



# **Sleep better, feel better**

The connection between  
sleep & mental health

## An introduction



Sleep is a crucial part of our lives. We spend a significant chunk of our lives asleep - almost a third – and it's essential in helping us maintain our physical and mental wellbeing. The more quality sleep we can get, the better we feel both physically and mentally. In this booklet, we'll look at:

- Why sleep is so important for our wellbeing
- How sleep impacts upon mental health
- How mental health impacts upon sleep
- Sleep disorders and insomnia
- The insomnia cycle and how to break it
- Nightmares, night terrors and sleep paralysis
- Sleep and medication
- What causes problems with sleep
- What constitutes good quality sleep
- The importance of sleep hygiene
- Tips to improve your sleep
- What sleep treatments are available
- When to seek professional help

# The importance of sleep for wellbeing

While you're asleep, your body is undertaking a whole host of fascinating processes to recover from the day and help you prepare physically and mentally for the next. That's why sleeping well is essential to our wellbeing. Good quality sleep means you'll feel restored and refreshed upon waking and it will help you maintain optimum physical and mental performance in the short and long-term.

## So, what happens when you sleep?

It might look like you're busy doing nothing but your body and brain are active throughout the night. Some of your body's physical admin is essential for your comfort during the night. Your muscles power down to keep you rested and anti-diuretic hormones are released to stop you having to pee as frequently as during the day. Your immune system releases cytokines and gets to work combatting infection and inflammation. Your body releases hormones: melatonin to keep you asleep and growth hormones from your pituitary gland to look after necessary physical repairs.

Meanwhile, your brain is busy sorting out and processing the events of the day which is important for the creation of your long-term memories. Notably, your sympathetic nervous system is able to relax when you're asleep. This is particularly important because your sympathetic nervous system is responsible for your fight or flight responses in stressful or frightening situations. Your cortisol level – the stress response hormone – is also reduced during sleep.

Sleeping well means all these processes are performed to the optimum level, setting you up for the next day and your best physical and mental performance. Sleep better, feel better!

Poor quality sleep means that some of these functions can be impaired. There are different ways in which poor quality sleep can manifest. It might mean you struggle to fall asleep or stay asleep. It might mean you wake up frequently throughout the night and/or have long stretches of wakefulness. You might find yourself waking up for the day far too early, or in the early hours.

If you sometimes struggle to get good quality sleep, you're not alone. Lots of us are familiar with the exhausted feeling after a rough night, which can leave you feeling tired, irritable, and unable to concentrate. Stretches of bad sleep are not uncommon, particularly in stressful periods in our lives. Good quality sleep can be elusive or erratic for a lot of us.

Most of us can manage these nights of broken, limited, or at worst even non-existent, sleep in the short-term but lack of sleep can have a significant impact on our ability to manage in our daily lives if it persists longer-term. This is when sleeplessness can have a serious impact on our mental health and quality of life.

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## **The relationship between sleep and mental health**

Sleep plays a vital role in helping us maintain a mentally healthy lifestyle. There have been a lot of studies and discussions on the relationship between sleep and mental health which show how the two are inextricably linked.

### **How sleep impacts mental health**

Studies have shown that not getting enough quality sleep can impact on your mental health in a variety of ways.

Low mood and anxiety are often linked to sleep deficiency. Studies suggest that those who have persistent difficulties in sleeping have an increased risk of feeling depressed and/or anxious. And there is also the risk that persistent sleeplessness could exacerbate existing mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and stress.

Not getting enough sleep can also impair cognitive functioning and performance. It can affect your memory, slow down your thought processes and lead to an increase in the number of mistakes made. These common side effects of sleeplessness have been linked to lower self-esteem.

Tiredness, irritability, and lack of energy and motivation are all common side effects of sleeplessness. Lack of sleep might also cause you to behave erratically. These are all difficult side effects to navigate in themselves, but can also cause problems with interpersonal relationships, making everyday life even more challenging. Disrupted sleep patterns can have a significant impact on daily living and might leave us feeling that we are struggling to cope. Mood changes are not uncommon; you might feel stressed, anxious, or irritable, impacting on your daily life, your relationships, and your mental wellbeing.

### **How mental health impacts sleep**

Similarly, there are lots of ways in which mental health issues can impact on your sleeping patterns. One of the common symptoms of anxiety and anxiety disorders is persistent worries and fears. These thoughts can make it very difficult for the sufferer to switch off and relax into sleep.

