

Sleeping



Having trouble with sleep?

Most people will find that at some point in their life they have trouble with sleeping. If you have a job interview or exams then you may find you can't sleep, or wake up early, and this is normal and nothing to worry about. Sometimes if you are unwell or stressed you may find your sleep

interrupted, but once you are better or the stress has gone then your usual sleeping patterns return.

However, some people have trouble with their sleeping for longer periods of time, and are unsure why this is so. Some people find that they are unable to get to

sleep, or may wake up in the night and be unable to fall asleep again. Other people may find it hard not to sleep and have trouble waking up. This leaflet will try to explain some of the reasons behind sleep problems and some things you might want to try.

Why do people have trouble with sleep?

Sleep is a very important function, which enables the body to rest, to renew, to grow and develop. But it is also an important function for our minds. If you have trouble sleeping for a long enough period, you will probably notice that your body is affected, but also your mood and sense of well being. You may start falling asleep at work!

There are many reasons that your sleep can be affected. Here are the main ones.



Physical illness, pain or distress

Physical illness, pain or distress can be a factor affecting people's sleep. If you are experiencing any of these and are having sleep problems for more than a few days, you might want to visit your GP for advice and support and investigate any physical health issues you may have.

Mental distress

Mental distress, worry, anxiety and depression can also have a major impact upon our sleep. If you have ruled out physical causes of over or under sleeping with your doctor, then it may be that something emotional is having an effect upon your sleeping.

Emotions, sleep and dreaming.

For most people, sleep plays an important role in our mental and emotional well being. When we are stressed our sleep can become disrupted; we may have nightmares that wake us up and leave us feeling emotionally stirred up. Why is this? How are sleep and emotions linked?

When we sleep we are unconscious, which means we are unaware of our normal surroundings. We may wake up at hearing a noise, or from a light shining in through the window, but we will spend most of the time in an unconscious

state. In order to be able to do this, we need to be comfortable, and to feel safe. If you think about it, sleep is a vulnerable state to be in, we are largely unaware of what is going on around us, and we have to be able to "let go". Our mind needs to be fairly relaxed. If you have had a very stressful day or have a lot on your mind, you'll know that this can make getting to sleep difficult. It's hard to "switch off".

If we manage to fall asleep, we then enter different cycles of sleep, and we also dream. Some people remember

their dreams very well, and other people don't. It is believed that dreaming plays an important role in sorting out our feelings and emotions, of making sense of things, of trying to work through anything that may be bothering us, or even fulfilling our wishes (we may do things in dreams that we wouldn't dare in waking life!). If you experience a nightmare, then you may wake up suddenly, and you may feel bewildered, frightened or confused. This feeling can be fleeting or may last for longer.

Waking up from a nightmare can be a sign that the emotions and feelings you were processing made you feel too vulnerable, and so you wake yourself up.

Usually our dreams, no matter how odd, do not wake us up. Often you won't even remember the dreams, your mind is just busy processing everything and you wake up and

get on with the day. But if you are worried about something, experiencing stress or anxiety, whether you are aware of it or not, your mind might resist getting into this vulnerable state where it experiences fearful feelings (like the type we have in nightmares) in the first place, by keeping us awake. So our unconscious mind may not 'let' us fall asleep. We stay awake,

less vulnerable, in control (even if it doesn't feel that way!).

Or, we may fall asleep, but then wake in the middle of the night and be unable to get back to sleep. If this is a regular occurrence, this again can be a sign that something is troubling our unconscious mind and wants us to be awake and in control.

Anxiety and sleeping - staying awake

It is common for people who have trouble sleeping to experience feelings of anxiety or restlessness. Anxiety is a feeling that keeps us in a state of being alert, 'wired', prepared, and can be a response to some feeling threat or danger – or of change, anything from a job interview to the fear of feeling emotional pain or losing control. For

example, if you have suffered a trauma or unexpected loss, the sickness of a child, or a relationship break up you may feel anxious and in a state of apprehension. It makes sleeping, relaxing and letting go very difficult. It may be that over time you manage these feelings yourself and have support from family or friends and your anxiety decreases

and you sleep well again. But if you are having trouble over a longer period, it may be helpful to get some support in the form of counseling or psychotherapy to help sort out and work through some of the worrying feelings or stresses.

Depression and sleeping - sleeping too much

It may be that you sleep more than you would like to, or have trouble staying awake. Again it's important to make sure there is not a physical reason for this by talking with your GP. It can be common for people who feel low, sad or depressed to sleep for longer than normal. Waking up can be difficult. Sleep may provide a safer emotional space to be

in, where feelings are not felt in the same way as in waking life. This may seem to conflict with what we said above about anxiety and not wanting to sleep because it feels unsafe. It will depend upon circumstances and your own emotional makeup whether you feel like shutting down from difficult feelings and protecting yourself or staying hyper-alert – and

we can sometimes alternate between states. For some people sleep is a safe, comforting place, for others a frightening place. We are all different and complex.

If you are experiencing prolonged feelings of sadness, depression – you might want to consider counselling or psychotherapy.

Things that may help you to sleep

There are many suggestions about how to sleep well that focus upon physical things such as room temperature, comfort of the bed, and not watching tv right before bed or eating a big meal. The Sleep Council's website has a wide range of information that you may find useful: www.sleepcouncil.com/

If you have the right physical environment, and need a bit of help with dealing with anxiety or other emotions, you might want to try the

following:

Keep a diary/journal and note down how you are feeling at the end of the day, so you get a chance to process things a little before bedtime

Soothing music or meditation tapes can help people drift off to sleep. The Mental Health Foundation have a range of free podcasts to help you relax

If you wake in the night and cannot get back to sleep, it may be helpful to get up, have a warm drink (not coffee as this contains caffeine and may keep you awake!) or a snack, or read for a while. It may then enable you to drop off again.

Don't be afraid to ask for help if you or your child or family members are having trouble with sleeping. Or seek professional help.

For a full range of leaflets visit our website www.tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/lifeissues

