**HOW TO HELP YOURSELF TO A BETTER NIGHT’S SLEEP**  ****

# Our Difficulty with Sleep

# It is estimated that 1 in 10 of us have a serious problem with getting to sleep or staying asleep. And 1 in 3 people suffer from poor sleep at sometime in their lives. Interrupted sleep, although troubling, is very common.

7-8 hours sleep on average is generally considered to be adequate but people vary in the amount they need. With age people tend to need less sleep. However, 24/7 living and new technology and have been found to affect our natural sleep patterns. For example, we artificially control our environment e.g. with lighting and shift work. In effect we have become a 24 hour society.

People make the mistake of regarding sleep as an activity like going to the gym and taking exercise. Sleep is doing less rather than trying. It is ultimately about letting go and trusting yourself to drift gently into sleep after a period of winding down and stilling the mind.

The techniques in this leaflet will help you to prepare your mind, emotional self and body for sleep as well as getting back to sleep if your sleep is interrupted.

# If you believe you are suffering from a serious, long term sleep difficulty or what is known as insomnia, you should then consult your GP.

Worrying about not sleeping is the biggest obstacle and the first thing you must tackle. Professor Kevin Morgan of Loughborough University who is specialises in Sleep Research says:

 *“How we behave and think about sleep influences the quality”*

1. **Practical Steps to Better Sleep**

 **Wind down routines work**

The first key principle is that routine comforts and leads to better sleep. Young children learn unconsciously associate their regular bedtime story or lullaby with sleep time. You too need to establish enjoyable routines to prepare for sleep. If you do so, your mind and body will become accustomed to the wind down time and will prepare for sleep unconsciously. This means deciding on a set bed time and get up time and keeping it the same each night as far as possible.

**Prepare for Sleep: Wind Down Behaviour**

Think about the times when you fall easily to sleep and have a refreshing uninterrupted sleep. These are likely to be the times when you are physically tired. So re-create this for yourself by first building up the pressure to fall asleep.

First you should make your external environment as comfortable and sleep conducive as possible. Develop a soothing wind down ritual, trying as far as possible to do much the same each evening. Aim to be in bed at roughly the same time every night. This will encourage your unconscious mind to associate your wind down behaviours with feeling ready to sleep.

Relax for at least an hour before you go to bed. For example, read, listen to relaxing music, have a warm milky drink or have a warm bath. Do whatever you enjoy to *S l o w* down.

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Encourage yourself to be prepared for a few nights’ broken sleep until you develop the new habits. The truth is that the more prepared you are to put up with not sleeping well to start with, the better you will sleep eventually.

Do this by getting up at least half an hour earlier every morning for a week, no matter how your sleep has been the previous night. Exercise during the day during the day also helps sleeping a night.

**Alcohol and Caffeine**

Though alcohol in moderation can be relaxing, it is also dehydrating and can interfere with sleep. Though you may fall asleep quite easily after a few drinks, you may wake up, feeling wide awake in the night. So make sure you drink plenty of water before, during and after drinking alcohol. You should, at the very least, match each glass of alcohol you drink with an equal amount of water.

Caffeine is a stimulant so refrain from any caffeine at least eight hours before bed time.

 **Keep the Bedroom for Sleep**Tempting though it is, do not switch on the TV when in bed. If necessary remove the TV from the bedroom. If you don’t, you will find it harder to associate bed with sleep. Make sure the room is dark. If you don’t have blinds or curtains to block out light, then use an eye mask.

When you turn off the light ready for sleep and you find yourself wide awake in bed for more than 20 minutes, get out of bed, sit and read or listen to music. Wait till you feel drowsy again before returning to bed. Avoid TV as it will over stimulate you. However tempting, do not look at the time at all during the night.

**Room Temperature**

The body needs to reduce temperature for you to fall asleep. So keep the room cool. Around 65◦ F is recommended. Have a hot bath before going to bed to boost circulation and deal with ‘restless legs.’

On cold nights it can help to wear socks to bed. Feet feel the cold because circulation is weakest in your extremities. Cold feet don't aid sleep: warm feet do.

