

PATIENTS AS PARTNERS

Brought to you by The South African Depression and Anxiety Group

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Sleep your way to better mental health

Sleep can be affected by a variety of things, including illness, medication, stress and anxiety. Sometimes, there is a family history of sleep problems. Weight gain, changes in routine and diet are other factors that can affect sleep quality.

Problems associated with sleep disorders

If you are having trouble sleeping on a regular basis, you may have a sleep disorder. Lack of sleep can cause you to feel disconnected, irritable and foggy, and sleep problems can cause so much more than just sleepiness. The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) has a Sanofi Aventis Sleeping Disorder Helpline on 0800 SLEEPY/753 379, which is open 7 days a week from 8am to 8pm. SADAG's Cassey Chambers says: "Many people who call our lines say that they don't sleep well or suffer from insomnia, and this makes them feel anxious and depressed." A continuous lack of quality sleep can lead to accidents, affect your relationships and physical health, and result in the deterioration of mental health and well-being.

Some common sleep problems include insomnia (difficulty falling or staying asleep), snoring, sleep apnea (abnormal breathing during sleep), restless leg syndrome (an irresistible urge to move your legs) and narcolepsy (excessive sleepiness at inappropriate times during the day).

Research findings suggest that chronic sleep problems significantly increase the risk for suicidal behaviour. People with sleep problems are almost 3 times more likely to attempt suicide than those without insomnia complaints, and sleep difficulties like falling asleep or staying asleep are significantly associated with suicidal thoughts, plans and attempts. Insufficient sleep can lead to poor judgment and cognitive functioning, weaker impulse control and increased fatigue. Importantly, sleep deprivation leads to increased hopelessness, which is a major contributor to suicidal thoughts and behaviour.

How to make a change

Local experts say that a restful night's sleep helps rejuvenate body and mind, and enables people to think clearer, be more focused at work and have higher levels of resilience. Dr Alison Bentley of the Wits Sleep Laboratory says people typically need 7 to 9 hours of good quality sleep per night. This can, however, vary from person to person. "Some people suffering from insomnia spend too much time in bed unsuccessfully trying to sleep," says Bentley. If you can't fall asleep, get up and do something like clean, work or read until you are sleepy, then go back to bed. Watching the time tick by will only make you less likely to get to sleep.

A vital point to remember is to only use your bedroom for sleep and sex. That means no reading or watching TV in bed. Doing these things or anything else for that matter confuses your body. Remember, your goal is to train yourself to fall asleep quickly; reading a stimulating book or watching an interesting TV programme undermines that.

Another helpful tool is a sleep diary. Keep track of your sleep by recording the time you went to bed and woke up, your total sleep hours, the quality of your sleep, times that you were awake and your activity (e.g. stayed in bed with eyes closed or got up, had a glass of milk and meditated, etc.), the types and amount of food, liquids, caffeine or alcohol you consumed before bed and times of consumption, your feelings and moods before bed (were you happy, sad, stressed, anxious, angry, irritable?) and what drugs or medications you took, how much and when.

It is vital to try to get to bed and wake up at the same time every day. This will train your body into a sleep schedule. If you can maintain this schedule for several weeks, you will probably find yourself falling asleep faster and feeling more refreshed. Do not sleep in on weekends or stay up late. Your body adjusts to changes in your sleep schedule at a rate of one hour per day. That means if you wake up at 6am on weekdays, but 8am on weekends, you need two days to adjust. You won't be sleeping well again until Wednesday each week.

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10 TIPS FOR BETTER SLEEP

1. Be careful with caffeine

Some people are caffeine sensitive, so if you're having trouble sleeping, make sure you do not consume any caffeine at least 4 to 6 hours before bedtime.

2. Restrict nicotine

The effects of nicotine are similar to caffeine – smoking before bed puts a stimulant into your bloodstream and this can keep you up and awaken you at night.

3. Avoid naps

If you usually struggle to fall asleep at night, napping during the day can make things worse as it can disrupt the body's natural sleep pattern.

4. Get some sunlight

Sunlight helps regulate your circadian clock and makes you feel sleepy at night by stimulating your body to produce melatonin – a hormone that regulates your sleep cycle. Morning sunlight can be especially helpful!

