

JUST THE FACTS: Sleep

Developing Good Sleep Habits



Harmful Sleep Habits

You might be surprised at some of the things that can make it harder for you to get a good night's sleep. Here's a list of some of the things many people do that make it more difficult to sleep well:

- Spending time thinking or worrying about not getting sleep.
- Focusing on things that are upsetting while lying in bed.
- Working, eating, reading, or watching television in bed.
- Doing stressful things like working, studying, or paying bills right before bedtime.
- Doing active things before going to sleep (surfing the internet, reading e-mail, playing video games, exercising right before bedtime).

So when something prevents you from getting a good night's sleep, it's natural for you to want to get some rest as soon as possible. But many of the things people often try to make up for lost sleep aren't really helpful. Misguided coping mechanisms following a night of sleeping badly include:

- Napping during the day for longer than half an hour, or taking several naps during the day.
- Sleeping late in the morning, or going to bed early the next night.
- Staying in bed when you're not tired or can't sleep.
- Using caffeine or nicotine to stay awake or feel more alert during the day.
- Consuming alcohol or drugs before sleeping.
- Not exercising during the day because of tiredness from lack of sleep.



Healthy Sleep Habits¹

Your mission in the evening is to prepare the body and the mind for sleep. Here are some things you can do to help overcome and prevent sleep problems:

1. At least thirty minutes before bedtime, relax your body and mind.
2. Do pleasant, relaxing things like listening to soft music or reading a pleasant book or magazine.
3. Take a warm bath or shower.
4. Avoid things that require a lot of physical or mental activity. This includes working, studying, paying bills, playing video games, or watching television or movies that are filled with action, violence, or horror.
5. Make your bedroom peaceful and comfortable.
6. Dim the lights and reduce noise. Darkness and quiet are signals to the body that it's time to sleep.
7. Make the bedroom temperature comfortable, neither too cold nor too hot.
8. Follow the same relaxing sleep ritual every night. Your body **learns** after a few weeks that the relaxation ritual is a signal for sleep.



¹ Adapted from Whealin, Julia M., Lorie T. DeCarvalho, and Edward M.Vega. *Dealing with Stress After War: A Clinician's Guide for Helping Veterans*. Wiley Publishers, in press).

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Here are some frequently asked questions about sleep problems:



If I can't fall asleep, shouldn't I just stay in bed until I do? No! It's **not** a good idea to stay in bed when you're having trouble falling asleep. Staying in bed for long

periods while you're awake teaches your body that the bed is a place in which to stay awake rather than sleep. If you lie in bed for a long time without sleeping one night, it's more likely you'll have trouble falling asleep the next night too.

If you're having trouble falling asleep, give yourself no more than half an hour. After that, get up, go into another room and do something quiet and relaxing; return to bed only when you start to feel drowsy. Remember, your bed is for two things and two things only: sleep and sex. Watching television, reading, studying, and talking on the phone while in bed teaches your body that the bed is a place in which to stay awake, not sleep.

Shouldn't I try to catch up when I've lost sleep? When you're tired, it's often common to sleep in late, especially on weekends, or to go to bed earlier for a night or two to try to "catch up." But this doesn't work: it only confuses the body about the correct times to be awake and to be asleep. Going to bed early or sleeping in late teaches your body a new sleep cycle, and this isn't helpful. And sleeping in late often means you'll be less tired that night when you go to bed, which only perpetuates the problem. One of the best things you can do to overcome sleep problems is to set a sleep schedule, and stick to it. If you're particularly tired, give yourself up to half an hour longer in bed than you usually sleep, but no more than that.

What about nicotine? Nicotine is a stimulant that can interfere with sleep. Keep from smoking, chewing or dipping tobacco near bedtime, or after waking in the middle of the night, as much as possible.

Won't alcohol help me to sleep? It's best to not drink alcohol at night. Alcohol may help you fall asleep but once it wears off, you'll find it harder to stay asleep. And alcohol-induced sleep isn't deeply restful.

Is there anything I should be doing when I wake in the mornings?

The goal in the morning is simple: morning is the time to wake up the body and the mind. Try increasing the sunlight or bright light exposure.

Exposure to sunlight and bright light sends signals to the brain that it's time to wake up. Since sunlight helps keep the body's natural sleep schedule on track, it's useful to get some indirect exposure to sunlight as soon as possible in the morning. If the availability of natural sunlight is limited, try using artificial bright-light boxes that have special bulbs in them, and use the bright-light box for about 30 minutes.

Should I get up at the same time every day?

Yes! It's important for you to stick with a regular sleep schedule: go to bed and get up at the same times every day, seven days a week (*it's ok to fudge a bit on weekends, but don't sleep in for more than an extra half hour*). The goal is for you to develop healthy sleep habits by waking up at the same, scheduled time.

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Here are some suggestions for things you can do during the day to help you to fall asleep, and stay asleep, at night:

- **Exercise!** Research clearly shows that regular exercise is linked to healthy sleep patterns. One reason for this is because of the effect exercise has on body temperature; during exercise your body temperature rises, but a few hours after you exercise, it drops. When your body temperature is lower, it's easier for you to fall asleep and to stay asleep longer. So exercise three to six hours before bedtime, and enjoy a sound night's sleep (exercising too soon before bedtime makes it harder to sleep because your body hasn't had a chance to cool down).
- **Naps can both help, and hurt, your sleep cycle.** If you've gotten a bad night's sleep, a short nap in the early afternoon might be just the ticket: ten to thirty minutes should do the trick. But don't nap for longer than half an hour (it helps to set an alarm), and don't nap close to your bedtime. If you do you're likely to have trouble falling asleep at night and staying asleep.
- **Don't consume caffeine in the afternoon or in the evening!** Caffeine in coffee, tea, soda and chocolate lasts for hours in the body and can interfere with sleep. A good rule is to not drink caffeinated beverages after lunchtime.

To sleep better, practice these healthy sleep habits on a daily basis! It *is* possible to overcome sleep problems and stop the cycle that causes sleep problems. Here are some tips to help you overcome poor sleep:

1. Know that you **can** do something about sleep problems.
2. Change negative thinking.
3. Practice good sleep habits.



Remember: Sleep problems, such as insomnia and nightmares, are common among Service Members, especially after a deployment. Poor sleep habits such as lying in bed worrying or having an irregular sleep schedule will worsen sleep problems. Good sleep habits involve working with the body's natural sleep stages and cycles to promote better sleep.



Keep in mind that changes don't happen overnight, and that you're best off with realistic expectations. So be patient: improve your sleep habits slowly, and don't try to do everything all at once. Celebrate your successes, including the small ones, and regard your mistakes as opportunities for improvement. Lastly, remember that chronic sleep problems can have real consequences; if your sleep doesn't improve after you've tried the suggestions we've shared, get the help of a health care professional.