

Overcoming sleep problems

Helping you to manage your health condition

Sleep problems are common when you have a health condition. People who have health problems are more likely to experience insomnia, poor quality sleep and fatigue. This can have a big impact on day-to-day life. It may affect your mood, your activities and your outlook on life, as well as making you feel worse physically. If you are affected by sleep problems, remember, help is at hand. There are lots of ideas in this booklet which can help you understand your sleep problem and take steps to improve your sleep. You may wish to read this booklet in small chunks or with the help and support of a friend or family member.

Understanding sleep

How much do I need?

Most people are eager to know how much sleep they should be having. It is a commonly held belief that it is important to get 7-8 hours continuous sleep every night. However, there is no evidence that this is true. Actually, people vary so much that for one person 4 hours is enough whereas for another 10 hours or more is needed. The amount you need can vary with age, with the amount of activity you are doing and with changes in your health.

"The worst thing in the world is to try to sleep and not to"
F Scott Fitzgerald



The sleep cycle

Unfortunately, there is no on-off switch for sleep. Instead, there are five stages of sleep that range from drowsiness to very deep sleep. Each night, we move through the different stages of sleep several times. It is quite normal to wake up briefly during the night, although you might not always remember it. Waking up during the night becomes more common with age, and is a normal change in the sleep cycle.

Sleep problems and insomnia

Everyone experiences difficulty sleeping from time to time. This is normal and usually sleep returns to normal eventually. However, when sleep difficulties keep going with no improvement you may be experiencing a sleep problem, sometimes called insomnia. Some people with health problems may be more likely to experience sleep problems, especially if the symptoms of their condition are painful or uncomfortable, disrupting sleep.

There is no clear cut answer as to why some people with short-term sleep problems go on to develop insomnia and others do not, but it is probably a mix of physical symptoms together with certain thoughts, feelings and habits which keep sleep problems going.

Types of sleep problems

- Trouble falling asleep
- Trouble staying asleep
- Waking up very early in the morning
- Poor quality sleep and not feeling rested when you wake up.

Causes of sleep problems

Physical causes

Physical health problems can often disrupt sleep. For example, you may experience pain, unpleasant physical symptoms related to your health condition or the side-effects of medications. All of these could play a part in disrupting your sleep.

Your feelings

Being unwell with a serious or chronic health condition can be a very worrying and stressful experience and it is normal to feel anxious and apprehensive at times. You might worry about how your condition affects your life now or how it might affect you in the future, for example. This uncertainty can lead to stress and anxiety.

Stress and anxiety can cause you to feel both emotionally and physically 'on edge'. Being 'on edge' can get in the way of the process of falling asleep, which relies on become more and more relaxed until you drift off to sleep. Feeling low in mood can also make it hard to sleep well and sleep problems can be a sign of depression in some people.

Your thoughts

Worrying thoughts often go hand in hand with feeling 'on edge' or anxious. People who have health problems may have lots of worries. For example, you might think about the negative ways your health condition affects your life. You may also think about the future and about whether your condition will change, causing you more problems. Having these thoughts going round and round in your mind at bedtime can get in the way of sleep by keeping you alert.

Your environment and routine

If you have been spending a lot of time in hospital, you may have been trying to sleep in a noisy, unfamiliar environment. You may also have tried to catch up by sleeping on the ward during the day. This kind of environment and routine can affect your sleep cycle. As a result, your sleep may continue to be disturbed even after you have left hospital.

Your home environment may also add to your sleep problems if your room is too bright, too hot or too cluttered. Having lots of gadgets such as smart phones, tablets, TVs and DVD players in the room where you are sleeping may also get in the way of sleep. Gadgets do this by keeping your mind active and stimulated, stopping you becoming sleepy. Even though these distractions may help you manage difficult thoughts and feelings in the short term, they may be keeping your sleep problem going, making you feel worse physically and mentally.

Effects

Poor sleep and insomnia can affect you in a number of ways.

