

How To Improve Your Sleep

Sleep- it's good for you

There is a huge amount of information written about the benefits of sleep; it helps you to concentrate and remember things, it can prevent high blood pressure and lower your stress levels; it makes you look and feel better.

Just knowing all this could easily make you feel so pressurised that you don't get any sleep! So, how can you turn things around?

What's your sleep problem?

With sleep problems estimated to affect at least 1 in 3 people in the UK, it may help to know that you're not alone, even if it might feel like it when you're awake in the middle of the night. In order to improve your sleep, try to first identify the problem in more detail, by answering questions such as

- Is this a long term problem, or has it started recently? If recent, has anything changed in your life lately, e.g. are there any worries you need to try to resolve?
- Do you find it difficult to go to sleep initially, or do you fall asleep easily, but then wake up in the middle of the night, or early morning?
- How do you cope with your sleeping difficulties? For example, do you stay in bed trying to sleep even though you know it won't happen, or do you look at your phone, or get up and make a drink?

Having a clearer idea of what's standing in your way of a good night's sleep can help you to understand, and ultimately improve, the problem.

What can I do?

There are lots of things you can do to give yourself the best chance possible to improve your sleep. Here is a checklist with some suggestions:

- Room temperature- is this right? Do you need to open the window, or get an extra blanket or thicker duvet?
- Noise- if it's too noisy around you, consider getting some earplugs. Or, if you find it's too quiet, is it helpful for you to have some calming music on in the background?
- Bedtime routine- try to set aside the last half hour or hour before bed, to do something relaxing that prepares you for sleep, such as taking a bath or reading a book. Try to stay away from your phone and other devices even if it's difficult, as they are likely to stimulate your brain more. You may want to consider not studying right up until you go to bed, as it may be difficult to switch off. Try to plan your study so that you have enough time for some relaxation at the end of your day.
- Regularity- try to keep your bedtime and waking up time the same every day, as far as possible. If it's difficult to do this long term, try for a set period of time, e.g. two weeks, to help 're-set' your sleep.

- Food and drink- keep a glass of water by your bedside so you can stay hydrated throughout the night. Avoid heavy meals, caffeine (including chocolate and energy drinks), alcohol and nicotine too close to bedtime wherever possible, as these tend to interfere with your sleep amount and/ or quality.
- Unhelpful thoughts- a common sleep stealer. If you can't quieten your mind, try to write down anything that worries you. Keep it brief at this stage, and come back to your worries the next day, or as soon as possible. One common worry is the potential effect the next day if you don't sleep- try to challenge thoughts like this by reminding yourself of other times that you didn't sleep well, but you still managed to cope the next day.
- Visualisation- think of a place, real or imagined, that feels really comforting to you, maybe being on a beach or sitting by a log fire on a snowy day; try to go through this experience in detail from beginning to end in your mind, imagining the sounds, smells and sensations, to help you relax and focus away from unhelpful thoughts.
- Set realistic sleep expectations- most, if not all, people have a bad night's sleep every now and again, and many have periods of poor sleep throughout their lifetime. Whilst long term sleep deprivation isn't helpful, it's useful to stay realistic, so you don't panic if you don't sleep that well every now and again.
- Doctor's appointment- if you have tried everything else on the list and you are concerned that your sleep still isn't improving and you're not sure why, make a GP appointment to rule out any physical problems that can affect your sleep.

Other sources of help

Sleep self assessment- <http://www.nhs.uk/Tools/Pages/Sleep-self-assessment.aspx>

Sleep information and help, including a sleeping diary-

http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/minipax.cfm?mini_ID=25

Muscle relaxation-

<http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/~media/CCI/Mental%20Health%20Professionals/Anxiety/Anxiety%20-%20Information%20Sheets/Anxiety%20Information%20Sheet%20-%202004%20-%20Progressive%20Muscle%20Relaxation.pdf>

Article and details of apps helping you to manage time spent on your phone-

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jan/27/mobile-phone-addiction-apps-break-the-habit-take-back-control>

If you prefer to speak to someone, INTO Manchester has got a Counselling Service available, where you can talk to someone in confidence and get help to work through your sleeping difficulties. You can make an appointment by speaking to a member of the Welfare Team, or emailing the counsellor directly at lisabrinktherapy@gmail.com .