

Insomnia

Student Counselling Service

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Insomnia

What is Insomnia?

We all have problems sleeping from time to time, especially when we are stressed or worried. But when sleep disturbance begins to cause problems coping with everyday activities we may need to seek help. There are many types of sleep disorders. Insomnia is a term that describes sleep disorder symptoms. Insomnia is neither a disease nor a diagnosis, but rather a trait of various types of sleep disorders. Sleep disorder symptoms may differ with individuals, but in general, they usually include problems falling asleep or staying asleep or both. Many people can get by with little sleep and function well in the daytime. Insomnia describes those for whom daytime functioning is impaired as a result of ongoing sleep disturbance.

Sleep disturbance can cause tiredness, sleepiness during daytime hours, impaired physical coordination and weight gain. Ongoing sleep disturbance can also impair the immune system, leading to increased susceptibility to illness, particularly during the winter season.

Sleep disturbance can be a result of problems relating to physical health (known as “organic” disturbances), such as illness or injury or it can stem from emotional issues (“non-organic”), such as fear, anger, bereavement or other upset feelings.

Insomnia commonly involves:

- feeling tired and not refreshed after waking
- being regularly tired throughout the day
- difficulty concentrating
- having frequent headaches
- being irritable
- sleeping better away from home
- taking longer than half an hour to fall asleep
- repeated night time waking
- waking too early and being unable to return to sleep
- sleeping only with the aid of medication or substances (e.g., alcohol, drugs)

Types of insomnia

Insomnia - which is another way of describing the symptoms of sleep disturbance - varies, but generally there are two broad categories: **transient and chronic**.

- **Transient insomnia** - may last for brief periods - a few nights or weeks only. This type of insomnia is usually associated to a stressful event e.g. an exam, a bereavement, or change of environment
- **Chronic insomnia** - is more serious and may last for longer periods ranging from several months or even years.

Insomnia Patterns

Insomnia usually takes one or more of the following forms:

- Difficulty falling asleep - more common among young people
- Sleeping lightly and restlessly, waking often, lying awake in the middle of the night - more common in people over 40. In younger people it may be associated with depression.
- Waking early and being unable to get back to sleep - this is more common in older people and anyone worrying about something in particular.

Reasons why people develop insomnia

What are some causes of insomnia? There can be many reasons, including:

- **Common emotional upsets:** Such as anxiety, fear, bereavement, stress, work problems, financial stress or unsatisfactory sex life can lead to disturbed sleep.
- **Environmental issues:** sleeping in a noisy, uncomfortable or unfamiliar area can inhibit sleep.

- **Substance use / misuse:** the use of drugs, particularly stimulants such as caffeine, medications, cocaine, amphetamines, or misuse of over-the counter or prescription drugs.

- **Physical Pain:** Painful injuries can cause sleep disturbance as it prevents relaxation necessary for sleep. Being in pain can also awaken someone who has rolled over in their sleep onto the painful part of their body. Additionally, medical conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis and hyperthyroidism can cause sleep disorders.

- **Mental illness disorders:** can also create sleep disorders. These can include illnesses ranging from clinical depression to various anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, and obsessive compulsive disorders. While not a mental disorder, this can also include post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

- **Sleep apnea:** Sleep apnea is a condition associated with respiratory problems. When a person's breathing is irregular during sleep, that person's sleep will be disturbed. People with sleep apnea may not remember either waking during the night nor having breathing problems. They may instead experience extreme sleepiness during the day and not understand why. Sleep apnea conditions can cause problems with the respiratory system and the muscles involved in breathing and should receive medical attention.

The above are only a few possible causes of sleep disorders. You should contact your GP if you feel that lack of sleep has begun to seriously affect your health or your ability to cope with everyday life.

What can you do about insomnia?

You can actually improve your ability to sleep well if you seek help. Help can come from many sources including making practical changes in your lifestyle in order to sleep better, seeking medical help from your doctor as well as obtaining emotional support from a counsellor.

Things you can do to help yourself

Change Your Environment

You need to determine if you need to improve any of the following bedroom conditions:

- Is your bed comfortable enough?
- Do you have any sleep distractions in your bedroom, such as a computer or TV?
- Is your bedroom quiet, warm and dark enough?
- Do you have noisy neighbours?
- Do you have a snoring partner?

Consider if these basic problems need to be addressed first.

Change Your Lifestyle

Consider if you need to change any of the following lifestyle conditions:

- Do you need to cut out or cut down on all stimulants such as coffee, tea, alcohol, nicotine, cola drinks, food additives, 'junk food', slimming pills or appetite suppressants?
- Do you need to drink fewer fluids in the hour before bedtime?
- Do you need to establish more regular sleeping and waking patterns?
- Do you need to stop falling asleep in front of the TV?
- Do you exercise regularly?

Avoid the following:

- sleeping during the day no matter how tired you are
- going to bed in a worried or upset state
- going to bed too early
- taking stimulants to keep you awake, or sedatives or alcohol to help you sleep
- having arguments at bedtime or in bed
- using your bed for waking activities such as: watching TV, writing, smoking, computer use, eating, telephoning, etc.
- focusing on angry thoughts because you can't sleep.
- lying in bed awake for more than 30 minutes
- eating, drinking or smoking when you get up during the night

The above are just a few ideas based on reasons some people stay awake. You can easily improve your sleeping habits by exploring with a counsellor any upsetting or suppressed feelings that may trouble you.

Relaxation

Anxiety can interfere with your ability to sleep. If you are depressed, worried or anxious here are a few suggestions:

- change or resolve the things causing you stress when possible
- accept situations you can't change
- keep your mind and body as relaxed as much as possible throughout the day
- give yourself enough time to do the things you need to do -including eating
- don't take on too much and avoid unrealistic demands
- live in the present, rather than worrying about the past or fearing the future
- talk to your partner if there are problems in your relationship

What can you do about insomnia?

