UNDERSTANDING YOUR SLEEP DIFFICULTIES

CREATING A FRIENDLY, POSITIVE, INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Student Wellbeing Team
www.brighton.ac.uk/wellbeing
What is sleep?

Sleep is an essential part of our lives. Despite the fact that we spend a third of our lives doing it and that it is as important for our survival as oxygen, water and food, we pay little attention to it.

The main role of sleep is restorative both physically and psychologically. Some levels of sleep are useful for restoring our energy levels and other levels of sleep are essential for restoring brain functioning, like memory and concentration. Sleep is also important for general physical health, recovering from injuries or illness, growth, psychological well being and work performance. It is usually only when we start having problems with sleep that we start to notice sleep and try and understand its processes.

Lack of Sleep and Problems Sleeping

People vary in terms of how much sleep they need. Although adults need on average around 8 hours per night, some people function well with 4-5 hours whilst others need 10 hours. Whatever your own sleep needs are, lack of sleep or poor quality sleep can have a negative effect on your functioning, physical and emotional wellbeing including the following:

- Poor attention, concentration and memory
- Irritability
- Impaired judgement and reaction time
- Poor physical coordination

A persistent, chronic difficulty with sleep is called insomnia. A medical diagnosis for Primary Insomnia requires the problems to have lasted a month and to include the following symptoms:

- Difficulty falling asleep - also known as onset insomnia
- Waking up on and off during the night - also known as middle insomnia
- Waking up very early and not returning to sleep
- Unsatisfactory sleep quality.

Insomnia is the most common mental health complaint, affecting up to 30 per cent of adults, and can occur as part of another mental health issue such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or generalised anxiety disorder (GAD).

The onset of insomnia may be due to a range of factors such as stress, pain or many other reasons, but it is often negative thinking and anxiety that can keep the problem with sleep ongoing and turn it into a chronic difficulty.

The following are some examples of negative thinking about not being able to sleep:

- Assuming the worst about the meaning or cause of sleep problems. “I haven’t slept well this past week, it must mean that I have lost the ability to sleep.” Try to replace this thought with - “I haven’t slept well this past week - I might be stressed about something at work or at home, I should address it.”
- Blaming everything on sleep - it is easy to start assuming that the sleep problems are the cause of everything going wrong in the day.
- Unrealistic expectations about how much sleep is needed with sleeping. Setting strict rules or targets for your sleep duration will increase performance anxiety and interfere with the process of falling asleep.
- Unhelpful thinking styles such as catastrophising, black & white thinking, over-generalisation, and selective attention can also contribute to maintaining sleep problems. For example, people with sleep problems tend to remember the times they slept poorly but forget the instances of good sleep.

You can use a Thought Diary to challenge any negative thoughts you may have about sleep. In this way, you can identify your negative thoughts and the feelings and behaviours associated with these thoughts and try and implement more balanced ways of thinking and approaching your sleep.

Top Tips on Good Sleeping Habits

- Establish a regular routine. Go to bed only when you are tired and at the same time and try and get up at the same time every day. Avoid sleeping during the day.
- De-stress before bedtime. Get your body and mind ready for rest and sleep. Try writing any worries or thoughts down. Take a warm bath, do a relaxation or meditation.
- Avoid visual stimulation right before bedtime like computer games, reading or watching TV.
- Check your sleeping arrangements. Think about temperature, light and noise levels
- Try and keep your bed only for sleeping and sex. Your body will then learn that bed is for sleeping. If you use bed as a place to watch TV, eat, read or work on your laptop, your body will not learn this connection.
- Don’t eat late and avoid sugar-rich foods right before bedtime. Drinking a hot milky drink can encourage sleep.
- Avoid caffeine or nicotine 4 to 6 hours before going to bed. These are stimulants and will not aid sleep.
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- Avoid alcohol 4 to 6 hours before going to bed. Many people believe alcohol makes them tired and helps them sleep but in fact, alcohol disturbs the quality of sleep.
- Exercise regularly in your weekly routine. This way your body will be tired and will need to sleep.
- If you can’t sleep, do not stay in bed. If after 20 minutes you can’t sleep, get out of bed and start your bedtime routine again.
- Try using complementary remedies. Yoga, meditation, herbal remedies may help.
- Keep a sleep diary - this can help you identify potential causes for your sleeplessness.
Try some reverse psychology – try keeping your eyes open and tell yourself to resist sleep as long as possible.

Repeat a soothing word to yourself or visualise a relaxing, calming scene.

Keep daytime routine the same. Even if you have a bad night sleep and are tired it is important that you try to keep your daytime activities the same as you had planned. Try not to avoid activities because you feel tired as this can reinforce the insomnia.

Talk to your GP. There are medications that can be prescribed in the short-term to try and help your sleep settle down if you have developed a serious sleep problem.

Talk to someone you trust – this may help relieve any psychological issues or anxieties that may be contributing to the poor sleep and help you develop ways of overcoming your insomnia.

What can help?

• Acknowledge how you feel and believe that it will pass because it almost always does.
• Talk to someone - if you don’t have friends you can talk to, seek out a tutor, chaplain or your SSGT. They will all understand and want to help.
• Orientate yourself around Brighton and Hove so you feel integrated and more at home in the city.
• Keep in touch with people at home and fix a time to go back but also give yourself enough time to get involved at university.
• If stress is causing you to lose sleep, remember other people will be feeling like you. If possible, try to reach out and chat with them.
• Be realistic about what you expect from university life. Don’t either just work or just party all the time. Find a balance and take time to relax in the way best suited to you.
• Give yourself time to adjust - it won’t happen overnight - the transition to university is a process not an event.

Useful Contacts

Sleep Council
www.sleepcouncil.org.uk
info@sleepcouncil.org.uk

Useful books

• I Can Make You Sleep, Paul McKenna
• 50 Things You Can Do Today to Manage Insomnia, Wendy Green

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Practical things to do

• Establish a routine as soon as possible
• If you are an International Student, you could reach out to the International Student Advice Service at www.brighton.ac.uk/current-students/my-student-life/international-students/index.aspx. Many international students experience culture shock when they come to live in the UK for the first time - some information as well as advice and support can be found in the UKCISA guide to culture shock
• Nightline | students there for students, 6pm-8pm every night during term time Tel 020 7631 0101 or email listening@nightline.org.uk. Free calls on skype via www.nightline.org.uk

If the feelings persist, consider seeking help from your doctor.