

## Establishing a Regular Sleep Pattern

Depression, anxiety, and other life difficulties often disrupt sleep. The sleep disruption can lead to even more anxiety or depression (which may worsen the sleep problem, which may...well, you get the picture).

In other words, sleep difficulties are a cause *and* an effect of mood problems. Regardless of which came first, it can be worth the effort to work on getting a good night's sleep.

### The Top Four Mood-Related Sleep Problems

Depression and anxiety are associated with all kinds of sleep problems. Here are the four most common ones:

- **Sleep onset insomnia.** Regularly taking more than an hour to get to sleep.
- **Sleep maintenance insomnia.** Frequent waking, plus difficulty getting back to sleep.
- **Early morning waking.** Waking up extremely early (e.g., 4 am) and being unable to get back to sleep.
- **Hypersomnia.** Requiring much more sleep than usual (up to 14 hours a night).

Other common sleep problems include sleep apnea (severe snoring), nocturnal myoclonus (muscle spasms while sleeping), and restless leg syndrome (leg discomfort and jerking). If you believe that you have any of these problems, tell your therapist and/or your physician.

### The nature of sleep

Sleep is more complicated than an on-off switch. There are a number of different types of sleep, based largely on the type of brain waves people experience during them. The lightest form of sleep, and the type we spend more of the night in than any other, is rapid eye movement, or REM sleep (so-called because of the characteristic movements of the eyes during this stage). REM sleep is the stage most closely associated with dreaming. Other forms of sleep (sometimes called non-REM), differ more in depth than type, and are numbered 1 through 4, with 4 being the deepest form of sleep.

The diagram on the next page gives a somewhat simplified view of the sequence of sleep stages over the course of a typical night.



## Tips for improving your sleep

Take a look at these suggestions for improving your sleep. Place a check mark beside any that seem particularly important in your own situation.

- \_\_\_\_\_ **Avoid over-the-counter sleep medication.** These preparations may put you to sleep, so they might seem effective. But most of them also disrupt the stages of sleep – particularly the early deep-sleep stages. When you awaken, you are likely to feel groggy and unrested. Your sleep will have lost some of the restorative capacity it should have.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Don't drink to sleep.** Alcohol can make you sleepy, but it disrupts the sleep stages, particularly when the alcohol is at its highest concentration in your bloodstream: the first third of the night, when you should be getting your deepest sleep.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Use prescription sleep medication wisely.** Some prescription medications are less disruptive to the sleep stages than over-the-counter pills. Nevertheless, these should be used cautiously, at the same dose each night. Most sleeping medications should not be relied upon over the long term (more than six months), though your case may differ. The mark of the success of any sleep medication is not whether it puts you to sleep, but how you feel during the day. Report the results to your physician.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Ask about medication scheduling.** Some antidepressant medication wakes you up and helps keep you more alert. This may be welcome during the day but can be a problem at night. If you are on medication, ask your physician whether it might be affecting your ability to go to sleep and, if so, whether it would be appropriate for you to take it earlier in the day.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Set a standard bed-time and keep to it.** Going to bed at different times can easily disrupt your 24-hour cycle. This is what causes most jet lag: not the air travel, but the change in bedtime. If your weekend bedtime is three hours later than your weekday bedtime, you are effectively giving yourself the jet lag of flying from Vancouver to Toronto and back every week. During depression be precise about your bedtime. If you can't keep exactly the same bedtime each night, at least try to go to bed within an hour of the same time.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Don't go to bed too early.** If you never get to sleep before 1 a.m., don't go to bed before 12. You will only spend the extra time awake, frustrated that you are not sleeping. Want to get to sleep earlier? Set your bedtime about 30 minutes before the time you have normally been getting to sleep. Then gradually begin going to bed earlier (by, say, a half-hour a week).