1. **Understanding how to let yourself sleep**

**You can’t switch consciousness off like a light bulb.** The act of ***trying*** to go to sleep is in fact a brain alerting activity. So trying to push yourself to sleep wakes you up! What works is changing your mind and brain activity from full alertness to complete relaxedness.

**Make relaxation your goal, not sleep.**

To fall asleep, your conscious and unconscious mind need to cooperate. Your conscious mind is the part that actively thinks and makes decisions and worries about lack of sleep. The unconscious mind holds your memories, your learning and the habits you use automatically to run your life. The unconscious autonomic system helps your body function whether you are asleep of not and it organises your sleep patterns.

**How falling asleep works**

When you feel sleepy or drowsy, your unconscious mind will be sending your conscious mind a ‘time for sleep’ signal. When this happens, you *fall* asleep naturally unless you conscious mind decides there is a need to stay awake. The unconscious mind makes sleep happen by changing your body chemistry, creating muscular relaxation and slowing the thoughts so you drift into unconsciousness, safely and willingly.

The less there is for your conscious mind to attend to, the better you will sleep.

You don’t want to wind yourself up when you want to wind down but ironically this is the very time that your thought engine starts motoring. The moment you are alone with your thoughts and feelings, the endless stream can take over. You may not even be anxious but simply be over-stimulated by the day you’ve had or by new ideas, projects and plans.

**Coping with the Chatter and Clutter in Your Mind**Let’s look at how to manage when you want to fall asleep but feel you can’t? What are you aware of around you and inside you? Stop right now and become aware of the ongoing mental chatter inside your mind. At bed time, your surroundings are hopefully quiet but inside but your mind may be still hyperactive and noisy. When this happens your attention is more likely to be focused on your non-stop chain of thoughts, feelings, images and self talk and it seems louder and more insistent.

Will I even get to sleep? What’s wrong with me ?

If only….when….

What if…..Help!

And on top of a busy mind, the problem is is made worse by worrying about not being able to fall sleep. This can become a vicious spiral of restless struggling, feeling bad and getting increasingly anxious. You then begin to associate bed with bad feelings and dread with sleep.

So although it seems that you doing something when worrying, fretting is in fact making you feel worse. In fact fretting about what you cannot change solves nothing and it drains you of energy and keeps you up at night. You can’t easily stop the automatic brain activity but you can learn to direct your attention elsewhere and away from your thinking.

What follows are several techniques and tips to learn to put your conscious mind to bed and allow your unconscious mind to take over.

**Plan To Worry before Bedtime**

Strangely, it can help if before bedtime you start by literally inducing worry! Do this as part of your wind-down behaviour. Get your immediate concerns off your mind. This is part of being human. Some people are so used to worrying that they automatically feel it is wrong not to worry. They even confuse worrying with caring. You need to learn that you can care without worrying.

There is a famous anonymous prayer which it may help to remember.

*God grant me
serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference*

**Deal with the worries that you can do something about**

Take yourself seriously and have a regular meeting with yourself. If you are the sort of person who likes to write things down, take a sheet of paper and write down all your current worries in two columns.

Create Column A with problems that you can do something about and Column B with problems that you can’t do anything about right now. Then list some things you can do, connected with the worries in Column A. Write or plan a To Do list for the day ahead.

**Taking Your Feelings Seriously**

It is often only at night that we have the time to reflect on life deal with our concerns. Ironically, this is the very time when we need to wind down. Sometimes we find ourselves awake with a nagging feeling that won’t go away**. Because we are unsettled by them** we defend ourselves against then by trying to ignore them. But trying to avoid them can make them stronger as they want to be heard! It works much better if we accept them and try to find out what is behind them. See them as our friends trying to communicate with us.

**For example if you are angry, start b**y paying attention to it and asking yourself why this is important to you, then you can move on and accept or deal with the situation.

First let yourself feel the emotion; just experience it. Let it be heard and felt. Then ask; ‘Why do I feel this way?’ Or ‘Why does this matter to me?’ Whatever the answer, ask again and why does that answer matter to me?