You might feel:

- fatigued, lacking energy, aches & pains, groggy, sleepy in the daytime
- snappy, irritable, short-tempered
- more on edge, anxious, jumpy
- as if you can't be bothered, withdrawn, low in mood

You might notice that you:

- can't concentrate, are distractible, have trouble making decisions
- are worrying about things more
- don't feel like doing much, take naps during day
- start to dread bedtime
- worry about the negative effects of not sleeping.

What keeps sleep problems going?

The things you do keep sleep problems going:

- Drinking too much caffeine, especially in the evenings. Regular tea, green tea, coffee and hot chocolate all contain caffeine. Some over-the-counter pain relief and cold & flu remedies also contain caffeine so read the packets carefully
- Using alcohol to help you fall asleep. You may fall asleep more quickly but the quality of your sleep will be worse
- Eating a big meal within an hour or so of going to bed or not eating enough so you are hungry
- Napping during the day. This means you may not be sleepy at bedtime
- Doing too little exercise during the day
- Doing too much strenuous exercise near bedtime
- Doing mentally exciting things like watching thrillers or reading an exciting book
- Clock watching. This is checking the time repeatedly when you are having difficulty falling asleep or when you wake up in the night. This is usually unhelpful, particularly if it triggers thoughts like "Only three hours left until the alarm goes and I am still awake!" (read on to understand how thoughts keep sleep problems going).

The thoughts running through your mind that keep sleep problems going

- Worries about your health, the future, the economy etc
- Active planning and problem solving at bedtime
- Mentally chewing over negative things (“rumination”)
- Unhelpful worries about how poor sleep will affect you negatively the next day.

“A ruffled mind makes a restless pillow”

Charlotte Brontë

Getting caught up in unhelpful thinking about sleep is very common when you experience sleep problems. This can often keep sleep problems going by making you feel worried and anxious about the effects of poor sleep. These thoughts are often negative, extreme and are rarely accurate. See if you recognise any below.

Unhelpful thinking styles	
Predicting the worst	”Because I haven’t slept well, I won’t be able to function at all tomorrow. I’ll get disciplined at work and I might even get the sack!”
Shoulds, musts and oughts	“I must get eight hours of unbroken sleep.”
Generalising	“I didn’t sleep last night and the night before. That means I’m stuck with permanent insomnia.”
Jumping to conclusions	“I feel awful after a bad nights sleep. I feel so bad it must be a sign my condition is getting much worse.”

You can see how these thoughts, if you believed they were true, would make anybody anxious and upset. However, not all thoughts are facts and later you will find out how to challenge unhelpful thoughts which may not even be true.

Your emotions keep sleep problems going

- Feeling very stressed and anxious about sleep or about other things can keep sleep problems going by disrupting the process of falling asleep
- Feeling down in the dumps, low or depressed can also make it hard to fall asleep. It can also take away your motivation to make positive changes to help get your sleep back on track.

How your body feels

- Aches, pains, unpleasant symptoms and physical tension related to your health condition can contribute to sleep difficulties.
- Inactivity can also cause some of these symptoms, particularly if you sit or lie in one position for a long time without moving.
- Doing much more activity than you are used can lead to aches and pains afterwards. If you are returning to exercise, try to increase your activity gradually.
- Anxiety can also add to physical tension and discomfort

Overcoming sleep problems

Take care of yourself

Try to eat a well-balanced diet spread across the day. This may help your body fight off infections and recover if you have been unwell. It will also prevent you being too full or too hungry to fall asleep at night.

Take regular exercise if you can. As well as helping you feel tired and sleepy by bedtime, exercise is also helpful for managing the tension and fatigue associated with anxiety and low mood. Think of an activity which is manageable for you and which you might enjoy. Then try to pace yourself, not doing too much or too little.

Get some light

Expose yourself to some light, either sunlight or bright artificial light, during the day. This is one way to reset the body's sleep wake cycle if it has been disrupted. This method is used to treat jet-lag and is called 'light therapy'.

