Understanding your Sleep Difficulties

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 – the average amount of sleep for adults is around 8 hours per night. Although, 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% of adults, and can occur as part of another mental health issue ie. 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 4-6 hours prior to going to bed – these are stimulant substances and will not aid sleep.

• Avoid alcohol 4-6 hours prior to 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 a Counsellor – 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.

**Useful Contacts:**

Insomnia  
[www.nhs.uk/conditions/insomnia/introduction](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/insomnia/introduction)

Sleep Council  
[www.sleepcouncil.com](http://www.sleepcouncil.com)

Sleep Apnoea Trust  
[www.sleep-apnoea-trust.org](http://www.sleep-apnoea-trust.org)

**Useful Books:**

Techniques* - Colin A Espie

*I Can Make You Sleep* - Paul McKenna

*The Effortless Sleep Companion* - Sasha Stephens

**What can help?**

Acknowledge how you feel and believe that it will pass because it almost always does.

Talk to someone - if you haven’t made any friends yet, seek out a Tutor, Chaplain, Supervisor or
Counsellor. They will all understand and want to help.

Orientate yourself around the town you are living and studying in, so you feel integrated and more at
home.

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.

Remember other people will be feeling like you, so talk to 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.

**Practical things to do:**

• Establish a routine as soon as possible

• If you are an International Student, you could join the International Students Society. 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

If this issue is causing you personal or emotional distress phone the Samaritans on the 24/7 freephone number - 111 123 or 01273 772277.

Also visit: http://www.thesite.org/work-and-study/student-life

If the feelings persist seek help from a Counsellor or your doctor.

Counselling at the University

Counselling provides a safe, confidential environment for you to see an experienced Counsellor and is available on all sites. More details about the counselling process can be found at www.brighton.ac.uk/current-students/my-student-life/health-and-wellbeing/need-to-speak-to-someone/index.aspx

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Eastbourne:
Trevin Towers Student Centre, Eastbourne
01273 643845

Falmer:
Student Services, E Wing, Checkland Building, Falmer
01273 643584

Grand Parade:
Student Centre, Ground Floor, Grand Parade
01273 643187

Moulsecoomb:
The Manor House, Moulsecoomb Place
01273 642895

Hastings:
The Student Centre, Room 108, 1st Floor, Priory Square Building
01273 644643

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