

# TIP SHEET FOR MANAGING SLEEP DIFFICULTIES



## Sleep – what effect does not sleeping well have?

At some stage, most of us experience difficulty with sleeping. This may be related to worry about assignments or exams, or issues in our personal lives which preoccupy us and get in the way of being able to study as efficiently as we'd like. Sometimes there appears to be no apparent reason behind our disrupted sleep. Whatever the cause, it's very frustrating!

Sleep difficulties can make life miserable. It can mean that it is hard to concentrate, focus and be alert. You may find yourself easily distracted and irritable. You may feel depressed or anxious.

It is the quality of sleep rather than the quantity which matters most. Research shows that it is more beneficial to sleep between 6.5 and 8.5 hours most nights. We do know that people who have consistently less than 4 hours of sleep or those who sleep for more than 10 hours per night are more likely to have health problems. What is most important is how you feel during the day and whether you can meet the demands you face.

It is important to remember that when you are sleep deprived, it is not a good time to be making big decisions which could have longer term consequences – decisions like changing a course or giving up your tertiary studies.

## What can I do to help myself?

These tips may help you to set up a routine which could improve your sleep. Once you have a plan, try to stick to it for a fortnight. By then, hopefully, you will have managed to establish a better sleep pattern.

- Try to get up at the same time each day, even when you have had a restless night and feel exhausted. This is a crucial part of beginning to get a better sleep routine that helps you feel rested.
- You may want to go for a short walk in the morning. Early exposure to sunlight has proven to be a helpful way to adjust your body clock - something that gets disrupted when you are having difficulties sleeping.
- During the day, set aside some 'Worry Time' where you can jot down everything that is worrying you. Write rapidly without judging what you are writing. Allow yourself to do this for about 20 minutes. When you are worrying at night, you can remind yourself that you will have 'Worry Time' again the next day. Tell yourself that night time is for sleeping, not for worrying.
- Let your mind associate your bed with sleep. Try not to study on your bed. And, if you need a short power nap in the afternoon, go to bed for 15-20 minutes rather than snoozing in a chair at your desk.
- Research has repeatedly shown that exercise is beneficial in improving sleep but be sure that you don't exercise within a few hours of going to bed. Otherwise you'll upset your body clock and feel more alert as bedtime approaches.
- Try to avoid substances like coffee, tea, chocolate, alcohol and cigarettes, particularly in the evenings. Heavy meals just before bedtime can make sleeping difficult. There is evidence that a light meal with a little protein, or warm milk, can improve sleep. Herbal teas may also help.

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- About half an hour before it's time for bed, begin your 'wind-down' time. Computer and TV screens tend to be very stimulating for the brain so choose quieter activities. Perhaps have a warm bath or read a chapter of a novel or listen to soothing music.
- Be sure that your room is prepared for sleep. For example, set the alarm – but put the alarm clock somewhere so that you can't keep checking the time. Make sure that your bed and pillow are comfortable. Is there enough air in your room? Do you need an eyemask to keep out the light or ear plugs to block noise? Could you keep a pen and paper near your bed so that you can briefly jot down any worries, ideas or other thoughts which may be interfering with sleep? Would it be useful to listen to gentle music or to a story? You may want to borrow CDs from your local library.
- You need to go to bed when you feel sleepy. Sleep comes in 90 minute rhythmic cycles of lighter and deeper sleep. Before falling asleep, body temperature and blood pressure drop slightly and it is helpful to learn to tune into your body's signals that it is time for sleep. These signals indicate a window of low arousal. This is the best time to go to bed, even if it means taping the end of that film you are watching or reading the unfinished article the next day. Remember that you can't force yourself to sleep.
- When you are in bed, you can practice relaxation exercises to help you go to sleep. It may be useful to read the Tip Sheet on relaxation. Some visualisations that you could use could include imagining yourself walking slowly down a spiral staircase or lying on a beach as you watch the tide go out or strolling down a bush path into a valley below. You could count backwards slowly from 500 or concentrate on keeping your breath slow, deep and regular by counting your breath in and gently repeating a word like 'relax' or 'release' as you breathe out. You could progressively relax your muscles, starting with your toes and working up towards your head, by thinking about that area of the body and allowing it to become heavy before you move to concentrate on the next area of your body.
- Even if you can't sleep, rest is beneficial. However, if you haven't fallen asleep within 20 minutes and feel restless, get up and do something relaxing until you do feel sleepy. Remember that you are trying to ensure that your brain associates your bed with sleeping. Make sure that you keep the light levels low as a cue to your brain that it is sleeping time. As soon as you feel tired, go back to bed. You may find that before you know it, the alarm clock will ring and it will be time to get up and begin your day!

## What about sleeping tablets?

It is generally best to work at getting a natural sleep using these ideas rather than taking medication. However, sometimes medication can assist you to get through a difficult period and establish a regular sleeping pattern. Sleeping tablets should only be taken for 2 or 3 nights and in the lowest possible dose. If you are not sleeping because you are depressed or anxious, it is better to get help for these specific issues.

We wish you the best of luck in your efforts to establish a routine which helps you to get your sleeping routine back. If you find any other techniques which are particularly useful, please let us know so that we can pass on your tip to other students.

## Where can I get help from others?

- Talk to a counsellor at the Newcastle campus (024921 5801) or at the Central Coast campus (024348 4060).
- Make an appointment to see your doctor.
- Lifeline 131 114 offers a 24-hour service, as do the Psychiatric Emergency Centre (1 800 655 085) for the Hunter region or the Central Intake (4320 3500) for the Central Coast area.

## What other resources are available?

### Websites

[www.shuteye.com](http://www.shuteye.com); [www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org) [www.stanford.edu/~dement/howto.html](http://www.stanford.edu/~dement/howto.html); [www.sleep.org.au](http://www.sleep.org.au); [www.sleepoz.org.au](http://www.sleepoz.org.au); [www.sleepbetter.com.au](http://www.sleepbetter.com.au)

### Books

Wong, M. (1989) *Sleep without Drugs*. Melbourne: Hill of Content.

### CDs/ DVDs:

Petrea King 'Golden Light Meditation' or 'Learning to Meditate', or 'Soar like an Eagle' or 'Sleep: a Guide to deep and restful sleep'. Look at her website [www.questforlife.com.au](http://www.questforlife.com.au)

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