

Sleep Problems

Disclaimer: These notes are intended for information only, and should not be seen as a substitute for professional advice

Do I have a sleep problem?

Sleep needs vary from person to person. The range is wide; some people need only 4-6 hours per night, others may need 10 hours. Most people benefit from having at least 8 hours sleep per night to feel well and rested. However, the amount of sleep that you need will vary according to other factors, eg your age, health and fitness, and stress levels.

Normal sleep and the stages of sleep

It is normal to wake up several times each night. Most people don't recall these brief moments of waking, but for some it is difficult to get back to sleep again.

In fact, research shows sleep follows a pattern of four stages of brain wave activity.

Stages 1 and 2 are considered "light" stages of sleep. When you first fall asleep at night this is stage 1 sleep which lasts for about 5 mins. Here you are easily woken and if you are woken it feels like you were never asleep. Then you move into stage 2 where you remain for 10-20 mins. Stages 3 and 4 are deeper, more restful periods and last about 20-40 mins.

From here you move into the first episode of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. One complete sleep cycle (ie from stage 1 to REM) takes about 90 mins. Most dreaming occurs during REM sleep.

If the normal pattern of alternating stages of sleep is disturbed, sleep may not feel refreshing.

Depression and anxiety and health problems are often associated with disturbed sleep. Also some medications, prescription and over the counter medications can interfere with sleep, eg decongestants, sinus remedies, some asthma medications, and many others.

Sleeping pills may be prescribed by your General Practitioner for short term use. However, the withdrawal from sleeping medications used over a longer time period may be associated with rebound symptoms including increased anxiety and disturbed sleep.

If there are medical issues associated with disturbed sleep, consult your Doctor. If you do not have a GP whom you regularly consult, Curtin University Health Service is available to all students and staff of the university (08 9266 7345).

Some stressful situations are relatively short-term and the effect on sleep temporary.

Students often claim to be suffering with poor sleep towards the end of semester when study workloads are high and exams are looming. Usually this resolves once the pressure of exams is over.

Ongoing worries, relationship difficulties, grief, work overload, stressful life events and problems in managing time can also affect your sleep.

You might find it helpful to talk to a counsellor and find ways to deal with these issues. Free counselling is available to students and staff at the University Counselling Service (see below for contact details).

Tips for Self-Help: Improving Sleep

Many people have trouble sleeping once in a while. If it becomes persistent it can have a marked effect on how we feel and function. Some people find it hard to get to sleep at night,

others are troubled by waking up in the night, others wake earlier than they would like in the morning.

However there are some very effective strategies to help you get a good night's sleep.

1. Sleep Hygiene

- Exercise every day. It's simple: exercise tires the body and we are likely to sleep better when tired. Don't exercise late in the evening though.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol and nicotine in the late afternoon and evening. Caffeine (in tea, coffee, chocolate and cola) is a stimulant. If you drink a lot of caffeine during the day, try to cut back or replace this with a decaf option. Alcohol may help you fall asleep but the downside is that alcohol results in shallow and disturbed sleep, abnormal dream periods and early morning awakening.
- Try having a bedtime snack, about half an hour before bed, something healthy and plain, eg a glass of milk, a banana, a piece of toast. Don't eat a large meal close to bedtime.
- Develop a relaxing evening routine. Begin winding down at least half an hour before bedtime. Read something light, watch TV, listen to music, have a warm bath (showers tend to wake you up), listen to a relaxation tape or CD.
- Make a To Do List. Keep a notepad and pencil handy and if you think of something important, jot it down and let the thought go. This will help you avoid lying awake worrying about it.
- Make sure your sleeping environment is comfortable. Keep the room cool, dark, and consider using earplugs to block out noise.

2. Sleep Rules

- Cut out daytime naps, they will only make you feel less tired at night and disturb your sleep. If you feel sleepy when studying, get up and move around the room, take time out for some gentle stretches, get some fresh air.
- Learn to associate your bed with sleep. Do not read, watch TV, eat or worry in bed. Use your bed only for sleep and sex.
- Only go to bed when you are sleepy.
- If you are in bed and haven't fallen asleep within 15-20 mins get up and do something else. Go to another room and do some quiet activity – reading, listening to music. As you become sleepy, go back to bed. Do the same thing if you wake up at night: if you haven't fallen asleep after 15-20 mins, get up and only go back to bed when you are feeling sleepy.
- However, if you are awake but lying in bed resting peacefully, you may prefer to simply lie there and continue relaxing. This is nearly as restorative as sleep.
- If you wake early: get up and begin the day.
- Move any bedroom clocks of out view, just checking the time can increase the stress.
- Go to bed around the same time each night. When you are having trouble sleeping, however, go to bed later. If you are only getting 5 hours sleep a night, don't go to bed until just 5 hours before your wake up time. E.g. If you are only sleeping a total of 5 hours per night and you want to get up at 6 am, don't go to bed until 12.30 am, allowing some time to get to sleep. Then, as your time in bed becomes good sleep time, move your bedtime earlier by 15-30 mins a night.
- Don't lie in. It's important to get up at about the same time each day, to reset your body clock.
- Worrying about sleep, focussing on it can make it worse.

3. Some tips to reduce thinking and worrying in bed.

- Put aside some time during the day for thinking and worrying. This should end at least 2 hours before you go to bed.
- It is not helpful to “try” to fall asleep, sleep happens when you let go.
- Don’t engage with thoughts, perhaps say to yourself: “Whatever it is, I’m not going to pay attention to it right now. I’ll think about it tomorrow. I’m just going to sleep now”. It can be helpful to just make a note of your worry or thought on a notepad.
- Choose to focus on pleasant thoughts, things that you enjoyed during the day or this week, think about the things you feel gratitude for in your life or something fun that you are looking forward to.

If you follow the above suggestions, your sleep pattern should improve. It is up to you to find out what works for you, today, knowing that this may change from time to time. It is useful to have a range of strategies.

However, if you are still having trouble getting a good night’s sleep, consider making an appointment to see a Counsellor.

The University Counselling Service is a free and confidential service where you can get help with academic support, personal counselling, and assistance with policies and procedures that you may not be familiar with in the University system. You can ring for a 50 minute appointment on the number below or come in and make an appointment.

Please Note: There are some more serious medical conditions that can interfere with sleep that require medical assistance, and in this case it is important to be under the care of a General Practitioner. Some medical conditions requiring medical support include, but are not limited to, sleep apnoea, restless leg syndrome, snoring.

COUNSELLING SERVICE AVAILABILITY AND ACCESS

Location: Building 109, Level 2

Hours

Monday - Thursday 8.00am to 6.00pm

Friday 8.00am to 4.30pm

Contact numbers

Telephone (08) 9266 7850

From outside metro area FREECALL 1800 199 008

Fax (08) 9266 3052

Web site

<http://counselling.curtin.edu.au//index.html>

Further Information, Resources

Websites

Information on sleep problems from Dept of Health, Victoria

http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/BHCV2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Sleep_problems_insomnia?OpenDocument

Dr Orman's guide to better sleep (information sheet)

<http://www.stresscure.com/health/sleep.html>

Australian Clinical Psychologist Dr David Morawetz's self help program (for purchase)

www.sleepbetter.com.au

Online relaxation exercises (can be downloaded from UWA Counselling Service)

http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/ss/counselling/self_help2/relaxation

Books

Sleep

Krugman, Michael (2005). The Insomnia Solution.

Wilson, Paul (1999) The Little Book of Sleep

Dealing with worry

Carlson, Richard. (1997) Don't Sweat the Small Stuff.

Copeland, Mary Ellen. The Worry Control Workbook.