



## SLEEP HYGIENE: TREATMENT OF INSOMNIA

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Before I get started on helping you improve your quality of sleep, I would like to provide you with some quick facts about sleep. Research has shown that, on average, we only require 7.5 hours of sleep to feel rested. Two-thirds of the population will require between 6.5 - 8.5 hours to feel rested. A minority of people feel fine after 4 hours of sleep, while some people may require up to 10 hours. As you grow older, you will tend to need less sleep. It is quite common for people to wake frequently during the night. When falling asleep or waking up, it is common for some people to experience odd sensations or perceptions. Common examples include: muscle twitches, sleep paralysis, pressure on the chest, hearing voices, or seeing 'bizarre' things.

Many people think that they have a sleep problem. If this is a concern of yours, worrying will tend to make it worse. Thus, try not to be too concerned or exaggerate the worry. Usually, once someone becomes less concerned, and as a result less anxious about falling asleep, the problem tends to go away. Nonetheless, follow the tips below to give you some helpful hints on falling asleep. Two key questions to ask yourself to help you decide whether you do have a sleep problem are the following: 1) Do you regularly feel tired throughout the day? and; 2) Does sleepiness interfere with your daily functioning? If you answered "No" to both these questions, chances are that you do not have a sleep problem, but are probably worrying that you do. However, if you answered "Yes" to one of these questions, there is a possibility that falling asleep is a problem for you, in which case you will want to focus on the tips I've provided below.

There are three main kinds of sleep problems that I will discuss below. These are: 1) difficulty falling asleep; 2) developing a regular 'sleep cycle' and; 3) waking up often during the night.

### 1) DIFFICULTY FALLING ASLEEP

If you have difficulty falling asleep, you will want to develop a 'habit' or 'sleep routine'.



Here are some helpful hints for a better night's sleep:

- Lie down intending to go to sleep only when you are sleepy.
- If you find yourself unable to fall asleep after approximately 10-15 minutes, get up and go into another room to do something boring in dim light (e.g. having a light



snack, do housework, read something boring with low-intensity light). Do not perform challenging or engaging activity. Do not expose yourself to any bright source of light (e.g. turning on the lights, opening the fridge, watching television, playing on the computer). Light sends a message to your brain that it is morning and time to wake up.

- Stay up as long as you wish and then return to the bedroom only when you feel sleepy. Remember that the goal is to associate your bed with falling asleep quickly. If you are in bed more than about ten minutes without falling asleep and you have not gotten up, you are not following this prescription.
- If you still cannot fall asleep after 10-15 minutes, repeat the previous instructions (i.e. get out of bed). Do this as often as is necessary throughout the night.



**A word of caution about television and the computer:**

- Many people fall asleep with the TV on in their room. Watching TV before bedtime is generally a bad idea when someone has problems falling asleep. Not only are you exposing yourself to a bright source of light, but television is a very engaging medium that tends to keep people up. It is recommended that the television not be in your bedroom. As soon as you feel sleepy, the TV should be turned off and you should proceed to your bedroom.
  - The same advice generally holds for playing on the computer before bedtime.
  - Some people find that the radio helps them go to sleep. Since radio is a less engaging medium than TV, this is probably a good idea, as long as the volume is not too high.
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- We do not want you to become a 'clock-watcher', so turn your clock around or cover it. This means you just have to estimate times.
  - Set your alarm and get up at the same time every morning regardless of how much sleep you got during the night. Get up at the same time even on weekends. This will help your body acquire a consistent sleep rhythm.
  - Do not use your bed for anything except sleep; that is, do not read, watch TV, talk on the phone, eat, or worry in bed. Sexual activity is the only exception to this rule. On such occasions, the instructions are to be followed afterward when you intend to go to sleep. The goal is to associate your bed with only two activities - sleep and sex – both pleasurable.
  - Do not nap during the day.
  - Sleep only as much as you need to feel refreshed. Linger in bed for long periods of time can actually hinder attempts to sleep.

- Some important “Do’s”  and “Don’ts” 
  - Make your sleep environment comfortable. If your mattress is uncomfortable, do something to improve it. Avoid being too hot or cold. Have the room well ventilated with fresh air. Keep noise to a minimum. Cover any light sources that may be bothersome and that may keep you from falling asleep.
  - Do not exercise in the 2-hour period before bedtime. Exercise earlier in the day can help you to feel more relaxed and ready for sleep at night. However, exercising right before you go to sleep could actually have a negative influence. While exercising, our metabolic rate increases, which is a state that is incompatible with sleep. Chances are that your body will need to ‘wind down’ and relax before you can fall asleep.
  - Do not drink caffeinated beverages (e.g. coffee, some teas, Coca-Cola, Pepsi) within six hours of bedtime. Drink decaffeinated versions of these if you must. Caffeinated beverages have a stimulative effect (e.g. heart rate and energy levels increase), which is a state that is incompatible with sleep. In addition, caffeinated beverages have a diuretic effect, so you will waken often to pass urine. Treats such as chocolate, cocoa products, or products with a high sugar content may also have a stimulative effect depending on the individual.
  - Avoid alcohol and smoking in the 2-hour period before bedtime. Alcohol interferes with sleep in three ways: 1) it is a diuretic, so you will waken often to pass urine; 2) it is a sedative. Although this may help you fall asleep initially, you will wake up often when the effect wears off and; 3) alcohol may also interfere with the ‘deep sleep’ part of the sleep cycle so you will feel less rested.
  - Establish relaxing pre-sleep rituals or habits such as having a warm bath or eating a light snack. Do not go to bed hungry, but avoid large meals.
  - Be aware that sleeping pills provide only temporary relief. Use them only under your doctor’s orders.