Some people get a feeling of anxiety about going to sleep. Some may experience nocturnal panic attacks. These have the same symptoms as panic attacks during the day such as shortness of breath, a feeling of terror, sweating, trembling, and a racing heart, but cause people to wake suddenly. There is often no obvious trigger for nocturnal panic attacks, but they can be a particularly distressing experience for sufferers.

As well as difficulties in falling asleep and/or staying asleep, chronic oversleeping can be a sign of underlying mental health struggles. Some conditions such as depression or Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) can disrupt sleep patterns and make you want to sleep for longer. While some people suffering from depression may experience insomnia, others may want to sleep more, may stay in bed for longer periods or sleep more often. They might experience deep fatigue, struggle to get out of bed in the morning, and are often sleepy during the day.

“Sometimes sleep can have an impact on our mental health and sometimes our mental health can have an impact on how well we sleep.”



## Sleep disorders

### Insomnia

The most common sleep disorder is insomnia. Insomnia is classified as a difficulty in getting to sleep or struggling to stay asleep long enough to feel the restorative benefits associated with a good night's rest.

There are various indicators of insomnia (see box, right).

NHS guidelines categorise insomnia into three different types according to duration:

- **Transient**, where difficulties in sleeping have been ongoing for less than one month
- **Short-term**, where insomnia has persisted for one to six months, and
- **Chronic**, where insomnia has persisted for over six months.

### Insomnia symptoms\*

- Finding it difficult to fall asleep
- Waking up frequently throughout the night
- Lying awake for extended periods at night
- Waking up incredibly early and being unable to go back to sleep
- Feeling tired and unrefreshed after waking up
- Finding it difficult to nap even when you're tired
- Feeling tired and irritable during the day
- Difficulties in concentration due to fatigue

\*Defined by NHS guidelines

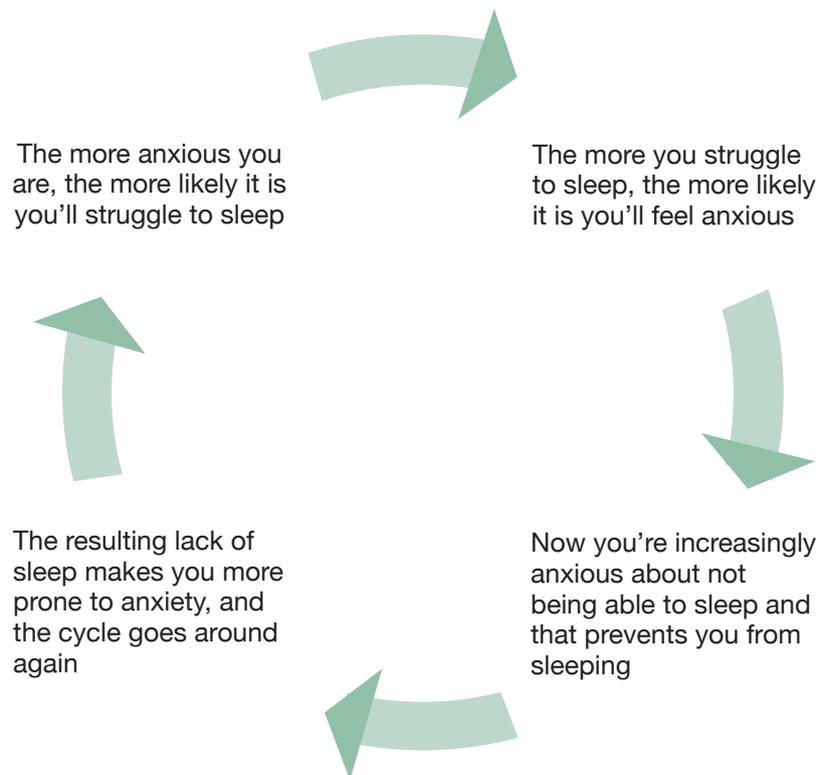


Figure 1: The insomnia cycle

## The insomnia cycle

Perhaps one of the most frustrating things about insomnia is that there is a danger of an unhelpful pattern forming which makes it more difficult to sleep even as your levels of fatigue and exhaustion grow.

The insomnia cycle is shown above. Notice what is happening for us and have more control over how we choose to respond.

It can be hard to break the negative associations which form around bedtime and sleeping when you're experiencing insomnia and bracing yourself for another sleepless night. It might be easier said than done, but one of the key things is to try to avoid being stressed about sleeplessness.

