TROUBLE SLEEPING?
7 TIPS FOR DEALING WITH AND PREVENTING INSOMNIA

It’s midnight. You’ve just finished an exhausting shift but you’re still geared up. You want to get to sleep as soon as possible, because you have an early start, and you know you have a huge problem to deal with in the morning. And you are worried you won’t sleep and will be even more exhausted tomorrow. What to do?

**First:** Don’t worry about your sleep. Let sleep take care of itself. It is a natural process that will occur when the conditions are right. That’s why they call it “falling asleep”. Most of us function fine with less sleep during a crisis. (How much sleep did you get the night before your certification exams?)

**Second:** Don’t go to bed till you feel sleepy. This is extremely important. You don’t want your body to be “conditioned” to be wakeful in bed. Stay out of bed, doing something non-stimulating till sleep feels irresistible. Then go to bed. Don’t worry if it is 3 am. The goal is to strengthen the habit of falling asleep once in bed.

**Third:** If you go to bed, and haven’t fallen asleep within 15-20 minutes, get out of bed again. Often people will feel sleepy, but once in bed, become suddenly alert (conditioning again). This is the time to get out of bed, and resume your non-stimulating activity. This is to prevent your body from associating bed with wakefulness, and preventing insomnia.

**Fourth:** Avoid sleeping anywhere besides your preferred bed. The temptation is to fall asleep in front of the TV on the couch, or try the spare room bed. This is fine if you want to sleep on the couch for the rest of your life. But it will make it harder to fall sleep naturally in your own bed. (conditioning again)

**Fifth:** Don’t push back your wake time or cancel your morning if you haven’t slept. This risks reinforcing the sleeplessness through negative reinforcement. Get up at same time, get through your day, and you will sleep that night.

**Sixth:** Wind down with non-stimulating activities. Reading: non work-related material. Books, magazines better than screens. NO EMAILS. If using ipads, iPhones or laptops, use “Nightshift” or f-lux or other programs to reduce blue light. Watch light programs on TV or Netflix. Relaxation or mindfulness meditation. “CBTi” is a free app on sleep, with many guided meditations. Eating: light snacks before bed are better than heavy meals. Avoid too much alcohol – it changes sleep architecture, and not in a good way.

**Seventh:** Optimize sleep environment: Cool, dark & quiet is best. Eye masks may help. For noise: white noise app - in ear phones/speaker can mask intermittent noises.

Developed by Dr Gail Myhr, Director of the MUHC Department of psychiatry CBT Unit in the context of MUHC cares for MDs

2020-03-31