### **Do worries interfere with your quality of sleep?**

If you have followed the above suggestions and you still have trouble falling asleep, do you tend to worry in bed? Worrying makes us anxious, which is a state that is not conducive to sleep (e.g. anxiety increases heart rate, metabolism). If you tend to worry and it keeps you awake, it is important that you start to develop the attitude that, “Nighttime is for sleep, and not for worry”.

If you catch yourself worrying, tell yourself, “Now is not the time to worry. Now is the time to rest”, and let go of the worry. At night problems may feel overwhelming and unsolvable, which will make you feel anxious, which is a feeling that is in direct opposite

to feeling rested. It is better to focus on problems during the day. If your mind gets redirected back to the worry, don't get agitated or angry at yourself, or give too much importance to the fact that your mind wandered back to the worry. If you do these things, you will probably get anxious, which again, makes it impossible to get to sleep. Simply redirect your mind back to focusing on sleeping. If you worry, you can jot down worries a few minutes before going to bed, or you can keep a pad and paper next to your bed to write down worries during the night if they keep you up.

## Counting exercises

If you have followed the suggestions above, and worrying is not a problem, but you still have trouble falling asleep, try some counting exercises. For example, direct your attention on counting your breaths or sheep – or any other object of your choice - or try counting backwards. If your mind is directed off the counting, simply redirect your attention to the counting when you realize you have done so. Do not get agitated or angry with yourself, as this feeling is in direct opposite to sleep. Although this exercise may seem trivial, remember that the purpose of this exercise is not to help you become a “professional sheep-counter”, but to help you fall asleep soon after you go to bed.

## 2) HOW TO DEVELOP A REGULAR ‘SLEEP CYCLE’

In order to feel refreshed and function well throughout the day, it is important that we have a regular ‘sleep cycle’. This means that your body is used to going to sleep and waking up at a regular time (e.g. going to sleep between 10-11pm and waking up between 7-8am). In some cases, an individual may have developed an irregular sleep cycle, or a sleep cycle that is shifted in time (e.g. going to sleep between 4-5am and waking up between 10-11am). Thus, this section is for those individuals who want to re-establish a normal and regular sleep cycle.



Here are some hints:

- Use all the tips I've just provided above.
- **In addition**, you will need to shift your sleep cycle back one-hour every few days until you have re-established a regular sleep cycle. For example, let's say you go to sleep at 5am and wake up at 11am. For the next few days, go to sleep at 4am and wake up at 10am. After this becomes habitual, go to sleep at 3am and wake up at 9am.
  - Repeat this procedure until you have established your regular sleep cycle (e.g. going to sleep at 11pm and waking up at 7am).
  - **Do not forget to include the tips above!**

### **3) WAKING UP OFTEN DURING THE NIGHT**

If you wake up frequently during the night, remember that many people do, and it does not necessarily mean you have a sleep problem. Try to not give it too much importance or get anxious; remember, anxiety is incompatible with rest and sleep. There are two main reasons why you may wake frequently. These are: 1) to pass urine or; 2) to worry.

If you wake to urinate frequently and this interferes with sleeping, pay particular attention to the “Do’s” and “Don’ts” listed above – go back and read them now. Do not drink alcohol, consume stimulative products (e.g. caffeinated beverages, treats with a cocoa or high sugar content), or exercise. In addition, do not drink any fluids 2 hours before going to bed. Also, make a trip to the bathroom and urinate before going to bed to empty your bladder.

If you wake up and worry, use the tips above about worrying. If worrying is not an issue, try using the counting exercises above to help you get back to sleep.

### **A FINAL WORD**

I hope you will find this primer on improving the quality of your sleep useful. My goal was to provide you with a quick and comprehensive reference in case you wanted to review this material, or if I was not available for consultation. I’d also like to mention that the topic of sleep is not ‘out of bounds’ in therapy just because I provided you with this handout. In fact, I’d like it to be an important part of our sessions and a goal that we work towards weekly, if this is important to you. Finally, please ask me any questions you may have if any of the material in this handout is not clear.