Good sleep habits

Good sleep habits, or 'sleep hygiene', are things you can do to improve your sleep. Here are some suggestions of things you can try out until you find the ones that work for you:

- Avoid caffeine, especially in the second half of the day
- Avoid nightcaps (i.e. alcoholic drinks just before bed)
- Avoid napping during the day unless you are so tired you cannot function
- Go to bed at approximately the same time every night
- Get up at the same time every day regardless of how you have slept
- Wind down with relaxing activities before bed, e.g. listen to gentle music or take a bath
- Make the bed and bedroom comfortable and dark. You may wish to clear any clutter, make sure you have comfortable bedding and hang some blackout curtains.
- Do not do physically or mentally stimulating activities before bed (e.g. strenuous exercise, watching action films or sending important emails)
- Keep the bedroom for sleep and sex only. Try not to watch TV, use the internet or read in the bedroom. This can help to strengthen the link between sleep and bed, which is very important, and weaken the unhelpful link between bed and wakefulness.

Learn to relax

Learning how to relax your mind and body can help you get ready for sleep. You can try out different things until you find one that works for you. For example:

- Listen to relaxing music or 'white noise' like the sound of waves crashing. You can download free 'White Noise Apps' to your smart phone, use Google to find audio files to download to your PC or MP3 player or buy a CD (these are widely available).
- Spend five minutes focusing your attention on your breath
- Try using prayer or meditation practices
- Imagine being in a peaceful scene, such as a beach or a woodland. Notice what you can see, hear, touch, taste and smell.
- Gently tense and relax different muscle groups in your body until your body feels physically relaxed, skipping any areas where you have discomfort if necessary
- Try not to rush around during the day. Leave plenty of time for your planned activities.

Keep a sleep diary

Keep a diary of your sleep for a few weeks. Try to include the following:

- when you went to bed
- how long it took you to fall asleep
- how many times you woke up during the night
- how many hours sleep you believe you got
- what time you got up in the morning.

Try to complete this diary soon after you wake up rather than during the night, as this may disrupt your sleep. Don't worry if you cannot be exact. Try instead to make a best guess. Also take note of what was going on that day, how you were feeling and record anything you tried to help you sleep. This will help you to build up an understanding of your sleep problem and to evaluate whether the things you have tried out have been helpful.

Put the day to rest

Earlier, we discussed how worries, concerns, planning and problem solving can all get in the way of falling asleep by keeping you alert. One way to overcome this is to put the day to rest before you go to bed.

Get a notebook and write down:

- Your main worries and concerns. Take them out of your head and put them onto the page. If there is something you could do about these concerns, jot down a few ideas about how to overcome and decide to return to these solutions the next day
- Your 'to do' list for the next day or any other planning you need to do
- Any reflections about the day and how it went, both positive and negative

Now put the notebook away. If you notice your mind wandering to the list, remind yourself that you can give it your attention again in the morning.

Challenge your thoughts

Certain thoughts, beliefs and predictions about a bad night's sleep can turn a few nights of bad sleep into insomnia. For example, people with sleep problems sometimes overestimate the negative effects of a bad night's sleep. This is unhelpful because it increases worry and anxiety which makes sleeping even more difficult. To challenge some of these predictions, try to ask yourself the following questions;

"How do I know this is true?"

For example, you might have a thought like "If I don't sleep well I won't be able to function at all the next day". Ask yourself, has this ever happened or, instead, is it something you worry about?. You might find that although it is very concerning, your worst fear has not happened yet (e.g. getting the sack due to yawning), and may never happen.

"Is there any evidence against this thought?"

It is probably true that you may not be at your best and you may not get as much done as you planned when you are feeling fatigued. This is normal. However, maybe there were at least some times during the day when you managed quite well and achieved things despite a poor night's sleep. Try to focus on these examples.

“Is there any other way of thinking about this?”

You might be able to come up with an alternative thought. For example, instead of saying to yourself “If I don’t sleep well I won’t be able to function at all the next day”, you might try saying to yourself

“If I don’t sleep well, I’ll probably feel pretty rough tomorrow. That won’t be great but I’ve handled a day like that before and I can cope if it happens again.”

