mental or physical activity [apart from sex], as the more alert and stimulated you are, the longer it will take you to fall asleep.

- ☞ **Associating the Bedroom with Sleep:** Entering the bedroom in order to go to sleep is something that most of us do almost every day of our lives. This means an association has been built up between the bedroom and sleep. If this association is strong enough then simply entering the bedroom can make one feel sleepy. A similar association can be built up between the kitchen and eating such that some people may become hungry when they enter it. To make use of this method of promoting sleepiness to the full it is important to make the association between entering your bedroom and sleep as great as possible. This can be done by only using your bedroom for activities that will lead to and help sleep. Make a rule for yourself to only use the bedroom for sleep, relaxation and intimacy. Try to identify activities which don't go well with sleep, and avoid doing them in the bedroom. Worrying of course does not lead to sleep.

Thus, if you find yourself lying in bed worrying then get up and go into another room.

It is possible to have some degree of control over your thoughts as you close your eyes and prepare to drop off. Try deliberately to direct your mind away from troubling, stressful and unhappy thoughts, and don't start attempting to solve problems that have been worrying you during the day. Put them away for tomorrow, let go and relax.

Banishing day time worries from your mind is just as important if you wake in the middle of the night. This is when time spent awake probably causes most concern about loss of sleep. But there is no need to be weighed down by this added anxiety because loss of sleep will do you no harm and in the long run you will get the sleep you need.

- ☞ **Warmth:** If you feel cold, your muscles become more tense and you may even shiver, all of which is a mechanism for maintaining your body temperature but it tends at the same time to keep you awake. When you feel warm, your muscles relax and sleep comes more easily.

During the cold winter months ensure that your bedroom is warmed up before you go to bed and that you have sufficient bedclothes to prevent you from waking up shivering in the small hours.

- ☞ **Satisfaction of important needs:** This is also followed by relaxation and a greater tendency to sleepiness. Many people will fall asleep more readily after a good meal or sex.
- ☞ **Do not have caffeinated drinks** [e.g. coffee, tea, cocoa, after 6 pm]: Caffeine increases feelings of energy, increase the body's temperature and causes greater wakefulness.

- ☞ **Avoid Alcohol:** There is a popular misconception that a drink at bedtime guarantees a good night's sleep. Alcohol does send you to sleep more quickly, but it will disturb your sleep later on in the night.
- ☞ **Avoid smoking:** Nicotine in cigarettes stimulates the nervous system, increases the depth of breathing and raises the blood pressure. It results in the release of the hormone adrenaline in the body which increases energy and liveliness and counteracts the effect of body building hormones that restore us while we sleep. A last cigarette before bed means that nicotine will act on the brain cells to interfere with sleep and make it less deep or actually broken.
- ☞ **The Importance of Exercise:** Most people in our modern society take too little exercise.



More exercise means better sleep, but what is important is regular exercise –



Sudden excesses should be avoided because overdoing it with unaccustomed exercise will disturb sleep.

Strenuous exercise too close to bedtime will also disturb sleep.

- ☞ **A Light, Easily Digested Snack** – before bedtime can often lead to a more restful night's sleep [e.g. Cornflakes and milk].

iii. Relaxation Technique:

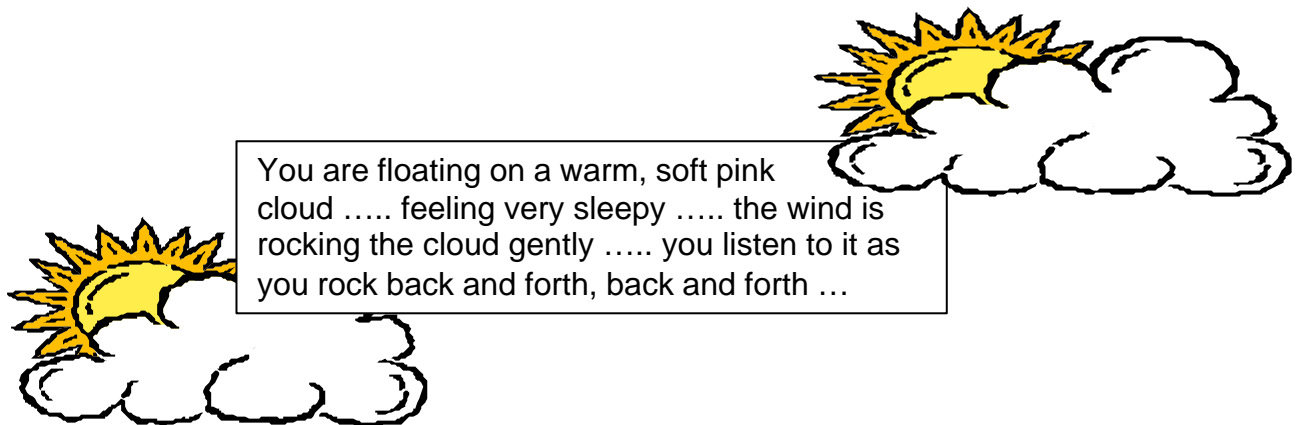
You can learn relaxation techniques which involve learning to progressively relax the muscles in your body. As regular, monotonous, rhythmic stimuli help you to sleep, relaxation is done in a very rhythmic way. Have you ever battled to keep awake while on a long trip driving on the motorway, staring at the long road ahead, with the steady purr of the car engine mesmerising you? Motorway driving is a well-known cause of sleepiness and this is because it is so monotonous. Novelty and interest will keep you awake, and by contrast, monotony will predispose you to sleep. Perhaps this is where “counting sheep” comes in: steady, rhythmic counting. What could be more monotonous?

You finish off the progressive relaxation of your muscles with soothing, rhythmic images: for example, imagine, vividly, as if you can see and hear it right now:

You are lying on a warm beach, feeling very sleepy. Watch the waves rolling in and hear them swishing down, again and again ...



OR



iv. Reducing Worry about Events Other than Sleep Problems:

This is possibly a big item for some people who have sleep problems – but this booklet cannot deal with this subject as the reasons for the worry could be so varied. When we have difficult life events to deal with, we tend to experience especially broken sleep. Sometimes anxiety and depression are an understandable response to difficult life experiences. If stress affecting sleep arises from a situation over which you do have control, try to resolve it by decision making, or a change in lifestyle.

TO SUMMARISE:

GUIDELINES FOR BETTER SLEEP:

- If you have lost sleep, be reassured that SLEEP IS AN EXCELLENT SELF-REGULATORY SYSTEM. YOU WILL GET SLEEP IF YOU REALLY NEED IT
- If you do not get as much sleep as you would like, the consequences will be less serious than your worst fears. You may, however, be more irritable than usual, or feel depressed.
- Regular hours for getting up and going to bed will give you better sleep at night and more energy during the day.
- Regular early rising helps to ensure that you regularly fall asleep early.
- Before going to bed, try and direct your attention away from the pressures of the day by doing something relaxing.

- Make the association between entering your bedroom and sleep as great as possible. Avoid all activities which are not conducive to sleep.
- Warmth and satisfaction of basic needs tend to send us off to sleep quicker than their opposites
- Avoid caffeinated drinks after 6 in the evening
- If you smoke and your sleep is poor, consider giving up smoking
- Never use alcohol to get you to sleep
- For better sleep and general health, take plenty of regular day time exercise. If you are taking up an activity for the first time, take it easy to begin with.
- A light, easily digested meal may lead to a more restful night's sleep.
- Progressive relaxation of your muscles and imagining rhythmic, monotonous scenes, will help you drop off to sleep.
- Try and resolve those problems that you have some control over and which are depriving you of sleep.