

Common Mistakes People Make When They Can't Sleep

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It's one o'clock in the morning and you have been in bed since ten. You're still wide awake. You have to get up at six o'clock for work. You look at the clock again. It's now one-thirty and still not sleeping. At two o'clock you begin telling yourself how awful you are going to feel the next day. You worry about not being able to sleep. You become more frustrated and angry that you can't sleep. It's now 2:30 and you're still not asleep. Does this sound familiar to you? It probably does. Everyone experiences some degree of insomnia from time to time. It can last a couple of nights or may become a chronic issue, lasting weeks, months, or even longer in some cases.

There are many different things that may contribute to poor sleep such as anxiety or excitement about an upcoming event, medications, certain foods and beverages, pain, illness, jet lag, and the list goes on. Often overlooked reasons for insomnia are our own behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. Before reaching for the prescription bottle or over-the-counter sleep aids, take some time to work on the way you are reacting to your sleep, or rather, lack of sleep. I have listed some of the more common mistakes people make when they can't sleep. You might be surprised at how much you can improve your sleep simply by making small changes to your thoughts and behaviors about sleep.

Mistake Number 1 – *Staying in bed.*

It is recommended that if you are not asleep after 20 minutes to get out of bed and go to another room. Too often people will stay in bed when they cannot sleep and attempt to "force" themselves asleep. The truth is, the harder you try the less likely you are to succeed at it. Many read, watch television, work on puzzles, or break out the laptop and surf the web. As far as your brain is concerned, these actions place the bed in the same category as your couch or desk, which are not typically places you go for sleep. The golden rule is that the bed should only be associated with sex and sleep.

The reason for this is that we are creatures of habit and association. We associate certain sights, sounds, smells, etc. with various things which affect how our body responds. What you want is for the bed to trigger the sleep response when you lay down. If you're routinely doing work in bed, then your mind is in a state associated with doing work and the bed is then associated as being a place where you do work. When you want to go to sleep, it can be difficult to switch over from work

mode to sleep mode. So if you must do work, it is much better to do it someplace other than your bed. If you aren't sleepy, get out of bed and sit somewhere else until you are sleepy, which takes us to our next topic.

Mistake Number 2 – *Found time.*

When people get out of bed they often say that if they are going to be up, they may as well be productive. So they do some work such as pay bills, do a load or two of laundry, and a host of other household chores. Thus the concept of found time. The truth is it's not found time, it's borrowed time. This is not extra time, it's time that is allocated to sleep, not work. What you are actually doing is guaranteeing that you will not sleep any time soon. When you get up and start working, you are activating your body and instead of having it go into rest and recovery mode it sets itself for activity and turns off the sleep pathways.

Instead of doing something productive, engage in more relaxing activities like reading, watching mindless television, or some other sort of relaxing activity such as meditation. Just for the record, while you may consider playing video games to be "relaxing", action games are not when you are trying to get sleepy. You should stay away from games that are stimulating, generate stress, or require thought and concentration. This pretty much excludes most video games. Think "mindless". You need to stay in a relaxed state until you feel sleepy so you can go to bed.

Watching television is something that some say should be avoided. It is argued that the light stimulates certain receptors that affect your sleep rhythm and may confuse your natural sleep cycles. While in theory this may be true, I believe that this really depends on each individual person and that the content of what is being watched plays a larger role than the light itself. Watching stimulating action dramas are less likely to help you get to sleep than a poorly done 1930's musical.

The bottom line is if you find that watching television tends to keep you up, then by all means, take that off your list and try reading instead. For others, the background white noise and flickering light actually is relaxing. So rather than make a blanket statement and say no television, I say if you find it helps you fall asleep then it's fine. If you find that it keeps you up, turn it off. It's not rocket science.

Mistake Number 3 – *Watching the clock.*

There is nothing worse than lying in bed when you can't sleep and watch time ticking away. Each check of the time is typically followed by a quick calculation of how much sleep you "could" get

that night and the determination of whether or not you can cope with that amount of sleep the next day. At some point, you reach that magic hour where it becomes worrisome and you start to tell yourself how bad you are going to feel the next day. What you are doing is ultimately setting yourself up for failure. As you think about how sleepy you're going to be, you become anxious. Particularly if there is something important you will be involved with the next day. Along with this, you might start to be angry and frustrated because nothing you do is putting you to sleep. Well here's why.

