

## Strategies to Start Sleeping Well Again

Sleep is essential to our wellbeing. It is an opportunity for our bodies to repair themselves, both physically and psychologically. When we fail to get enough quality sleep over a period of time, it can become a serious issue with potentially significant consequences.

Over one-quarter (27%) of North Americans have occasional insomnia and 9% have chronic insomnia. Common causes include big changes in daily routine, pain, nausea, shortness of breath, depression, anxiety, medications, etc. Sometimes insomnia goes away on its own, but not always and may require intervention either by the individual or a healthcare practitioner.

In our 21st century world, we have developed numerous habits and routines which are not necessarily conducive to good quality sleep. When insomnia is ongoing, the first approach to treatment should be to alter sleep habits (**it is always important to consult your physician if you are experiencing sleep issues in case further investigation is warranted**). There is ample clinical evidence supporting the effectiveness of a concept called **Sleep Hygiene** which is a term given to a constellation of recommendations that help to identify and alter daily habits and routines with the specific aim of improving sleep quality. Even a few slight adjustments can, in some cases, mean the difference between sound sleep and a restless night.

### Routine:

Develop a routine. Setting a bedtime routine is important, it cues your body that it's time to go to sleep. Establish a set routine that you follow every night. Plan ahead each day so you can start your routine at about the same time each night.

- \* Make sure to allow yourself enough time to get at least 7 hours of sleep time.
- \* Set the alarm and get out of bed at the same time everyday, weekends and holidays included, regardless of how much or well you slept.
- \* Do not nap during the day. If you feel like napping, try participating in an activity that actively engages your body or mind. If you must nap then do so for no longer than 15-30 minutes early in the afternoon and be finished by around 3pm.
- \* For example, at 9pm have a hot bath, put on your pajamas, brush your teeth, then listen to soft music or read on the couch until you start to feel sleepy and then go to bed.
- \* Eventually you will reestablish a sleep pattern.

### Sleep Behavior:

Developing appropriate sleep behaviors will help your body to associate the bed and bedroom with sleep, not frustration.

- \* Go to bed only when sleepy.
- \* Use the bed only for sleep or sex. Do not read, work, eat, use the computer, tablet, phone, etc. or watch TV in bed (get that TV out of the bedroom).
- \* If unable to fall asleep after 20 -30 minutes, get out of bed, go to another room and do something boring that doesn't include TV, computers, lots of light, etc. (read the user manual for your camera or a section of the newspaper you have no interest in) and only return to bed when you feel sleepy.
- \* Try relaxing with calm music, relaxation exercises, meditation, etc.
- \* You may also want to try a warm, decaffeinated drink.
- \* Repeat this strategy as many times as necessary.

#### Raise Your Body Temperature:

Raising body temperature before bed can be helpful. Sleeping is associated with a decline in core body temperature from a relative state of warmth.

- \* You can raise your body temperature by exercising 3-4 hours before bed (try to finish light to moderate exercise at least 2 hours before, and strenuous exercise 4 hours before bedtime as exercise too close to bedtime can be too stimulating and make it harder to sleep).
- \* Taking a warm bath 30-90 minutes before bed is a good way to relax and raise your body temperature.

#### Bedroom Environment:

A comfortable, inviting, relaxing bedroom environment will help promote an association with restfulness.

- \* Make sure that you have a comfortable, supportive mattress and fresh, comfortable bedding.
- \* Maintain a comfortable, cool, steady room temperature throughout the night. If your room is too cold, too hot or if the temperature fluctuates too much during the night it can disrupt sleep.
- \* Keep the room dark. Use blackout material over the windows or an eye mask if necessary. Avoid lighted clocks or other sources of continuous light.
- \* Minimize extraneous noise as much as possible. Earplugs or a continuous source of soft, non-fluctuating background white noise may be helpful to cancel out other, unavoidable noises.

- \* If you are a "clock-watcher," hide the clock so you can't see it or easily reach it.
- \* If your pets keep you awake, keep them out of the bedroom.

### Ingestion:

Several commonly used substances can hinder sleep quality. Understanding which ones, and how to time their use if necessary, is important.

- \* Caffeine is a stimulant associated with sleep disturbances. Ideally caffeine should be stopped completely if you are having sleep troubles. Caffeine stays active in the body for a long time, so even use of caffeine early in the day may affect sleep at night. If caffeine is unavoidable, then use it as sparingly as possible in the morning only.
- \* Nicotine is also a stimulant and should be avoided up to 4 hours before bedtime and upon night awakening.
- \* Alcohol is a depressant and may help with falling asleep but often causes awakenings later in the night. Avoid alcohol close to bedtime.
- \* Some prescription and non-prescription medications and supplements contain stimulants and therefore impact sleep quality.
- \* Check with your pharmacist or physician to find out if any of your medications might be hampering your ability to sleep.
- \* Avoid heavy food or large meals close to bedtime.
- \* A light, healthy snack before bedtime however, may be sleep inducing.
- \* Don't drink large amounts of fluid too close to bedtime

### Relaxation:

- \* Making an "effort" to fall asleep will not produce sleep. Sleep should not require effort.
- \* Mentally relaxing activities such as listening to calming music, calming thoughts, etc. can help.
- \* Avoid mentally stimulating activities such as an action movie, suspenseful book, stimulating conversation, etc. just before bed.
- \* Relaxation techniques such as controlled breathing, visual imagery, stretching, or other specific relaxation exercises may be helpful.