You might find that a balanced thought like this helps to reduce your anxiety and may, over time, even help you get off to sleep.

“What would I say to a friend?”

Often we are much harder on ourselves than we would ever be on other people. Ask yourself what you would say to a friend who was struggling with day-to-day activities due to poor sleep. Would you say ‘Pull your socks up and get on with it’ or ‘Just give up! What’s the point’?. Probably not.

Instead, would you reassure them that everyone has bad patches with their sleep from time to time, encourage them to prioritise a couple of important things to do and then let themselves off the hook, especially if their standards were high to begin with.

Managing fatigue

One of the most unpleasant side-effects of poor sleep is daytime fatigue. Fatigue is also a common part of many health conditions. When people have fatigue for weeks or months, it is common to get into a habit of doing lots of activity when you have a ‘good day’ (i.e. less fatigue) but hardly anything the next day because you are exhausted, sometimes called a ‘bad day’. This cycle of overdoing it and underdoing it, can lead to more fatigue. This is because the number of ‘bad days’ start to outnumber the ‘good days’ making you unfit and more likely to fatigue easily.

You can break this ‘boom and bust’ cycle by trying to do a similar amount of activity each day regardless of how tired you feel. This means doing a bit less than usual on good day and a bit more than usual on a bad day. Over time, this builds up your fitness and helps to combat fatigue.

Try paying attention in a different way

Being awake when you want to be asleep is very frustrating and feeling frustrated leads to more wakefulness. As an alternative, try taking a curious and non-judgemental attitude towards whatever you are experiencing in the ‘here and now’, rather than letting your attention rest on the past or the future. This is sometimes called ‘mindfulness’. Try these simple steps;

- Focus first on your breath. Pay attention to the natural rhythm of your breath. Notice the rise and fall of your chest and stomach. Notice how the breath feels coming in and out of your nose. Pay attention to any changes in your breath. Don’t be concerned if you notice your mind has wandered off. This is normal. Just gently bring it back to the breath.
- You can focus on any sensation or experience, not just the breath. You could experiment with paying attention to the experience of being in bed. Notice the texture of your bedding, the warmth or coolness of different parts of your body, any noises you can hear like the rustle of sheets as you move.
- You could use this way of paying attention to experience wakefulness or fatigue in a different way. These experiences often have negative feelings attached to them. This makes sense and is normal, but may not be helpful.

Instead, you could try observing them in a neutral and curious way. You can do this by trying not to label them or judge them and by focusing on what they feel like in the here and now. For example, focus your attention on the experience of wakefulness. Does it become more or less intense as you observe it over time? Do you feel it in different parts of your body? Does it change from jittery, to alert, to calm, to sleepy?

Being mindful of your experiences is a very different way of paying attention and it takes practice. There are many good books and CDs about mindfulness and about how to apply it to your everyday life if you think this approach might be helpful for you and you would like to learn more.

Managing low mood

Sleep problems can lead to low mood, particularly if you have experienced low mood or depression in the past. There are some things you can try to lift your mood;

- Make time for doing things you enjoy and find pleasurable
- Talk to someone you trust about how you are feeling
- Try not to withdraw from other people and activities. This can make you feel worse in the long term
- Try to focus on signs of improvement in your health or in your sleep and celebrate any changes in the right direction, however small
- Use thought challenging to question negative thoughts
- If you are concerned that you may be experiencing depression that is not improving despite your best efforts, see your GP or healthcare professional who can discuss the options for support and treatment with you.

Next steps

- Plan a time to use the ideas in this leaflet
- Share the ideas with someone who can support you
- If you have tried the ideas in this leaflet and you have not seen any improvements, talk to your healthcare professional about getting further support.

Further reading

- An Introduction to Coping with Sleep Problems. Colin Espie.
- Overcoming Insomnia and Sleep Problems. A self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques. Colin Espie.

King's Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

This is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. The PALS office is located on the ground floor of the Hambleton Wing, near the main entrance on Bessemer - staff will be happy to direct you.

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