

INSOMNIA

Introduction

You may find it odd that a feature of life with which everyone is familiar with, on occasion or from time to time, is listed as a problem. The truth is that lack of sleep may be a complicating factor in coping with times of stress. Additionally some people have developed styles and patterns which deny them sleep. The positive side of this dilemma is that now a great deal more is known about sleep and some of the things which improve or induce it without the use of medication. This page addresses a few concepts and remedial activities.

Forms of Insomnia

Normal

- Waking early
- Difficulty in getting to sleep for a period of time
- Prolonged, disturbed and light sleep
- Sleep which is interrupted by shock and fear on sudden waking (night terror)
- Sleep which is interrupted by nightmares
- Small amounts of sleep with cat napping at other times
- Occasional complete absence of sleep

Not so Normal

- Any of the above which becomes chronic (ie. lasts for an extended duration or occur in repeated bouts over a long time)
 - Sleep which has a radically disordered rhythm
 - Disturbance caused by shift work
 - Seasonally affected sleep e.g. excessive sleep in winter
 - Sleep disturbance associated with feeling depressed (or having Chronic Fatigue or ME)
 - Jet-lag
 - Apnoea (a sort of snoring but with a breathing lapse involved)
 - Snoring problems
 - Teeth grinding
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Strategies for Addressing Insomnia

Basically strategies to beat insomnia fall into these main categories:

- Getting help from others
- Changing your night-time routine
- Preparing the body for sleep
- Behaviour conducive to sleep
- Getting Help from Others
- Check with your doctor to assess whether you have a disordered pattern. This is particularly the case with abnormal sleep.
- Talk with a counsellor about issues which impinge on your sleep
- Consider referral to a sleep clinic if matters are advanced.
- Changing your Night-time Routine
- Noise - ear plugs, 'white noise' background distraction
- Temperature - not too hot, not too cold
- Don't go to bed hungry
- Try to modify late night drinking and go to the toilet in order to avoid being woken by a full bladder
- Make your bed as comfortable as possible
- Reduce mental activity two hours before sleep
- Reduce light levels two hours before sleep
- Have a range of distractions available for use in the event of insomnia - relaxed area away from the bed plus hot water bottle - light reading - something mechanical
- Create a sleeping environment which has a freedom from work and disturbance eg. screen off from essays!

Preparing the Body for Sleep

Use diet and herbs to provide you with the chemistry which encourages sleep, particularly foods containing melatonin may be helpful; oats, sweet corn, rice, ginger, tomatoes, bananas and barley all contain Melatonin. Oats contain most, barley least. Also carbohydrates broadly speaking affect the production of Tryptophan which is what effects the levels of Serotonin in the brain.

Temperature maintenance

- Decrease caffeine intake before sleep
- Decrease alcohol intake before sleep
- Avoid respiratory stimulants before sleep (cigarettes)
- Avoid exercise before bedtime (increases stress response chemistry in many people)
- Check for general sleep deprivation
- Behaviour Conducive to Sleep
- Keep sleep to limits; don't oversleep
- Avoid long daytime napping
- Don't allow too much sleeplessness to occur in bed.
- Get up and do light things until you feel drowsy again
- Don't magnify or alarm yourself over your sleepless state, this may make it worse.
- Keep a clutter free sleep area just for sleep (and sex!)
- Consciously stop yourself worrying at night. Write concerns down and deal with them in the morning.

Further Help

Books include:

The Natural Sleep Handbook - Anthea Courtney, Thomsons 1990

The Good Sleep Guide - Michael Van Straten, Kylie Cathie 1990
