

Insomnia

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4 Essential Habits for Conditioning Good Sleep

Conditioning anything worthwhile requires consistent, dedicated practice. In order to be successful at becoming a good sleeper it is essential that you practice these 4 habits every night:

1. **Take at least one hour to wind down before bed.** This is to allow your adrenalin levels to wear off after pushing yourself through the day when you are tired or busy. Do something relaxing like reading until bedtime. Make sure you do this before you go to bed, not in bed. Even though some people may relax watching TV, it is best to **avoid “screens” such as TV, computer, tablet and smart phone** as this bright and often flashing light can delay the onset of your natural melatonin and can be neurologically stimulating. Blue-light filters will not fully prevent these effects.
2. **Set the alarm and turn the clock away so you cannot see it.** The alarm enables you to sleep deeper and wake up less often by taking away the responsibility of deciding when are going to get up.
3. **Do a relaxation technique** in bed, lights out, eyes closed, with permission to fall asleep while you are doing it. If you wake during the night, remember that your body is still tired and wants to sleep. It is your mind getting in the way. Your only job is to repeat the relaxation technique, turn your mind off and return to sleep.
4. **If you have not fallen asleep, or wake and cannot return to sleep within an estimated 20 - 30 minutes, get up,** go to another room and do something relaxing (no screens). Return to bed when you start to feel sleepy (or approximately 30 minutes has gone by, whatever comes first) and repeat the relaxation technique. **You do not want to stay in bed awake for long periods of time “practicing insomnia”** and reinforcing the bed as a place to be awake. Repeat as required until the alarm goes off.

Good Sleep Hygiene

These additional sleep hygiene habits will improve your chances of success at getting good sleep:

1. **Maintain a regular bed time and wake time.** This is to help your biological rhythm. Unless you can make naps a regular part of your day, try to avoid them. The exception to this is when you become sleepy while driving. In this situation you are impaired and it is important that you pull over where it is safe to do so and have a nap.
2. **No thinking in bed!** If you have a habit of thinking in bed, **set aside some “worry time”** in the evening to think about all the things that need thinking about. Then write it down, make a list or put a note on a calendar. Do whatever it takes to **give yourself permission to be “off duty”** for the rest of the night. Then use relaxation in bed to distract you from further thought.
3. **The bedroom should be comfortably cool, dark and quiet. Use only for sleep or sexual activity. Do not look at the clock during the night.** Looking at the clock causes you to think.
4. For those who have a habit of staying up late and sleeping in, you may need to reset your biological clock with morning bright light. Starting within one hour of your usual wake time, try to get 30 - 45 minutes of direct sunlight (ideally outside, no sunglasses) or use a “light box”.
5. Eat regular meals and a good diet. Avoid heavy meals 3 hours before bed.
6. Exercise everyday. To help your sleep, it is best to exercise in the late afternoon or early evening because it helps raise your evening body temperature. However, regular exercise is helpful at any time as long as it is not within 2 hours of bedtime.
7. Nicotine is a stimulant. If you smoke, you should stop smoking, or at least **do not smoke at bed time and definitely do not smoke during the night!** **Avoid caffeine** or at least drink no more than 2 cups per day and none later than noon. Have no more than 2 drinks of alcohol on any one day and **do not drink alcohol within 3 hours of bedtime.** Although it is sedating, alcohol has an alerting effect as it wears off during the night and makes sleep worse.
8. **If you are having difficulty consolidating your sleep, try going to bed an hour or two later for a few weeks.** Once your sleep is consolidated, gradually advance your bedtime routine 30 minutes per week until getting enough sleep to feel fully rested all day.