Keep asking until you get a positive answer. This will be the positive value which your unconscious mind wants you to understand. The things that bother you tend to be about your deeper values in life you really care about.

# Sleep Induction Techniques

# Now your thoughts have been attended to, what follows are eight techniques to allow your body and conscious mind to let go and fall into or back to sleep if you wake in the night.1. Deep and Slow Breathing

Stressful breathing is fast, involves the rib muscles and makes the shoulders tense. Calm breathing has a slow rate and is done with the abdominal muscles relaxed. Put your hand on your stomach and feel it swell as you slowly breathe in.

Relax your jaw to help you to breathe slowly. Let your lower jaw drop slightly, as if you were starting a small yawn. Keep your tongue still and resting in the bottom of your mouth. Let your lips go soft. Breathe slowly and in a three-beat pattern of breathe in, breathe out and rest. Stop forming words, don’t even think about words. Instead bring your attention to how you are breathing. If it wanders just bring it back to your breathing.

Breathe in and out, slowly and regularly, at a comfortable rate. As you breathe in and out slowly, you will gradually feel yourself starting to relax. You will feel the tension draining away. As you breathe in and as you breathe out; say to yourself, “One, two, three.” Or each time you breathe out, repeat a focus word like “peace” or “relax.”

**Exercise 2.**  **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

This technique teaches you to tense up and release groups of muscles around your body. The aim is to make your muscles relax. A firm contraction leads to a deep relaxation. You need to become aware of the feelings you get in your body when you tense and release muscles. There are 16 muscle groups to tense and release and it can take up to 20 minutes to go through it all.

Relax and focus on how your muscles feel with each clench and release.

1. Raise your eyebrows.
2. Screw up your eyes and wrinkle your nose.
3. Clench your teeth and pull back the corners of your mouth.
4. Pull your chin down and press your head back against the bed, tense your neck muscles and relax
5. Draw your shoulders back then let go.
6. Make a fist with your right hand without using your upper arm. Push your right elbow down against the bed while your hand is relaxed.
7. Make a fist with your left hand without using your upper arm.
8. Push your left elbow down against the bed while your hand is relaxed.
9. Tighten your abdominal muscles (make your stomach hard).
10. Tense and relax each buttock
11. Tense and relax your pelvic floor
12. Tense the thigh of your right leg by contracting the muscles, which go to your knee.
13. Point your right foot down.
14. Point your right foot up towards your face.
15. Tense the thigh of your left leg by contracting the muscles, which go to your knee.
16. Point your left foot down.
17. Point your left foot up towards your face

#### Exercise 3. Daydreaming

In this exercise you are allowing yourself to have a pleasant day dream.

* Decide on a pleasurable place to be in your imagination or memory that feels calm and safe where you can be calm and still. For example, lying in a hammock, sitting on a swing or in a rocking chair.
* See it, hear it, feel it and wallow in it. Feel the atmosphere around you and feel the warmth or coolness and the pleasure. Let any images that come into your mind move and drift in and out of your consciousness. Follow the trail of your images as they start to come involuntarily and succeed each other, like watching a film.
* If other thoughts interfere, just notice them and let them go and return to your favourite place.
* Continue to practice this and build up the image to last as long as you like.

Or a try this in a slightly different way:

Imagine your tensions being breathed out, a little at a time with each breath. Imagine that each time you breathe in, you are breathing in peace a little at a time. Breathe out tension, breathe in peace, gently breathing, and feeling peace flowing through your body.

Choose a pleasant colour for ‘peace’ and see and feel it flowing through you warmly and gently. Follow the trail of your images as they follow each other.

**Exercise 4. Practice Feeling Drowsy.**

Remember a time when you felt very warm and drowsy, so much so that you want to be left to sleep. How did that felt like in your body? Bring all those feelings and sensations into the present. Now imagine you have all around you people that are just as tired as you. Notice that some have difficulty keeping their eyes open. Some are yawning. Let yourself yawn too and let your mind drift. ..drift and yawn, yawn and drift...

