

INSOMNIA MANAGEMENT KIT

Relaxation

The Insomnia Management Kit is intended to be used in conjunction with your GP.

To access further instructions on the use of this fact sheet and other components of the Insomnia Management Kit, go to 'Insomnia management' on the SA Health website: www.sahealth.sa.gov.au.

Stress and sleep

Most people meet situations every day that can cause stress, worry, anxiety or frustration. These feelings can affect the ability to fall asleep because they do not allow the body to mentally or physically 'wind down'. With chronic insomnia it is often the worry and frustration about poor sleep that actually causes the stress and leads to all those daytime feelings such as fatigue and irritability.

Therefore, developing a relaxation routine can really help you to 'wind down' before going to bed or help you to fall back to sleep after an awakening.

Relaxation techniques

Aimed at reducing somatic tension or intrusive thoughts that affect sleep.

There are many relaxation techniques available, including:

- > deep breathing
- > progressive muscle relaxation
- > visualisation
- > meditation
- > self hypnosis.

It is important to feel comfortable with the technique chosen. A common element of these different techniques is to focus attention on something non-provocative such as breathing, a relaxed body, a pleasant thought.

Relaxation techniques to help you get to sleep should be well practiced before using them at night. Without practice, 'trying to relax' in bed may actually lead to feeling anxious or frustrated that it doesn't seem to work.

You can learn many of these relaxation techniques by using a CD or DVD programme, attending classes (eg mediation or yoga) or consulting a psychologist or therapist.

Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is a simple technique for relaxation, also called Belly breathing. Concentrate on you breath and gently breath in and out through your nose. Hold your breath for 3 seconds and then exhale slowly.

Progressive muscle relaxation

If you experience physical tension, a passive, progressive, muscle relaxation technique may help you to relax and be more likely to sleep.

Progressive muscle relaxation is simple and quick to learn.

- > Focus on a part of the body, for example, your arms and shoulders.

- > A slow deep breath is taken in and then slowly exhaled while you relax that part of your body. It may make you feel looser, lighter or heavier – whatever feeling helps you relax.

Repeat this technique for other parts of your body (eg neck/head, hands/fingers, face/jaw, stomach/back, legs/feet, etc.)

The feeling of tension then slowly lessens in each of the muscle groups.

Mental imagery / visualisation

Some people prefer to just focus attention on their breathing. The idea is to not exert control over it; just observe the physical sensations of air going in and out and your chest rising and falling.

Others prefer to use a visualisation technique. Mental imagery can be an effective technique to stop an active mind. The technique is designed to focus your attention on a pleasant image and therefore prevent other intrusive and bothersome thoughts from entering your consciousness, thus allowing relaxation and sleep.

Before starting it is important to take a few deep relaxing breaths and let the body become limp against the bed. Then:

- > imagine a pleasant and restful scene such as resting by a river on a warm spring day, or any other scene you would like to imagine
- > it is important to see the sights, hear the sounds, smell the scents and feel the sensations
- > maintain the image as continuously as possible until sleep arrives.

At first, you may not be able to hold the image very long before other thoughts enter your mind. Do not be discouraged by this – expect it. Be mindful of when this happens. Just recover your image and continue again, holding it for as long as possible.

With increasing practice, you will be able to hold the image for longer and longer uninterrupted periods. This is a mental skill that requires practice just as learning a new physical skill also requires practice to improve. It is advisable to do the initial practice of this mental imaging relaxation during a designated 10-15 minutes during the day to develop some skill at it before using it for falling asleep at night.

Learning to manage our response to stressful situations will give us confidence in our ability to cope and reduce their impact on our sleep.

Good Relaxation Guide

This guide provides strategies you can use to help you deal with physical and mental tension, worry, difficult situations and problem solving. All of these are common causes of sleep difficulties.

Dealing with physical tension

- > Value times of relaxation by thinking of them as essential, not extras. Give relaxation some of your best time, not what is left over.
- > Build relaxing things into your lifestyle everyday. Do not rush, enjoy them.
- > Learn a relaxation routine but do not expect to improve or gain results without practice. Try to develop this as a skill.
- > Tension can show in many different ways – aches, stiffness, heart racing, perspiration, stomach churning etc. Do not be worried about this, it is a natural biological response to mild worry or frustration.
- > Keep fit. Physical exercise such as a regular brisk walk or a swim can help to relieve tension.

Dealing with frustration or racing thoughts

- > Do not try to fall asleep. Trying hard to fall asleep is actually counterproductive. This only increases feelings of anxiety which leads to alertness, not sleep. Accept that sleep will come when you are feeling sleepy and relaxed.
- > Try to ignore irrelevant ideas and thoughts. Visualise a pleasing scene (mental imagery) or try silently repeating a simple word such as 'the' every few seconds. Just as we learn physical relaxation with practice, we can learn to be mentally 'still'.

Dealing with worry

- > Some people find it helpful to set aside some time each evening to write down any worries. Try writing down your concerns and work out a plan of action for each problem.
- > Worrying about sleep itself can lead to feelings of anxiety, tension and helplessness. These thoughts and feelings not only lead to alertness but also to behaviours that exacerbate sleeping difficulties.
- > Enjoy quiet moments, eg listening to relaxing music. Allow your mind to wander and try to picture yourself in pleasant and enjoyable situations.
- > Everyone has good and bad days. Expect to have more good days as time goes on.

For more information

Refer to 'Insomnia management' and 'Sleep problems' on the SA Health website, www.sahealth.sa.gov.au.

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/breathing-to-reduce-stress>

https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS_05.htm

Professor Leon C Lack and Dr Helen Wright, School of Psychology, Flinders University assisted with the information in this resource.

Drug and Alcohol Services South Australia
75 Magill Road, Stepney SA 5069
Phone: (08) 7425 5000
www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/dassa

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