5. Do not use alcohol as a sleep aid

Although many people find that a drink at bedtime helps them fall asleep, this is a bad idea as it actually causes disturbances in sleep, resulting in less restful sleep.

6. Avoid watching TV and discussing emotional issues in bed

Watching TV in bed can, in the long term, be distracting and make it harder for you to fall asleep. Never discuss emotional issues in bed or go to bed angry.

7. Eat right, sleep tight

While you should not go to bed hungry, it is also wise to avoid heavy meals before bedtime; being over-full can keep you up or give you nightmares. Some foods can help though, like milk, which contains tryptophan – a sleep-promoting substance. Other foods that may help promote sleep include tuna, pumpkin, artichokes, avocados, almonds, oats and bananas.

8. Exercise at the right time

Regular exercise can help you get a good night's sleep, but the timing and intensity play a role in its effect on sleep. If you become energised or more alert after exercise, don't exercise in the evenings.

9. Keep your bedroom quiet, dark and comfortable

For many people, even the slightest noise or light can disturb sleep. Use earplugs, window blinds or dark curtains, and an electric blanket or fan – everything possible to create the perfect sleep environment. The ideal temperature is between 20°C and 23°C, and temperatures above 24°C or below about 12°C can disrupt sleep.

10. Relax before bedtime

Stress not only makes you miserable, irritable and angry, it can also seriously affect your sleep. Develop some kind of pre-bedtime ritual to ease away the stress built up during the day – make a list of the day's stressors, along with a plan of how to deal with them; listen to relaxing music; meditate or take a hot bubble bath.



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QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR

If you're having consistent trouble sleeping, the sooner you talk to your doctor the better. Prepare for your next visit by considering some of the questions below.

- What can I do about stress-related sleep loss?
- What medical conditions could be causing my sleep loss?
- Could any of the medications I'm taking be causing my sleep loss?
- How do I know if I'm not getting enough sleep?
- What defines having difficulty falling asleep?
- What could be causing me to wake up frequently during the night and have trouble returning to sleep?
- How can I tell the difference between a few nights of poor sleep and a more serious sleep problem?
- How could sleep medication help?
- How does prescription sleep medication compare to over-the-counter medication?
- How safe is treatment with sleep medication?
- Could this medication interact with medicines I'm taking for other conditions?
- What are some common side-effects?
- If I take prescription sleep medication, can I become addicted?
- Does the frequency I take a prescription sleep aid impact its effectiveness – or can I take it as I feel necessary?

QUESTIONS YOUR DOCTOR MAY ASK YOU

When discussing your sleep problems, your healthcare provider may ask you some of the following questions. Review this list before your appointment – you'll be setting the stage for a more helpful, productive consultation.

- Which of the following best describes your sleep problems: trouble falling asleep, trouble staying asleep or waking up earlier than you'd like?
- How do you typically feel when you wake up in the morning: very refreshed, somewhat refreshed or fatigued?
- Overall, how often do you have trouble getting a good night's sleep? Is it every night, several nights a week, once a week, once a month or several times a year?
- How would you characterise your sleep problem: mild, moderate or severe?
- How long have you had this sleep problem?
- Has your partner noticed anything unusual about your sleep? (Your partner may witness behaviours you aren't aware of, such as snoring or brief awakenings.)
- Have you had any recent changes in your life? Have you had any recent illnesses?
- Are you currently being treated for another health problem? (Be sure to yell your doctor about all medications you are currently taking.)
- What other steps have you taken to improve your sleep?
- What medications, if any, have you taken in the past to help you sleep? (Include both prescription and over-the-counter medication.)
- How did you respond to the medication you tried?

IMPORTANT NUMBERS TO REMEMBER

Suicide Crisis Line: 0800 567 567 or SMS 31393

Pharmadynamics Police and Trauma Line: 0800 20 50 26

AstraZeneca Bipolar Line: 0800 70 80 90

Sanofi Aventis Sleep Line: 0800-SLEEPY (0800 753 379)

Dept. of Social Development Substance Abuse Line: 0800 12 13 14 or SMS 32312

Dr Reddy's Helpline: 0800 21 22 23

Office Lines: 011 262 6396

Website: www.sadag.co.za