



Coping with sleeplessness

Many victims of crime experience difficulty sleeping for some time after a traumatic incident.

Memories and feelings associated with the event often are often stronger at night. This can make you jumpy and fearful and cause sleeplessness.

This is a normal response after a traumatic event and is usually temporary.

There are many ways to improve your sleep. Some may work for you and others may not, so trying a combination of ideas may help you get a good night's sleep.

- Go to bed only when you feel sleepy – going to bed too early or at a set time may mean you lay awake feeling angry and frustrated;
- Try to keep your usual bedtime routine – your body relies on routines to prepare for good night's sleep;
- Leave a light on if it makes you feel more at ease;
- Play relaxing music or listen to a relaxation tape;
- Limit caffeine and nicotine – both are stimulants and can often make a big difference to sleep quality;
- Have a light snack or warm milky drink before going to bed – hunger may wake you during the night;
- Wait about four hours after a big meal before going to bed – too much food in your stomach can make you uncomfortable;
- Exercise regularly – walking, doing yoga, swimming laps, going to the gym or other exercise can improve your quality of sleep;
- Meditate before going to bed – tapes and books are available from bookshops and libraries, or you could try the internet. Meditation can help you focus on pleasant thoughts at bed time instead of revisiting the recent trauma;
- Get a professional massage or ask a friend or partner to give you a massage;
- Have a warm bath or shower before going to bed – try adding lavender oil to the bath or burn some aromatherapy oils;
- Write down things that are worrying you and ways to resolve them – this may help you from thinking about them in bed. Make a time before going to bed to think about the day's events and the challenges of tomorrow, and then resolve not to think about these issues until the next day;
- Create a comfortable sleep environment – it can be helpful if the room is dark and quiet and at a comfortable temperature – eliminate most of the light from your room and maybe wear earplugs if your room is noisy;
- Avoid alcohol – while drinking alcohol in the evening may relax you and help you fall asleep, the effect soon wears off, causing withdrawal and disrupted sleep during the second half of the night; and
- Speak to your GP or a counsellor if you are concerned about your inability to sleep or you find that nothing is working for you.

Coping with nightmares

Bad dreams and nightmares may also affect victims. Ways to help you relax after waking from a nightmare include:

- Try not to lie in a state of fear for too long – remind yourself where you are and that you are safe;
- Put the light on – walk around to reorientate yourself and remind yourself that you are safe. Make yourself a warm drink or have a warm bath or shower;
- Practice relaxation techniques – many bookshops and libraries have ready-made relaxation tapes. You could also try looking on the internet for relaxation or meditation techniques;
- Write down in detail the dream/nightmare in a book – put the book away in another part of the house and remind yourself to leave the images there;
- Turn on the TV or radio or read something light – this may help distract your mind from distressing dream images;
- Talk about or write down your feelings and thoughts in the daytime – they need some way to be expressed so if you tend to them during the day they are less likely to plague you at night; and
- Face up to issues in your daily life – if nightmares are particularly fierce or persistent, there may be something in your daily life that's triggering them. While it may be difficult, taking steps to resolve your problems or protect yourself can reduce your worry and nightmares.

How can counselling help me?

Counselling can provide you with an opportunity to talk in a safe and confidential environment and help to find ways to cope with your feelings. Counsellors can refer you to other agencies for different types of assistance.

Further advice

The Victim Support and Child Witness Service can assist victims of crime with professional counsellors, trained volunteers, and a network of information and service providers.

Victim Support and Child Witness Service

District Court Building
Level 2/500 Hay Street
PERTH WA 6000

Telephone: 9425 2850
Facsimile: 9425 4428
Freecall: 1800 818 988

Adapted with the permission of Victim Services, Attorney Generals Department of NSW