

Sleep and You

Our lives are so busy, so it is important for our bodies and minds to restore on a daily basis. We do this in different ways, one of them is through sleep. For some people sleep is something that happens naturally, but for others it can be a real struggle, an unpleasant and anxiety provoking and even depressing experience.

Sleep is crucial in allowing our bodies to restore themselves, without it our bodies are not able to repair themselves and the effects can have serious implications on our health. Some of the effects of long term lack of sleep can be mood swings, irritability, depression, anxiety, diabetes type 2, cognitive impairment, immune deficiency (being more susceptible to colds and flu), reduced ability to focus, concentrate and decision making, cardiovascular disease and hypertension.

Sleep disturbances are unfortunately very common. They may stem from circumstances such as becoming a parent and having to tend to children throughout the night, being a shift worker, worrying about work, relationships or any other personal circumstances or simply choosing to stay out late. The problem arises when those circumstances change but our body clocks continue to be out of sync as a poor sleep habit has already been created.

Unfortunately a commonly used treatment for sleep disturbances is sleeping tablets. These however, do not treat the problem and in time our bodies become tolerant and require either a higher dose or different sleeping tablets altogether.

Following are some tips to help you have a better night sleep:

1. Ensure your bedroom promotes sleep. You do this by ensuring the room is dark enough, your bed is comfortable, you are not too hot or too cold, and if possible keep noise levels down.
2. Develop a sleep routine. You can do this by engaging on activities to unwind. This is important as you will be teaching your brain it is time to rest. Some of those activities could be reading, yoga, pilates, practicing relaxation techniques, meditation, etc.
3. Recognise signs of tiredness and go to be straight away. This is very important as you are far more likely not only to fall sleep faster, but also stay sleep. Thus, go to bed only and only when are very tired.
4. Don't do any work or study for at least two hours prior to going to bed.
5. Make sure your bed is only used for sleeping. Don't watch television or do any work in bed. This will assist your brain in knowing and making the connection that bed is for sleeping and nothing else. However, it is Ok to read a book or listen to relaxing music or relaxation strategies as long as it not for longer than 30 minutes.
6. Be mindful of things such as caffeine (coffee, tea, chocolate and cola drinks), alcohol, nicotine and sugar as they can significantly impact on quality of sleep. These are stimulants and as such are likely to affect your sleep. Ideally try to avoid them altogether until your sleep is in check, otherwise, try not to consume them after 2pm.
7. Exercise helps promote sleep. The more tired you are, the more likely you are to fall sleep and stay sleep. Generally try not to exercise after 7:00pm as your body will produce adrenaline which is likely to keep you awake.

8. Stop watching your clock during the night. The more you do this, the more likely you are to stress about not being to sleep and thus less likely to fall sleep.
9. If you find you are not falling sleep after lying in bed for about 30 minutes, get up, go to a different room and do something boring. Try to avoid turning bright lights on. Once you can recognise signs of tiredness, go back to bed. Unfortunately, this may mean needing to get up a few times in the night. It is important to note this is the case if you are thinking and worrying about things. If you are relaxed, it is ok to stay in bed.
10. Getting up at the same time every day will regulate your clock. It is ok to sleep in on weekends as long as it not longer than 60 minutes.
11. Learn to manage worry. You can do this in various ways. One is to allocate a 'worry/ problem solving time' where you write down your worries and what you can do to solve them. If you wake up worrying about a particular problem, remind yourself "I will worry about it tomorrow" or "it's on the list". By doing this you are training your brain in knowing there is a place and time for everything, even worrying and that the middle of the night is not the time for it.
12. Learn to relax. You can discuss relaxation techniques with your Psychologist in therapy. Progressive muscle relaxation technique is a popular one. In this technique you become aware of your tense muscles and learn how to relax them in a gradual manner.
13. Introduce figs and dates in your diet as they can help with sleep just like having a glass of warm milk if you wake up in the middle of the night. Try not to drink too much to avoid needing to use the toilet.
14. Napping during the day can negatively impact your sleep. So, try to stay awake until it is time to sleep.

It is important to keep in mind you can always work on developing good sleep habits. It is **never** too late to start. You need to be prepared though to consistently apply the above tips for at least 6 weeks. Once you find your sleep has improved and you are happy with getting a better night sleep, you can be more flexible.

At Vida Psychology we have helped many people improve their sleep.

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