

GETTING A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

HOW PSYCHOLOGISTS HELP WITH INSOMNIA

How many times did you hit the snooze button this morning? We all crave sleep, but too many nights we fall short of the seven or eight hours we need to thrive. An estimated 50 to 70 million Americans suffer from a chronic sleep disorder, according to the Institute of Medicine.

In today's overscheduled society, sleep may feel like a luxury, when in fact it's a necessity. Sleep is vital to our health, safety and overall well-being. Sleep recharges the brain, allowing it to learn and make memories. Insufficient sleep has been linked to car crashes, poor work performance, and problems with mood and relationships. Sleep deprivation also raises the risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, depression and stroke.

Seeing a Psychologist About Sleep Disorders

In many cases, people experience insomnia because they develop a pattern of behavior that interferes with good sleep habits. Sleeping difficulties are often connected to underlying problems such as stress, depression or anxiety.

It is a good idea to consult with a physician or another medical professional to learn if medical issues may be contributing to your sleep difficulties and treat related medical problems. Seeing a psychologist may also help you address sleep problems. Psychologists can help people change their behaviors and manage the thoughts, feelings and emotions that can interfere with a healthy night's sleep. Licensed psychologists have the professional training and skills to treat individuals suffering from depression and anxiety, which have been linked to sleep problems like insomnia.

In working with a psychologist, you can expect to talk about your overall physical and emotional health, as well as your health beliefs and behaviors. A psychologist will help you identify any underlying stressors and behaviors that may be interfering with sleep.

A psychologist may ask you to keep a sleep diary with information about your routines and behaviors. This can help the psychologist identify patterns of behavior that might be interfering with sleep. For instance, if you have a habit of exercising at night or watching TV in bed, your psychologist can help you take a look at how your routines impair sleep, and help you find alternatives. The psychologist may also teach you relaxation techniques to help you learn to quiet your mind and unwind before bed.

Understanding Insomnia

Insomnia is a common sleep disorder that occurs in 30 million Americans, according to the Institute of Medicine. A person with insomnia has trouble falling or staying asleep. When sleepless nights persist for longer than a month, the problem is considered chronic. Often, people with chronic insomnia see the problem come and go, experiencing several days of good sleep followed by a stretch of poor sleep.

Studies show that people with insomnia who learn to recognize and change stressful thoughts sleep better than those who take sleeping pills to treat their insomnia.

Whatever the cause, you're more likely to rest if you adopt healthy sleep behaviors. Much like diet and exercise, sleep is a basic building block to health.



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Sleeping Better

Consider the following steps that can be helpful in changing unhealthy habits and improving your sleep.

Create a relaxing sleep environment. Keep your bedroom dark, cool and as quiet as possible and keep electronics such as a computer, TV and phones out of your bedroom. Exposure to stimulating objects and lights from computer and TV screens can affect levels of melatonin, a hormone that regulates your body's internal clock.

Don't discuss or deal with stressful or anxiety-inducing situations right before bedtime. Just as exercise can increase energy levels and body temperature, discussing difficult topics will increase tension and may provoke a racing heartbeat. Protect the quality of your sleep by dealing with any stressful topics long before bedtime.

Set a sleep schedule. Maintain a regular sleep routine. Go to bed and get up at the same times each day, even on the weekends. Don't go to bed too early. If you hit the sack before you're sleepy, you may lie in bed awake and start to feel anxious. That will only make it more difficult to drift off.

Limit naps. Late afternoon naps can interfere with nighttime slumber.

Maintain a regular exercise routine. Research shows that exercise increases total sleep time, particularly the slow-wave sleep that's important for body repair and maintenance. However, don't exercise too late in the day. Working out close to bedtime can boost energy levels and body temperature, making it harder to fall asleep.

Avoid late night meals and alcohol consumption. Skip heavy meals before bed and limit alcohol. Even if a cocktail seems to help you fall asleep, it can interfere with sleep quality and disrupt sleep later in the night.

Curb nicotine and caffeine use. These stimulants can make it harder to fall asleep and stay asleep, especially if consumed late in the day.

Schedule downtime before bed. Setting aside time to unwind and quiet your mind will help you get into a sleepy state of mind. Meditating, doing breathing exercises, taking a bath and listening to relaxing music are great ways to calm down at night.

Don't check the clock. Tallying how much sleep you're losing can create anxiety and make it harder to fall asleep.

Take notes. If you can't stop your stream of thoughts, get up and write them down. Tell yourself you can check the list in the morning, so there's no need to keep worrying tonight.

DEPRESSION AND SLEEP

Depression is one of the most common mental illnesses. More than 16 percent of Americans experience major depressive disorder during their lifetime, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. And depression and sleep problems often go hand in hand.

Many people with depression experience hypersomnia, a condition in which they sleep more than normal. On the other end of the sleep spectrum, insomnia is also common among people with depression. In fact, research suggests that people with insomnia are 10 times as likely to suffer from clinical depression.

Some people develop sleep problems first, and then go on to experience depression. In others, depression occurs before signs of sleep disorders. In either case, sleep difficulty is just one of many reasons to seek treatment for depression.

Depressed people typically feel hopeless and guilty. They often lose interest in routine activities and withdraw from family and friends. They may have thoughts of suicide. Treatment can address both depression and the sleep problems that go along with it.

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