The National Institute for Health and Excellence (NICE) recommends looking at sleep hygiene in the first instance to alleviate insomnia. We'll look at some suggestions for improving sleep hygiene habits later in this booklet. But in cases where improved sleep hygiene doesn't help and/or where lack of sleep is causing distress and difficulties in everyday life, NICE recommends Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Insomnia (known as CBT-I).

As we can see from the insomnia cycle (*above*), insomnia thrives when we start to develop negative or unhelpful thoughts and emotions around

our difficulties in sleeping. You might think things like “I didn’t get a wink of sleep last night” or “I’ll never make it through the day today because I slept so poorly last night”. You might start worrying through the day that “I’ll never get to sleep tonight” or “I’m always going to struggle to get enough sleep”. You might start to imagine worst-case scenarios about your lack of sleep; imagine your exhaustion and its negative effect the next day; or start to blame your insomnia for every difficulty in your life. It might be tempting to think in a binary way of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ nights with no acknowledgement of the ‘okay’ or ‘good enough’ night.

These different kinds of negative thoughts about insomnia can have a powerful effect on your (in)ability to sleep as the thoughts may start to reinforce your poor sleeping patterns. Negative thinking and assumptions that sleep is unattainable become a self-fulfilling prophecy when insomnia ensues, reinforcing the negative thoughts. That’s where CBT-I can help.

**“Negative thoughts about insomnia can have a powerful effect on your (in)ability to sleep.”**

CBT-I works because it helps to examine our unhelpful or inaccurate thoughts about our sleeping patterns and look at the underlying reasons contributing to insomnia. CBT therapists work with clients to challenge negative assumptions surrounding sleep issues and question how accurate these assumptions are. This might involve considering what a ‘good enough’ night looks like or considering how true it is to say, “I didn’t get a wink of sleep last night”. Maybe it’s not inevitable that a difficult night always results in a difficult morning after or that you can’t function adequately on less than eight hours.

Your CBT therapist may suggest use of a Thoughts Diary to record your thoughts, feelings, and emotions about sleep to assist you in moving to a more positive mindset around sleep and sleep issues. By removing a lot of the distress, anxiety, and frustration around insomnia, it helps to break the insomnia cycle. CBT-I helps clients create a more balanced way of thinking about sleep which is key in moving towards good quality sleep.

CBT therapists also work with stimulus control and may make suggestions about only going to bed when tired, getting out of bed if you don’t fall asleep within a certain timeframe, and using the bedroom for sleep and sex only.

The therapy room is also a safe space to learn about mindfulness, relaxation techniques and visual imagery techniques to help you get a good night’s sleep. In addition, therapists can provide psychoeducation around sleep. If you are struggling with insomnia, it may be helpful to discuss this with a therapist who can provide tools and information and a safe space to discuss what’s going on for you.

## **Nightmares, night terrors and sleep paralysis**

Nightmares, night terrors and sleep paralysis can be very distressing experiences for sufferers, and result in disrupted, broken or disturbed sleep.

### **Nightmares**

More than just bad dreams, nightmares can be very upsetting and frightening experiences. Nightmares invoke intense feelings of fear and/or anxiety and can awaken sufferers from sleep. For those who experience frequent nightmares and are disturbed/awakened abruptly, nightmares are classified as a sleep disorder.

Nightmares can have a variety of causes. Stress and anxiety are among the most common. It's not uncommon to experience nightmares in times of acute stress at difficult points in our lives. These will often subside once the acute stress has passed. Nightmares from chronic stress and anxiety may be more long-term or frequent. Certain medications have been linked to the occurrence of nightmares.

There are certain mental health issues of which nightmares are a symptom. These include: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), general anxiety disorder (GAD), depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia.

For those who experience intense and recurring nightmares, it can have a huge impact on their lives. Feeling powerless to prevent nightmares often results in sleep avoidance. Worrying excessively during the day and desperately seeking the meaning of the nightmares is also common. Sufferers may interpret their nightmares as 'proof' of an underlying weakness or vulnerability. This is often very distressing for the sufferer and can carry a significant psychological burden which impacts on day-to-day living.

When someone suffers these feelings of distress around their nightmares, it changes their thoughts and behaviours and attitudes towards sleep, such as sleep avoidance and distressing thoughts. Negative thoughts and behaviours may start to reinforce poor sleep habits and unhelpful thinking around sleep which in turn increases distress and fuels the nightmares.

