

Fact Sheet

Sleep



When does sleep difficulties become a problem?

Sleep patterns vary from person to person. While one person will function well on as little as five hours sleep per night, another person might want as much as ten hours sleep. Not only is there differences from person to person, individuals can also vary on the amount of sleep they get from one night to the next. Variations in your sleep patterns may be very noticeable if something particularly stressful has just occurred in your life.

A short-term change in sleep is usually not a reason for concern. Disruptions to sleep can become a problem if they significantly interferes with your life, or if causes 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.

What are sleep problems?

There are a number of different sleep problems. The most common is insomnia. Insomnia refers to a difficulty getting to sleep or a difficulty staying asleep. Insomnia also includes problems associated with poor sleep quality, which is often associated with tiredness and not feeling refreshed. The four types of insomnia are primary, middle, tertiary and hypersomnia. Primary insomnia is having difficulty getting to sleep, while middle insomnia is associated with waking up during sleep. Tertiary insomnia is waking up very early. Hypersomnia is somewhat distinct from insomnia, as it refers to sleeping for very prolonged periods.

There are other types of sleep problems, including medical conditions (e.g. respiratory illnesses, chronic pain) as well as behaviors while asleep (e.g. teeth grinding, restless legs, sleep walking, nightmares), that are associated with poor sleep. Sleep is usually one of the first things that it affected when someone experiences a significant emotional distress 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.

What are the things that can disrupt sleep patterns?

- Stressful and Traumatic life events
- Troubling or worrying thoughts
- Putting other things ahead of sleep, i.e. social life or work)
- An inconsistent night-time routine
- An unhealthy lifestyle including a poor diet and little exercise)
- Use of drugs and alcohol, including caffeine and other stimulants
- Depression, anxiety or another emotional difficulty

What can a psychologist do about my sleep?

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Links psychologists specialise in teaching clients how they can modify their behavior and thinking for a more satisfying and fulfilling life. Sleep difficulties are very common, and frequently associated with stressful life events. A psychologist can assist in the management of sleep difficulties as there are some great strategies that can help you to get a better night's sleep.

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

A psychologist will start by making a brief assessment of the things that might be contributing to your sleep problem, and how this has impacted on your life. During the first session the psychologist will also discuss your best treatment options.

If both of you agree on treatment, the psychologist will work with you closely and help you to develop skills in managing your sleep. Links psychologists practice a range of interventions which have proven to be effective for sleep difficulties. In essence, our approach will help you to develop good sleep habits and relaxation techniques, modify worrying and rumination, and work through life problems that might be causing stress and therefore interfering with your sleep.