

Insomnia



How do I know I've got a problem with my sleep?

There is really no such thing as a normal night's sleep. People's sleep patterns vary significantly. While one person may need six hours sleep per night, another person might want at least ten hours sleep. Some people fall asleep as soon as their head hits the pillow, while others take longer. There are not only differences from person to person. The *same* person might have a very different night's sleep one night compared with the night before or the following night. It is perfectly normal to experience variations in sleep from time to time. It is also normal to experience interruptions to sleep if something particularly stressful has just occurred in one's life. A short-term change in sleep is usually not a reason for concern, even if the change is causing some distress at the time.

However, approximately one third of people experience *long-term* sleep difficulties. Disruptions to sleep can become a problem if they occur over the long term, if they significantly interfere with a person's life, or if they cause significant worry or distress. You might have a sleep problem if you continue to feel overwhelmed by a disruption to your sleep, either due to worry about it or due to the impact lack of sleep is having on your life.

Types of sleep problems

There are a number of different types of sleep problems. The most common type is insomnia. Insomnia refers to a difficulty getting to sleep or a difficulty staying asleep. Insomnia also includes problems associated with poor sleep quality. Poor sleep quality can lead to feeling unrefreshed upon waking in the morning. Types of insomnia include:

- Primary insomnia - experiencing difficulty getting to sleep
- Middle insomnia - waking up during sleep, perhaps more than once
- Tertiary insomnia - waking up very early
- Hypersomnia - sleeping for very prolonged periods

There are other types of sleep problems, including disruptive behaviours and experiences while asleep (e.g. teeth grinding, sleep walking, nightmares), and medical conditions associated with

poor sleep (e.g. respiratory illnesses, chronic pain). Sleep is usually one of the first things that is affected when someone experiences a significant emotional problem such as anxiety or depression. There are a number of reasons why someone might experience poor sleep, and there are a number of specific things that can interfere significantly with a person's sleep.

Things that tend to interfere with a good night's sleep:

- Stressful life events
- Worrying thoughts
- Difficulty relaxing
- Prioritizing other areas of life in lieu of sleep (e.g. work)
- An inconsistent or unhealthy night time routine
- An unhealthy lifestyle (e.g. poor diet and minimal exercise)
- Use of drugs and alcohol, including caffeine
- Depression, anxiety or another emotional disturbance

What would a clinical psychologist do about my sleep?

Clinical psychologists specialise in teaching people how they can modify their behaviour and thinking so that people can lead more satisfactory and fulfilling lives. These days it is quite routine for people suffering from sleep problems to be referred to a clinical psychologist. There are a number of psychological strategies that can help you to get a better night's sleep. What's more, sleep problems are sometimes associated with an emotional problem (e.g. stress and worry, anxiety, depression, relationship difficulties). A clinical psychologist can assist in the management of these conditions.

What happens when I tell my clinical psychologist about my sleep problem?

A clinical psychologist will start by listening to your concerns. He or she will ask some questions about your sleep and about things that might be contributing to your sleep problem. During the first session the clinical psychologist will discuss with you what your best options for treatment are, and what interventions might be necessary.

If both of you agree on treatment, the clinical psychologist will work with you closely and help you to develop skills in managing your sleep. Most clinical psychologists practice **cognitive**

behaviour therapy (CBT) which is proven to be a highly effective treatment for a number of psychological and physical complaints. In essence, this approach involves helping people to

- (1) develop ways to change unhelpful behaviour patterns (such as developing good sleep habits and relaxation techniques),
- (2) modify unhelpful, negative and worrisome thinking patterns, and
- (3) work through current problems in life that might be causing stress and therefore interfering with your sleep.

It is a relatively short term treatment approach which usually occurs over a few weeks. The length of time and the specific format of treatment will depend on your individual concerns. It is important to realise that CBT is a very effective intervention.

Who else should I see about my sleep problem?

You may wish to consider seeing your GP (local doctor) and/or a sleep physician to discuss any possible medical interventions that could help you. Generally it is important to rule out any significant medical cause of your sleep problem. It is advisable to be cautious about taking medications for sleep as these medications can be addictive and can have unpleasant side effects. Furthermore, there are other effective ways of learning how to cope with sleep problems. A clinical psychologist, for example, can help you to overcome your worries without drugs.