

What is good sleep?

Sleep is a natural process that provides us with physical, mental, and emotional renewal. Good sleep allows us to rebalance our internal systems each day. During sleep, the brain sorts through the day's events and processes the information taken in. While we sleep our brain stimulates physical repairs to our bodies, relaxes our mental processes, and deals with emotional distress. Most adults require between 7-8 hours of undisturbed sleep in order to function well and between 4-5 hours of sleep to feel rested over a short period of time.

What do we mean by sleep disturbances?

- finding it hard to fall asleep (more than 30 minutes)
- waking up frequently after short periods of sleep
- waking up feeling drained and tired even after sleeping regular hours
- waking up feeling anxious
- waking with disturbing dreams or nightmares

What is the impact of lack of good sleep?

Research suggests that insufficient sleep leads to the following:

- diminished energy levels
- poor decision-making
- lack of concentration
- feeling increasingly out of control
- increase in the wear and tear on our body
- lowering of the resistance of our immune system
- less ability to be productive



How are sleep disturbances and trauma related?

People experience a range of reactions after being victimised by crime. Sleep disturbance is a common physiological trauma reaction. During and after the crime, your body responds internally to the external threat. When the instinctual part of the brain recognises a threat, it secretes adrenaline that stimulates oxygen intake, heart rate, and blood flow to the muscles to prepare the body to fight or flee. To increase our ability to fight or flee, the brain activates certain systems and slows or shuts down other systems. An example of this is that the Immune and Digestive Systems are slowed and the sleep process is 'switched off'.

Once the threat has ceased, your brain may take some time to realise that the danger has passed, and may continue to act as though the threat is still there. This means ongoing sleep problems. You cannot force sleep when your body is still reacting to a real or a perceived threat. Until you have consciously worked through some of the trauma and believe that the danger is over, sleep patterns will continue to be disrupted.

How are trauma and nightmares related?

While we sleep, the brain tries to make sense of what has happened to us during our waking hours. Dreams and nightmares are ways in which the brain tries to understand and process the trauma. Often nightmares start out being very violent and/or confusing, and may reflect your own level of confusion and fear associated with the crisis period after a crime. As you consciously begin to understand and adjust to what has happened, your nightmares and dreams may reflect this.



How can you help the brain recognise that the danger is past, and to encourage sleep?

Safety Measures

- Assess the risks around the home and take whatever measures help you feel more secure. (Police can do safety audits)
- Check that the house is secure before attempting to go to bed.
- Request information from Police on crime rates in your area so that you can realistically assess risks.
- Have a safety plan prepared in case you need to escape the house (as you might have emergency procedures in case of a fire); you are more likely to act effectively if you have an idea of what you can do to escape or confront danger.
- Have telephones and mobile phones readily accessible.
- Have emergency numbers programmed on your phones for easy access.
- Leave a light on in the house and/or have sensor lights around the house.

Routines

- Find relaxing activities that help you unwind before you get into bed. For example, have a warm bath, listen to relaxing music, sit quietly with an herbal tea, meditate or use aromatherapy oils along with music to set up a calm, relaxed environment.
- Try to go to bed and get up at the same times each day; the body does better when it has a regular rhythm.
- Write down any things you are fearful of forgetting for the next day so that your mind is released from as many worries as possible.
- Take time before getting into bed to review the day and think about what the next day will bring. Try to work on having a positive thought for the next day.
- Keep a journal of your thoughts- fears, concerns, progress; emptying your conscious mind as much as possible saves your unconscious mind having to go into overdrive!

Diet

- Have a cup of warm milk prior to sleep as it relaxes the body.
- Avoid caffeine beverages or foods (such as coffee, cola drinks and chocolate) for a few hours before going to bed.
- Eat a balanced diet and avoid eating heavy meals a few hours before bed.

Exercise

- Try to do some form of physical exercise each day; this helps to get rid of surplus adrenaline stored in the body. Walking is particularly good as it helps relax the mind as well as the body.

Breathing

- Practice deep breathing or relaxation techniques such as Yoga or Tai Chi before trying to sleep. Deep breathing helps relax the muscles in preparation for sleep and can help you fall asleep again quickly if you wake up during the night.

Grounding Techniques

- If you awake in fright, try touching or holding something solid to remind yourself where you are and to help bring you back to reality. For example, grab hold of the bedclothes, focus on a familiar, comforting object or look in a mirror to remind yourself that you are real and that you are safe.

Medication

- Sleeping tablets (for example, Temazepam) can be helpful in the short term for giving a solid block of sleep. Such medication may save you from exhaustion, thus preventing problems in general functioning. Taking sleeping tablets to assist sleep can break unhealthy patterns that may have developed as a result of trauma. Sleeping medication should be taken with care and with regular consultation with your doctor.
- You may want to try some natural remedies that offer an alternative to the drugs contained in sleeping tablets. Consult with your pharmacist.

Other Ideas

- Avoid looking at the clock during the night if you are finding it difficult to sleep; remove it from your bedroom if you have to. Keeping track of how long you are not sleeping only adds to the frustration.
- If you are unable to fall asleep, and have become restless and agitated; get up for a while and try a warm glass of milk and some relaxation ideas (see above) before going back to bed.
- Tell yourself that you are ready to sleep (do not say over and over that you can't sleep!!); the unconscious mind believes and acts on what it hears most of!
- Attend counselling to manage the issues that are disturbing your sleep; tell the counsellor about your dreams and nightmares.
- Keep a record of all your dreams and nightmares - keep a notepad and pen by your bed so that you can write them down as soon as you awaken.
- Take short naps if you need to; this may help you function until you are sleeping normally again.



Useful Resources

1. Quanta Centre of Neuro-Learning's "Gift of Sleep" CDs; booklet included
2. Quanta Dynamics website: www.quantadynamics.com/research/index.html
3. 50 Ways to Encourage Sound Sleep (Four Seasons Publishing) [Se 63 in Library]

Other material on sleep disturbance is available in the Victim Support Service Resource Centre.

Further Information

If you would like more information, please contact Victim Support Service on (08) 8231 5626 or view our website at www.victimsa.org