**Exercise 5. Slow Talking to Yourself**

You may not be aware that how you talk to yourself internally affects how you feel. We are mostly aware of our internal voice when we are feeling frustrated or self critical. Remember the last time you told yourself off. You probably sounded loud and spoke to yourself in an impatient, harsh tone.

Now think of how you would tell a child a bedtime story if you wanted them to go to sleep. You would probably speak slowly, softly, gently and rhythmically.

Now recall how you talk to yourself when you are fed up and can’t sleep. Hear the words and how your inner voice sounds. Next change the tone of your inner voice, slowing it down and making it sound gentle and see if you can move the voice away from yourself a bit.

Practice slowing your inner voice and any mental images, bring the volume or brightness down. Literally fade away.

**Exercise 6** **Bore Yourself to Sleep**

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Psychologists have discovered that whether we are awake or asleep our minds are constantly involved in a stream of consciousness that consists of images, sounds and feelings. When we describe these images out loud, it increases our intelligence by creating more complex neural networks in our brains.

However, they also discovered that when researchers described their image stream to themselves silently, with their internal dialogue, they found it impossible to stay awake. Some could stay awake for only a few minutes, others took a little longer.

If you find yourself unable to get to sleep, simply close your eyes and describe whatever you are aware of silently to yourself in a relaxed, monotone voice. For example: *“Now I am aware that I see the ocean . . . now I am aware that I hear the sound of my friend’s voice . . . now I am aware I see a swimming pool . . . I see a giraffe . . . I taste an orange . . . I can hear the sound of a car . . . I can feel the sun on my body,” and so on.*

No matter how bizarre the things are that come into your mind, just continue describing them in a monotone voice. If you talk to yourself in an excited way, then you will excite yourself and keep yourself awake. You know how some people just drone on when they are talking to you, and you find yourself quickly bored and very soon wanting to nod off? You need to do just that to yourself. Describe to yourself whatever comes into your mind and bore yourself to sleep.

If you are still awake a few minutes after starting this process, then you need to do two things: first, make your voice even more monotone as you describe your experience; and secondly, do it continuously. If you do this properly, it is absolutely impossible to stay awake.

**Exercise 7. Keep your eyes open**

There is a good chance that you are relaxed enough for this to work. See how long you can lie relaxed but with your eyes open. You will soon feel you want to close them.

**Exercise 8. Self Hypnosis**

You should do this when you are already relaxed from having done the previous exercises. You need to give your mind something easy, passive and ordinary to do.

Some people do find listening to relaxation tapes and music soothing. Others like talk podcasts or MP3 downloads helpful as they occupy the conscious mind in an undemanding way and which may allow you to fall asleep. If you are concerned about disturbing a sleeping partner, use ear plugs.

NB. Listening to the radio is not advised as news items and knowing that time is ticking away can be disturbing.

**a) Counting Sheep Backwards**
The famous idea of counting sheep actually works. We suggest you do it by trying to counting sheep backwards. Start by seeing a sheep in your mind’s eye. The sheep will have a number on it. The first sheep will have 100. Watch it walk by. Then the next will appear with 99 on it. Watch it pass by. Then 98 will appear and so on. You can choose any animal or object you like but make sure you see each one in your mind’s eye with its number move in front of you.

If you stop or start thinking about something else, just go back to 100 and start again. It is highly unlikely you will get to 0.

**b) Blackboard Exercise**Another way you can occupy your conscious mind is to imagine a black board in front of you. In one hand you have a piece of chalk and in the other you have an eraser or blackboard rubber. You then write 100 with the chalk and then rub it out with your other hand. Then you right 99 and again use your other hand to rub it out. Continue. If you find your mind wandering, start again from 100.

There are also many good relaxation tapes which you can get from your local library to occupy your conscious mind to let go and fall asleep naturally.

Comprehensive patient resources are available at [www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)

***Good Night and Sleep Well***

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**Mo Ressler**

**Primary Care Individual and Couples Therapist**This material on sleep is derived from a number of sources in the public domain but in particular from Paul McKenna’s book: I Can Make You Sleep (Bantum Press) There is a hypnotic sleep inducing relaxation CD in the back of this book.