

Strategies for Improving Sleep

These strategies have been found to be very useful in assisting people to sleep. They can be particularly helpful if you are experiencing pain which interferes with your sleep.

- ❖ **Establish a routine.** If you go to bed at the same time every night, you are training your body to know when it should be ready to sleep. No matter how much sleep you have had, try to get up at the same time in the morning. Use an alarm clock for this. The body needs to experience hours of daylight in order to distinguish night from day, which triggers the message for sleep.
- ❖ **Keep to the routine even on weekends and holidays.** If you are training yourself to establish a routine, you need to stick to your schedule for at least for a few months until your sleep habits are established. Staying up until after midnight on weekends or holidays will trigger the old learned habits of sleep difficulty. Also, this often will increase the length of time your body will go without nutrition from eating. You eventually may be able to sleep in, once you have retrained your body into the new habits for a sufficient period of time.
- ❖ **Sleeping in the daytime is not a good idea** as this confuses your body's natural clock (regulated in part by melatonin, which your body produces more when it is dark), and makes it more difficult to sleep at night.
- ❖ **Practice “dusk simulation.”** Start dimming the lights around the house 1 hour before bedtime and consider using only candle light. This will promote the release of natural chemicals in your body that help initiate and regulate sleep.
- ❖ **Take a warm bath before bedtime** to relax tense muscles. The drop in body temperature will allow your body to drift into sleep. A warm bath increases your core body temperature temporarily, then as you retire for the night, your body temperature drops a greater degree triggering sleep. Consider adding lavender essential oil to the bath water – this is a relaxing aromatherapy.
- ❖ **Do some physical exercise during the day** (walking is especially good.) This means you are physically, not just mentally, tired at the end of the day.
- ❖ **Avoid chemical stimulants in the evenings**, e.g. drinking caffeine or alcohol. These inhibit getting to sleep. Instead, a small warm milk drink or herbal tea (e.g. chamomile tea) can help you settle to sleep. You may also have a light snack – eating a starch, such as a plain baked potato or piece of bread, or drinking a glass of warm milk 30 minutes before bedtime may increase production of the brains own natural sleep-inducing chemicals.

- ❖ **Keep your bed as a place for sleep, not anything else.** When you get into bed, say to yourself, ‘Now I am going to sleep.’ It is not a good idea to watch TV, talk on the phone, use a laptop, or do your homework in bed. If you keep your bed for sleeping only, your body learns that when you get into bed it is time for sleep.
- ❖ **Make sure your bedroom environment is conducive to sleep.** It is important that your room be dark, quiet, and somewhat cool to promote sleep. Use blackout drapes or aluminum foil on the windows to block out light. Use a small fan to create “white noise” to block out other noises. Keep your room temperature around 68 degrees.
- ❖ **If you are unable to sleep after 10-15 minutes, get out of bed,** go to another room and do a quiet activity until you feel sleepy, then return to your bed and try to sleep again. You may need to do this several times to start with. You should not remain in your bed for long periods of time if you cannot fall asleep, because then your body associates your bed with the inability to sleep.
- ❖ **Avoid stimulation activities near bedtime** such as exercise, having stimulating chats or arguments, reading exciting books, eating heavy meals (a light snack is OK), watching TV or movies, chatting online or texting, or doing demanding intellectual work. Give yourself wind-down time. Calming activities that can help some people settle to sleep include: reading a book or magazine, listening to easy music or the radio, having a warm (not too hot) bath or shower. Try to notice any signs of tiredness in your body, as this is the best time to go to bed.
- ❖ **Use relaxation strategies before you get into bed,** or if you wake up during the night. For example, focus your mind on your breathing and take slow and deep breaths from the bottom of your stomach. Although this focus may seem difficult to start at night, it can be surprisingly effective, especially if you have been practicing relaxed breathing techniques at other times. If focus seems especially hard, limit yourself to 10 or 20 breaths to start. Mark these off by moving a finger with each breath. Don’t use numbers to count, as this is distracting from the focus on breath. This is helpful in the middle of the night to assist getting back to sleep.
- ❖ **Use your imagination positively.** This is like creating your own movie (or dream) behind your eyes. Imagine a quiet place or activity you love, fill in all the physical details including color, texture and smell of the place. Put yourself in this movie and freely move about. The place or activity you create can be whatever or wherever you want. In the country, by the sea, at home – what matters is that it is peaceful and feels safe and interesting to you.

- ❖ **Keep a notebook by the bed**, so if your thoughts are racing or worrying, you can write them down. Tell yourself that it is unlikely that you will find a solution right now and that your mind is just on “repeat mode.” It’s OK to stop thinking about them now because you can think about them in the morning when you are more likely to find a solution.

Other Points to Remember:

- ❖ If you don’t sleep tell yourself it is OK. While lying in bed your body is resting and you will be all right in the morning.
- ❖ Make sure clock faces are not visible so that you are not ‘clock watching.’ Move the bed stand clock away from the bedside and face the illuminated side towards the wall. This also will help decrease the light in the room and will lessen the distress of looking at the time should you wake.
- ❖ A routine may take several months of persistent practice to establish.
- ❖ In general, no harm will occur if you do not sleep for one or two nights. Remember you are still resting and you will catch up on sleep later because you are tired.
- ❖ Accept that progress may be slow, especially if the problem has been there a while. If it seems hard and you are losing heart, keep a log of your sleeping patterns and compare them with your earlier baseline. You can gradually move your going-to-bed time back by 15 minutes at a time for a week or so. To keep yourself on track, record whatever factors are affecting your sleep, such as difficulty getting to sleep, how long you slept for, how many times you woke in the night, and how you felt when waking up in the morning.

Additional Options:

- ❖ Herbal therapies also may be something to consider and are safe when used appropriately. One to two droppers full of Valerian root liquid extract can be placed in a small amount of warm water and taken a half-hour before bedtime. This needs to be taken nightly for about a week before seeing real benefits. Melatonin 5-10 mg about 45-60 minutes before bedtime every night for a week can also be helpful. Melatonin is a naturally occurring substance that is produced in our brains to help promote sleep. Sometimes our brain does not produce enough of this substance then our sleep patterns get disrupted. By replacing what is missing, we often get our sleep patterns back on track. This dietary supplement can be bought over the counter at most health food stores or GNC.
- ❖ Another consideration is to add 1-2 cups of Epsom salts to bathwater and take a bath about one hour prior to bedtime. Epsom salts are magnesium salts, and magnesium is a natural pain reliever and muscle relaxer that can assist in initiating sleep onset.
- ❖ If sleep issues or pain are extreme or continue to get worse, you may benefit from visiting a sleep clinic (for Children’s Mercy Sleep Disorders Clinic, call 913-696-8519) or discussing pain medications that can also assist sleep (e.g., amitriptyline.) But remember that medications are only a short-term answer; retraining yourself is the long-term solution.