



Basic Sleep Habits

A Northern Nights Sleep Disorder Centre Patient Handout

Many people with insomnia have habits that keep insomnia going. You can change that, but you have to improve all your habits, not just some. You have to be patient. Improvement takes several weeks.

1. Put work and school away well before bed.

Don't try to work or study right up until the time you think you should be going to bed. We all have to wind down for an interval before we can relax and sleep.

2. Have a routine to unwind before bed.

Reading is the best relaxation routine, a special or reading a book you have read before so you know the story and don't feel compelled to keep going right to the end of the book. Listening to a book tape is a good alternative.

A lot of people watch television in the evening, but although television is distracting it is usually not very *relaxing* and it usually does not give you something relaxing to think about when you go to bed. If you *must* watch something an old movie or old show is better than television.

3. Go to bed only after you get very sleepy NOT when “you have to get to sleep” and NOT just because “everyone else is going to bed.” You can't force sleep and going to bed just because you have to get up in the morning doesn't work for anybody. Trying harder doesn't work. You already know that.

4. Continue your relaxation routine when you go into bed

The idea is to make sure that you stay feeling very sleepy. You can see why I usually suggest reading as the best bedtime routine – you can read in the living room to you get sleepy and then bring the book to bed. Reading a story gives you something to think about after your turn out the light and keep intruding or racing thoughts away while sleep takes over from behind.

5. Never (and I really mean NEVER EVER) stay in bed if you feel frustrated or if you feel like your mind is racing or won't shut down / slow down.

When someone feels frustrated or annoyed or anxious lying in bed they don't fall asleep, or at least they don't fall asleep until they are exhausted, and not until a long time later.

Lying there feeling bad *stops you from sleeping right now*, and worse, *it trains your brain to expect the same thing tomorrow*. That's why you may feel drowsy or doze off on the couch, but feel wide awake as soon as you lie down in bed.

If you feel awake and feel frustrated (or helpless, or wound up, or unable to shut down- I think you get the idea) **get up NOW. Don't keep trying harder. Get up & distract yourself.**

The best distraction is reading someplace comfortable. If you don't like reading, listen to a book tape, watch an old movie, do a simple puzzle or a simple craft like knitting.

Television doesn't usually relax people, and surfing the internet is worse. Doing work, especially housework or physical work are not good ideas either.

Set the stage so that you can get up easily. Have a place to go, a pillow and a blanket to be comfortable. Know what you are going to do (like read the book you were reading before bed). Make sure you've got your slippers, housecoat ready to go. Have a flashlight handy if the way is dark, and make sure you've got a reasonable (but not over- bright) light to read under.

Come back to bed only when you get drowsy again, but don't stay there if you feel awake again.

6. **Keep a stable wake up time -don't sleep in more than one hour on days off.**
Keeping a consistent schedule is important, but *not* with a consistent bedtime, but rather a consistent wake of time. For most people sleeping in delays the internal clock making sleep onset more difficult on subsequent nights.
If you must add sleep on days off to catch up, take a nap for an hour or less in mid afternoon.
7. **Use natural background noises if your bedroom is 'too quiet'**
Many people used the television or radio for background noise to distract them from racing thoughts or intruding thoughts. It doesn't work very well for most people. If you need a background sound, consider getting a recording of some environmental sounds, like waves or wind and rain.
8. **Don't let light disturb you**
Most people sleep better if the bedroom is relatively dark. If you need light, use a dim night light, and have a flashlight at the bedside.
9. **Stop checking the time**
If looking at the time does *anything* other than relax you, stop looking. If it makes you anxious, annoyed or frustrated, you are just making the insomnia worse (see #5). I usually suggest that people have a ritual every night where they check that the clock is correct, but the alarm is set correctly, after which you should put the clock out of sight. If you are worried about sleeping in the in the morning, get a second alarm clock and it said it 10 minutes after the bedside clock, and put it in the bathroom or in the hallway. If you haven't been up to turn back clock off, you aren't late.
10. **Don't let your pet disturb you**
If a dog or cat is disturbing you at night, keep them out of the bedroom. Remember who is the master.
11. **Feel safe**
You won't sleep if you don't feel safe. If you feel unsafe, try to fix the problem. A few ideas: have a cell phone and a flashlight at the bedside; have a whistle at the bedside ; change your smoke alarm batteries every year at New Year's, and test them every Canada Day; install a security system.
12. **Get enough exercise**
Exercise has been clearly shown to decrease anxiety and stress, and to improve sleep. You don't have to run marathons. Walking or something like walking works just fine. if you have been in active, start gently - 20 min a day. Try to gradually and steadily increase until you are walking 2 miles in 40 minutes every day, or something equivalent .
- 13 **Taper off all caffeine.**
Morning coffee can have night-time effects. The half life is typically 5 hrs but is highly variable, and rises with many different conditions. You can get decaf everything these days.
14. **Minimize alcohol.**
Although it is sedating, alcohol breaks up sleep after the first few hours. If you need a sedative talk to your doctor, not your bartender.
15. **Don't use sedatives the wrong way**
Sedatives can be useful in insomnia, but there is one fundamental rule: never take any sleeping pill and then lie in bed waiting for it to work, getting frustrated that you are not falling asleep – any sleeping pill will lose its effect very quickly. Talk to your doctor about whether or not you should use sedatives, but do all the other things in this list.