(Continued)

- have some relaxing, non-competitive activities - something you do just for pleasure, for fun
- give yourself some 'quiet time' each day
- practise a relaxation technique or breathing exercises regularly

There are many ways that you can learn to relax. Often by addressing difficult feelings directly, you may feel your anxiety levels decrease and that you begin to feel better. There are resources available with the Goldsmiths Counselling service including leaflets on "Anger" and "Coping Depression".

Self Esteem

People who suffer from insomnia tend to have lower self esteem and be less confident than others. Working on improving your confidence or self esteem will probably help you sleep better. Counselling can help in this area.

Depression

Depression can often cause insomnia. Signs of depression include:

- waking in the middle of the night or early morning and unable to get back to sleep
- loss of interest, energy and appetite
- aggression and anti-social behaviour
- aches and pains that have no physical explanation

If you are depressed it makes sense to seek some help. Speak to your GP or come to the Counselling Service to speak to a counsellor.

Alcohol and sleep

Alcohol can be a source of not sleeping as it makes you thirsty and produces adrenaline in your body. Reducing the amount you drink may help improve your sleep. Avoiding late night drinking can also help.

Treatment of Insomnia

There can be many reasons for insomnia. Two people may experience similar levels of stress, but the person with less support and less effective coping skills may experience sleep disturbance due to internalising unpleasant feelings that they agonise over during the hours they should be sleeping.

At other times, insomnia may be a result of illness, medication side effects or emotional problems. If you experience sleep problems, consulting your GP in order to rule out medical problems is always an essential first step.

Before any pharmacological approaches are considered, ask yourself if there are practical measures that can be addressed first, such as sorting out the environment in which you are trying to sleep, dealing with the sources of personal stress more effectively, getting help with financial problems, engaging in counselling or learning forms of relaxation therapy, such as hypnotherapy.

Medications

Some treatable physical conditions that can cause sleep problems can be managed through medications. One example is an undiagnosed over- or under-active thyroid, which may cause an inability to sleep. Once medically, diagnosed however, this condition can help the individual to enjoy regular sleeping patterns.

While medications such as sleeping tablets and other sedatives may be helpful in the short-run, there is a well-known risk involved of them potentially causing dependence over longer periods, including:

psychological dependence: where the individual cannot psychologically accept that they can sleep without drugs and/or

physical dependence: where withdrawal symptoms and accidents can occur when the person with sleep disorder wants to discontinue their use.

Tips on what you can do to help yourself

Some practical steps you can take to improve your sleep, include:

Establish a regular bedtime and waking up time:

Setting a sleep routine is an established way to combat insomnia. By keeping to a regular pattern of sleeping that never varies, you can establish helpful patterns for your body that reinforce sleep.

Establish relaxation techniques just before bedtime. By doing things such as having a hot bath or a cup of chamomile tea, you can facilitate a sleepy state. There is a scientific basis for taking a hot bath as the resulting decreased body temperature immediately afterwards will cause you to feel sleepy.

Avoid taking naps. Naps make it more difficult to sleep when it is bedtime.

Snacks with natural sleep inducers: Foods containing tryptophan have been proven to be a safe and reasonably effective sleep aid, due to its ability to increase levels of serotonin, a calming neurotransmitter. Examples of foods containing tryptophan include eggs, fish and meat as well as most dairy products such as milk, yogurt, and cottage cheese. Other foods include oats, chocolate, peanuts, sesame, spirulina, chickpeas and sunflower seeds. By having a light snack before bed (heavy meals may interfere with sleep), you may find that foods with tryptophan may induce sleep.

Don't try to sleep if you are anxious. If you are worried or tossing and turning, leave the bedroom and do something you find dull or tedious until you feel drowsy.

Use light to help you wake up. If you have problems rising, use bright lights and curtains to let the daylight wake you.

Therapy Treatment approaches

•Counselling

•Hypnotherapy

Counselling approaches

There are many types of therapies available, which vary in their approach to working with your issues.

Cognitive therapy focuses primarily on how thinking affects feelings and behaviours. It involves helping clients develop skills for modifying beliefs, identifying distorted thinking, relating to others in different ways, and changing behaviors.

Integrative therapy focuses on integrating both thinking and feelings in order to help people cope better and solve problems.

Hypnotherapy

Hypnotherapy can be useful in a variety of ways in helping to rapidly improve sleeping. Often by working with a hypnotherapist, you can develop the ability to relax and have more consistent, good quality sleep. Additionally, learning self-hypnosis can help you to allow yourself to relax.

Getting additional help

The reasons for insomnia can vary greatly amongst individuals. They may have medical causes and these should certainly be explored initially with your GP. There are often underlying emotional issues that counselling may be able to help with in order to alleviate the problem. It is helpful to explore both medical and emotional support approaches simultaneously in order to achieve healthy sleeping habits.

Insomnia can be a serious problem, so it is okay to seek help to resolve it.

It is not a problem that you will have to endure for the rest of your life – if you seek help, you will be able to improve your ability to enjoy consistently good quality sleep.

Books

50 Things You Can Do Today to Manage Insomnia – Wendy Green

Say Goodnight to Insomnia: A Drug-Free Programme Developed at Harvard Medical School – Gregg Jacobs

Self Hypnosis for Dummies – Mike Bryant and Peter Mabbutt

Desperately Seeking Snoozing: The Insomnia Cure from Awake to Zzzz – John Weidman

Overcoming Insomnia and Sleep Problems: A Self-Help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioral Techniques – Colin Espie

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