Your body constantly changes how it works due in part to two branches of the autonomic (think automatic) nervous system called the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system is triggered during times of stress, exertion, or a threat for example. You may know it better as the "*fight or flight*" response. So named because the sympathetic response changes your body to allow you to better fight or escape a perceived threat. The parasympathetic nervous system essentially returns the body back to a resting state, what we call the "*rest and digest*" response. When you are lying in bed worrying about how little sleep you are getting, becoming angry, and frustrated, your body is stressed and triggers the "*fight or flight*" response in a small way. One of the results of this is the release of the stress hormone adrenaline which signals several changes in your body. One of these changes causes you to increase your level of alertness, obviously an action incompatible with sleep. So you see, getting angry and frustrated because you cannot sleep is actually making it harder for you to get to sleep. It doesn't take much stress to interfere with sleep so don't worry about what time it is.

You are much better off not worrying about the time or that you are not asleep. It does not matter what time it is or that you "*should*" be asleep. Stay calm and don't give it any concern. Doing this will keep you from becoming stressed and will allow you to become sleepy more quickly. An interesting thing I've noticed over the years is that given two people with an equal amount of sleep, let's say 4 hours, the person who spent the night watching the clock and getting stressed out and frustrated felt much more tired and groggy the next day than the person who relaxed and did not become stressed about not sleeping. In fact, by not worrying about it people found that they could get through the day feeling fairly well. Attitude makes all the difference. That and perhaps avoiding the subsequent adrenalin crash the next morning.

Mistake Number 4 – Waking during the night. Is it time to get up?

If you didn't hear the alarm, no. Keep your eyes closed and allow yourself to fall back asleep. It is not unusual to wake up during the night. You can be too hot, too cold, have an insistent bladder,

or just wake up for no particular reason. The mistake is opening your eyes, checking the clock, looking around, listening, whatever. Unless there is some compelling reason to wake up and be alert, you should just lie there, keep your eyes closed and let yourself drift back to sleep.

As you progress from one sleep cycle to another, you are moving from deep sleep to lighter sleep and it's in this transition between cycles when your sleep is the lightest that tends to be the time you will feel yourself becoming aware that you are waking. However before opening your eyes, ask yourself, "have I heard the alarm?" and if the answer is no, then there is no reason to open your eyes. It does not matter what time it is. It doesn't matter if you have 5 minutes or 5 hours before time to get up. As I said above, if there is no compelling reason to wake up, keep your eyes closed and allow yourself to drift back asleep. Again, the plan is to keep you from getting activated and becoming alert as this will prolong the time it takes to return to sleep.

The hardest part of this is keeping your curiosity in check. Regardless of whether you dread what's coming the next day or can't wait, you have to stay calm and relaxed and not care about the time. If you can do this on a consistent basis, you have a very good chance of falling back to sleep within a minute or two. Eventually, you may not even become aware of waking in the night.

Mistake Number 5 – Thinking, Worrying and Planning.

For many people life can be hectic. Whether you are building a career, raising a family, or just trying to make ends meet, there are often many things that weigh heavily on your mind. You might think that there is no better time to mull over those things that concern you than when you are lying in bed. Wrong! This is actually the worst time to be doing this. Recall my discussion about stress above. By thinking about these things, you are causing stress and therefore, keeping yourself awake. Besides, rarely do you actually come up with solutions to life's burdens by thinking about them in bed.

Whether it is just random thoughts or a serious stressful situation, you need to put the thoughts aside to allow yourself to fall asleep. First understand that the thoughts are going to come whether you want them to or not. You cannot shut that off so don't get frustrated by your inability to make them stop. Just accept that the thoughts are there and remember that you don't need to participate in the conversation. What you can do is to choose not to hang on to them. That is, when a thought comes into focus, let it come in, pass by, and let it move out to be replaced by the next thought. Let the thoughts be like clouds pushed by the wind and don't reach out and grab them. The proverbial counting sheep method is simply a way to focus your attention away from your worries

and thoughts by engaging in a mindless, boring exercise. Try it. Sheep are optional.

When you are facing challenging situations, you want to be able to focus and think clearly. You want to be able to look things up and gather facts to help you reach a decision on what course of action to take. Bedtime is not the best time for this. Bedtime is meant as a time for the body to repair and rejuvenate itself so that you will be better able to take on the stress of the day and deal with the issues that are of concern. Besides, as you lie there worrying and planning, you are occasionally looking over at the clock and noticing how late it's getting, adding more stress. So give your body a break and put off the worry and the planning until you are rested and alert. Chances are that you will make much better decisions. Sleep is an important part you're your health. You need to put everything aside while you sleep.

Mistake Number 6 – Alcohol.