- **Set a standard rising time.** Get up at the same time each day even if you feel the urge to sleep in (and even if you went to bed later than usual). Getting out of bed may seem like a strange way to get better sleep, but the type of sleep you get in the early morning isn't all that helpful anyway. Having a standard rising time helps set your internal clock even more effectively than having a uniform bedtime.
- **Use an alarm clock.** If waking up at the same time each day is hard for you to do, an alarm clock can help. If you find yourself tempted to hit the snooze button, put the alarm clock across the room or in the hall. You'll have to stand up to turn it off, and it will be easier to prevent yourself from slipping back to sleep.
- **Save your bedroom for sleep.** Your bedroom should be a place you associate with sleep. Just as Pavlov's dogs salivated when they heard a bell, you want to feel sleepy at the sight of your bedroom. Avoid associating this area with activities that are inconsistent with sleep – working, eating, arguing, exercising, using the telephone, watching television, and so on. A few minutes with a book is fine, but don't read anything that's so involving you can't put it down. Sex is also fine – men in particular may find that having sex enables them to fall asleep quickly.
- **Create a good sleep environment.** The best bedroom temperature for most people is 18° to 21° (65°F to 70°F), though some prefer the room to be cooler. Avoid temperatures above 24° (75°F). If noise is a problem, some options include earplugs, soundproofing the room (cloth hangings can help a bit), and devices that emit white noise (e.g., fans or special noise machines). Eliminate hourly watch beepers or clocks that gong if they attract your attention. If a restless bed partner is a problem, consider a larger bed, special mattress, or even twin beds (at least until your sleep stabilizes).
- **Avoid napping during the day.** Long daytime naps can disrupt your ability to get to sleep at night. Some people groan that if they didn't nap they'd never be able to function. In all likelihood, their naps perpetuate the sleep problem at night. If, on the other hand, you are a great 20-minute napper, keep it up. But just have one a day.
- **Prepare for sleep.** Help your body make the transition from wakefulness to sleep by avoiding strenuous activity, exercise, heavy meals, and bright light for at least one hour before going to bed.
- **Practice breathing or distraction strategies when attempting to get to sleep.** It can be tempting to lie in bed thinking about problems or your plans for the next day. This will keep you awake, not put you to sleep. Practice any mental exercise that takes your mind away from these topics. Diaphragmatic breathing may help, particularly if you occupy your mind while doing it (perhaps by counting breaths).

## Special advice for hypersomnia

What if getting to sleep or staying asleep isn't the problem? What if you just sleep far too much? Hypersomnia (sleeping too much) is especially common in depression. Some people have hypersomnia throughout their depression. Others have insomnia when their mood is at its worst, then develop a tendency to oversleep when they start to recover. Here are a few options. Put a check mark beside any that seem to apply especially well to you.

- \_\_\_\_\_ **Ask about medications.** If you are on medication, ask your physician whether it has an activating or sedating effect. Let your physician know about your oversleeping and ask whether altering the time you take the medication might be helpful.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Develop a sleep schedule.** Follow the suggestions above for establishing a regular bed-time and rising time. Start by allowing yourself the amount of sleep you seem to need (12 hours or more if need be). Then gradually shrink your sleep period by about 15 minutes every four days until you are sleeping only about an hour more than you do when you're not depressed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Schedule morning appointments.** If sleeping late is a problem, schedule your appointments so that you absolutely have to get out of bed. Don't be mean to yourself, though: If you've been getting up at noon, don't schedule your appointments for 9 a.m.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Accept it.** Hypersomnia doesn't seem to be a particularly destructive symptom of depression. It tends to lift when your mood lifts. You may temporarily need more sleep than usual.

## Special advice for shift workers

Shift workers pose special problems because their lives impose regular disruptions on their circadian rhythms. To this group we might add flight crews, long-distance truckers, and others who work nights or odd hours, or who regularly cross time zones. Some individuals appear to manage shifts without difficulty, but many shift workers report problems with concentration, energy, sleep, and appetite. Here are some suggestions for them:

- \_\_\_\_\_ **Rotate less often.** Problems are created not by working nights, but by changing your sleeping hours. It helps if you don't change your schedule very often (say, once every two weeks).
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Stay on your shift on days off.** Changing from a night-shift schedule to a daytime schedule on your days off (then switching back to night-shift two days later) can make things worse because your body has to adjust to two big changes every week. If possible, consider maintaining your workday sleep cycle on your days off.

- \_\_\_\_\_ **Limit light before bedtime.** Exposure to daylight suppresses the release of melatonin, a hormone that helps you fall asleep. If you want to sleep during the day, try to be in a darkened room for at least an hour ahead of time.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Get light when you wake up.** When you first awaken, try to get out into the daylight. If it's dark at that time, consider trying out a light therapy unit to see if it helps.

What if you try everything and nothing works? Consider a job change. Some people (perhaps *most* people) are just not meant to work shifts. They don't handle the changes well and they need daylight. Humans did not evolve as nocturnal animals. If it is clear to you that your shifts contribute to your depression, and if you have tried a number of strategies to cope and nothing has worked, you may find yourself faced with a decision. Is the job really worth your health?



The worse your sleep, the more likely it is that your mood is being affected. Do you have any of the common sleep problems described in this section? Which?

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If you have been having problems sleeping, look back over the tips on getting better sleep. Try to come up with one or two of the tips in this section (or ideas of your own) that you could put into action.

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