### Regular Exercise:

People who exercise regularly tend to have more restful sleep. Develop a program that works for you and gets you up and moving.

- \* Exercise for at least 30 minutes most days (*at least* 3 days a week).
- \* The best time to exercise is in the late afternoon or evening (finish at least 2 hours before bedtime).
- \* If the only time you can exercise is in the morning, of course go for it, it will likely help your sleep, just maybe not quite as much as exercise later in the day.

### Don't Worry:

- \* Leave your worries about work, school, health, relationships, etc. out of the bedroom.
- \* If you are a worrier, try scheduling a "worry time" earlier in the evening to deal with your worries.
- \* If you wake up in the middle of the night worrying, try writing down your worries and tell yourself you will address them during the day.
- \* Worrying about not sleeping doesn't help, it just makes it more likely that you won't sleep. Let go of your belief that you have to get 8 hours of sleep or you can't function.

### Electronics and Light:

Bright lights and electronic screens such as TVs, computers, tablets, laptops, phones, etc. can suppress the production and release of natural sleep inducing substances (not to mention be over-stimulating) and make it harder to sleep.

- \* Limit exposure to bright light in the evenings. If necessary, consider having dimmer switches or smart lights installed where possible on the light circuits you use most
- \* The summertime in our northern climate often means sunshine coming into our homes until quite late in the day. Consider installing blinds or curtains that block out the light in the rooms you use most in the evenings. Some people may find indoor use of sunglasses in the evening to be helpful.
- \* Avoid electronic screens too close to bedtime. If you absolutely can't avoid using electronics within 2 hours of bedtime, there are some things you can try which may help mitigate some of the sleep interrupting effects they can have. A great discussion on this topic is presented in the following link to "8 Ways to Use Your Gadgets at Night And Still

get a Good Night's Sleep." Please keep in mind the best option is still to turn them off 2 hours before bedtime and to only use them if doing so is unavoidable.

- \* Try to spend some time outdoors or in natural light every day. Getting natural light early in the day can be helpful for setting your body's natural sleep/wake cycle.

<http://www.fastcompany.com/3042717/sleep-week/8-ways-to-use-your-gadgets-at-night-and-still-get-a-good-nights-sleep>

#### Keep a Sleep Diary:

A sleep diary can help you get a better handle on your current sleep patterns and assist you in identifying what changes to make first.

- Please see the sample sleep diary at the end of the article.

#### **Keys to Success:**

**Start Small!!!** Making small changes can have a large impact on your sleep. Don't try to do everything all at once. Instead, pick one or two strategies and try them consistently. When you're ready, try adding a new strategy. The goal is to slowly start increasing behaviours that can help you sleep, while reducing things that are interfering with your sleep.

**Be Consistent.** Pick a strategy and use it consistently. Try to do the same thing every night.

**Be Patient.** These strategies can take time to improve your sleep. In fact, sometimes things may seem worse before they get better. It's not uncommon for people to feel extra tired as their body adjusts to the new schedule. So hang in there and stick with it!

**Chart your progress.** Use the Sleep Diary form to keep track of the strategies you're using and your weekly progress.

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**Sample Diary:** Take a few minutes each morning to fill in the information about your day yesterday, your sleep last night and your awakening this morning. Be as precise as you can but estimates are OK if you can't remember exactly. Choose at least one sleep hygiene strategy to start with your first week and log it in the diary. Each week or two try adding an additional strategy, continuing to log the strategies you are using. You now have a document you can reflect upon and you can share with your health care professional for further assistance if needed.

Day/Date	Example 01/01/16	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun	Sleep Hygiene Strategies used this week and the consistency with which they were employed.  i.e. Bedtime routine developed – implemented M-Th, S&S – Friday went out with friends late.
Time I went to bed last night	10pm								
Time I got out of bed for the day	6am								
No. of hours slept last night	6								
No. of awakenings and total time awake last night	2 1.5 hrs								
How long I took to fall asleep last night	½ hr								
How awake did I feel this morning? 1 – wide awake 2 – awake but a little tired 3 - sleepy	2								
No. of caffeinated drinks and time when I had them yesterday	none								
No. of alcoholic drinks and time when I had them yesterday	1 glass of wine w/dinner at 7pm								
No. of nicotine doses and when I had them yesterday	none								
Medications (other than regularly scheduled prescriptions) What and when	Naproxen 220mg 1 at noon								
No. of naps, time and duration yesterday	1 30 min								
Exercise times and lengths yesterday	6am – 30 min walk								
How sleepy did I feel during the day yesterday? 1 – so sleepy had to struggle to stay awake much of the day. 2 – somewhat tired 3 – fairly alert 4 – wide awake	2								