One of the most popular home remedies of all time for sleep is good ole alcohol. Or is it? Well, there is no denying that if you drink enough you'll eventually relax enough to fall asleep, or pass out if you overindulge. This is the plan for many people who say that they just have a few drinks before bedtime just to relax them so that they can fall asleep. This sounds like an effective strategy but the problem is that while drinking alcohol can have a relaxing or sedating effect, it later comes back in a different form and interferes with your sleep. Even if you are someone who manages to sleep through the night, chances are you're not going to feel rested in the morning.

According to The Sleep Foundation, drinking alcohol before bed can interfere with your brain's ability to process memory, interrupts your body's natural sleep/wake cycle (called the circadian rhythm), and can reduce or even block your REM sleep where you get your most restorative sleep. You will probably notice that your dreams tend to disappear too. Additionally it relaxes your muscles, including your throat muscles leading to an increase in snoring and sleep apnea (inability to breathe in your sleep due to a blocked airway). Alcohol is a diuretic so it can interrupt your sleep by causing you to have to go to the bathroom more often during the night. So, while you may have great success falling asleep, the sleep you get is not likely to do you a whole lot of good. You are better off keeping alcohol off your list of "*medications*".

Mistake Number7 – Sleep medication.

There are a number of medications to help you sleep; some require prescriptions while others are available over-the-counter. They all help most people to fall sleep. Many of the prescription sleep aids are only designed to put you to sleep and their effects dissipate after a few hours. Others are formulated to release the medication slowly over time so that you fall asleep and stay asleep. Usually, medications are given with the expectation that you will have at least eight hours to devote to sleep. If you don't have eight hours to sleep and a couple of hours to get your wits about you before starting your day, you are likely going to feel groggy or spacey for a while in the morning. While they are effective for most people to get to sleep, they do so at some cost.

One of the biggest concerns for prescribers is dependence. Taking a sleep medication for too long can get you to the point to where you feel that you cannot sleep without it, so you become dependent on the medication. In other words, you convince yourself that you cannot sleep unless you take the sleep aid. Continuing to take the medication beyond that, you run the risk of reaching a state called tolerance. That is, your body has become so used to having the medication that it ceases to work as well and a higher dosage is required in order to attain the desired result, sleep. Continuing on this path you run the risk of having an overdose and becoming very ill, and in very extreme cases, even ending in death. For this reason, most prescribers prefer to use sleep aids for short periods of time only.

This is a good place to talk about the use of melatonin. Many people turn to melatonin as an alternative to prescription or even over-the-counter sleep aid because it is a natural supplement with no side-effects. Melatonin is a naturally occurring hormone in the body whose job it is to regulate your sleep-wake cycle. When your body is supposed to be awake, the melatonin is at its lowest level in the body and gradually increases over time. As it reaches its peak level, it signals the body that it is time for sleep. As you sleep, the level gradually decreases and the cycle starts again.

If you want to take melatonin to help you sleep, there are a few things you need to know. First of all, there is no standardized dose that is recommended and different manufacturers make different dose capsules. So it can't be said to take 1 capsule or 3 capsules because it just is not known what the dose should be. Secondly, melatonin does not put you to sleep. Taking the supplement only increases the amount of melatonin in the circulation to signal your body that it is time to sleep. Note that it really isn't known how much is enough to make a difference. Thirdly, if melatonin is taken every night, it should be taken at the same time so that your body's normal cycle can adjust so that the peak time will be around when you take the supplement. The use of melatonin supplements,

like other sleep aids, should be considered for short-term use only. Your body produces enough melatonin on its own. A supplement is best used to help with jet lag, time zone change adjustment, shift work, etc., anything that might affect the natural sleep/wake cycle.

The bottom line is simply that all sleep medications or supplements should be considered the method of last resort and then used only in short spurts. Long-term use can lead to dependence and ultimately cause more problems than it solves.

In Summary ...

- 1) *Stay out of bed if you are not sleepy*
- 2) *Engage in restful, relaxing, and non-stimulating activities until you are sleepy*
- 3) *Associate being in bed with sex and sleep only, no working in bed*
- 4) *Keep your eyes closed.*
- 5) *Save the planning and the worry for the morning, the night is for sleep and recovery*
- 6) *Avoid using alcohol as a sleep aid*
- 7) *Use sleep medications only as a last resort and only for a short time.*

While these won't solve everyone's sleep problems, following the recommendations given here can help change some of the behaviors that commonly keep people awake. Pay attention to what you do and think. When you have a problem sleeping, maybe you are making one of the mistakes I talked about above.

Pleasant dreams.