

A LINE ON LIFE

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Dealing with Insomnia *

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A sleeping disorder that hits most people at one time or another is **insomnia**. There are worse sleeping disorders, but this is little comfort to insomniacs. Their difficulty in sleeping makes them feel exhausted almost every waking moment. Psychologists have some suggestions to help these people who spend hours tossing and turning in bed.

First, **exercise** during the day. It helps to be *tired* before going to sleep! Many insomniacs are so exhausted that they take catnaps during the day. Then they are not tired enough to sleep that evening. In addition, learning systematic **relaxation techniques** and/or **biofeedback** can help you unwind from the day's stress and tensions. Essentially, these methods develop a **relaxing routine** before going to bed. Avoid stimulating work or play, family arguments and stressful activities just before bedtime. Do whatever relaxes you – take a hot bath, read, watch television or listen to music.

Relaxation is aided by a dark and quiet environment. To keep it dark, get room-darkening window shades or sleep goggles. If you can't kick out your snoring roommate (or don't want to), get earplugs. Another possibility is to get a "white-noise" machine to block out unwanted outside noises.

Second, choose a regular bedtime, and then stick to it. Keeping a consistent schedule helps your internal timing mechanism to better regulate your sleeping patterns.

Third, **use your bed mainly as a place to sleep**. Don't use your bed as an all-purpose area. Try to leave studying, reading, eating watching TV and other recreational activities to some other area. (However, this doesn't mean that sexual activities have to be performed outside the bed. By the way, if satisfactory sexual activity makes you sleepy, it might be a good "*lullaby*." On the other hand, if sex energizes you, don't do it just before going to sleep.) Using your bed primarily for sleeping tends to make your bed a stimulus that encourages sleeping.

Fourth, **avoid caffeine** drinks – like coffee, tea, hot chocolate and some colas – after lunchtime. Their effects can linger 8-12 hours after they are consumed. The best thing to drink before going to sleep is a glass of **warm milk**. Grandma was right, although she might not have known the reason why. Milk contains *tryptophan* – a chemical that aids sleeping. Tryptophan is also found in the carbohydrates of sweets, bread, pasta and rice. (However, if you also have a weight problem, you might want to forget these foods.)

Fifth, **avoid sleeping pills**. Even though over \$100,000,000 is spent each year on sleeping pills in the United States, most of the money is wasted. Sleeping pills can be effective temporarily. However, since they disrupt the normal sleep cycle, sleeping pills

can cause more harm in the long run. The same is true with **alcohol**. Several alcoholic drinks might help you *fall* asleep, but they interfere with you *staying* asleep. After a few hours – when the effect of the alcohol wears off – you're likely to wake up. In addition, alcohol might trigger or dangerously worsen the disorder, **sleep apnea**. (With this disorder, breathing repeatedly stops during sleep.) Lastly, combining sleeping pills and alcohol can be lethal.

Sixth, **don't try to go to sleep**. Psychologists have found that part of the reason why people can't go to sleep is that they are trying so hard. Worrying about not sleeping causes tension, which, in turn, keeps you from sleeping. It is better to go to bed only when you feel tired. If you don't fall asleep within ten minutes, get out of bed and do something else. Return to bed only when you feel tired. This process needs to be continued – all night if necessary. But in the morning, you need to get up at your usual hour. Even though you might feel tired, you must not nap during the day. (Remember that humans are flexible and can function quite well on little sleep.) In less than four weeks of following this procedure, most people will come to associate their beds with sleep – and fall asleep rapidly at night.

***"Some people are not aware
of the sleep they have had."***

Lastly – even though these methods might not work to your satisfaction, and you still think that insomnia is a problem – there is one consolation. Many people – who *think* they have sleeping problems – might be mistaken. In a 1988 psychological study, observers found that many people who go to sleep laboratories for treatment actually sleep much more than they think they do. Researchers have found that some people – who report being up all night – actually fall asleep within 30 minutes and stay asleep all night. This means that their problem is not insomnia. It is their faulty perception of their own sleeping patterns. In many cases, just becoming aware of how long you really sleep – and understanding that the older you become, the less sleep you need – is enough to "*cure*" your perception that you have a sleeping problem.

* Adapted from Robert S. Feldman's *Understanding Psychology*, McGraw-Hill Publishers, 1990, pages 387-388.