Counselling can help those who suffer from chronic nightmares by addressing some of these unhelpful thoughts and interpretations to alleviate distress. By seeking to create a more helpful way of thinking, therapists work with clients to break the link between negative thoughts and behaviours and the nightmares.

CBT therapists may use visual rescripting or rehearsal when working with nightmares. This process involves playing a specific nightmare through in your mind and then rescripting parts of it to remove negative meanings and interpretation. This may be a daunting prospect but working through this with your therapist can be very empowering. Rewriting the narrative and meaning of your nightmares with a professional, provides the opportunity to be in control and increase confidence. The aim is to reclaim the narrative and lessen the grip of the nightmares.



**Nightmares can cause people to change their behaviours and attitudes towards sleep**

### **Night terrors**

Night terrors, also known as sleep terrors, can affect people at any age but are statistically more likely to affect children. A less common sleep disorder, those experiencing night terrors may scream, flail, shout, and thrash about while still asleep although they may have their eyes open. Sufferers will often wake abruptly in a state of fear after an episode lasting from seconds to several minutes.

Night terrors can happen in times of illness, particularly fever, and periods of emotional tension, stress or conflict and are often linked to trauma. They can be a feature of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

“Those experiencing night terrors may scream, flail, shout, and thrash about while still asleep although they may have their eyes open.”

If you suffer from night terrors, it may help to keep a sleep diary (including the events of the preceding day and how you were feeling) to help identify a cause. Your GP may find this helpful in ruling out any physical causes such as sleep apnoea.

If you feel your night terrors are caused by stress and anxiety in your life, it may be helpful to discuss these underlying issues with an experienced therapist.

### **Sleep paralysis**

Sleep paralysis is a phenomenon which can occur as you are falling asleep or waking up while your body is sleeping, and your brain is active. It results in a temporary loss of muscle function while your body is asleep, and you experience this as being unable to move or speak. While episodes of sleep paralysis are usually harmless, they can be upsetting and induce intense feelings of fear and anxiety. Those who suffer from narcolepsy, insomnia, anxiety disorders, depression, bipolar disorder, and PTSD may be at increased risk of sleep paralysis.

Your GP will be able to help with underlying issues which may cause sleep paralysis episodes. You might also find it helpful to talk to a therapist, who can work with some of the underlying mental health conditions which can trigger sleep paralysis episodes, to talk through your concerns.

## **Sleep and medication**

### **Which medications can disrupt sleep?**

The side effects of certain prescribed medications can include insomnia and sleep disruption. This typically includes:

- Some antidepressants
- Narcolepsy medication
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) medication
- Epilepsy medication
- Some steroids

Seek appropriate medical advice and speak to your doctor if you feel you are affected by this.

Some over-the-counter medications, such as some cold and flu remedies and painkillers, also contain caffeine which may keep you awake at night.

### **Which medications can help with sleep?**

There are also medications available which may help with short-term sleeplessness. Most pharmacies offer sleeping aids as a short-term solution to improving sleep quality. Some contain natural ingredients such as valerian or lavender, which are traditionally said to promote sleep, while others are antihistamines which induce drowsiness and aid relaxation.

It is essential to check with your doctor or pharmacist for medical advice before taking anything for your sleep issues.

Doctors may prescribe sleeping tablets for the short-term relief of sleeplessness issues. Melatonin (the sleep hormone) is sometimes prescribed for jet lag. Alternatively, your doctor may refer you to a sleep clinic or online treatment program for chronic insomnia.



**Caring commitments may contribute to poor quality sleep**

## **Sleep knowhow**

### **What causes problems with sleep?**

There are many factors which may contribute to poor quality sleep.

- Psychological issues such as stress, depression, or anxiety
- Developing unhelpful thoughts about sleeping and forming negative associations around sleep, leading to the insomnia cycle
- Physical issues such as illness, pain, or bodily discomfort
- An uncomfortable sleeping environment: perhaps an uncomfortable mattress and/or bedding, or a bedroom that's too hot or too cold, or not dark enough
- Extraneous noise from outside your bedroom window
- Shift work or jet lag. Both disrupt your Circadian rhythm which regulates your sleep-wake cycle or 'body clock'
- Using recreational drugs such as cocaine or ecstasy and/or the misuse of alcohol
- Stimulants such as caffeine or nicotine
- Unsatisfactory sleep hygiene and bedtime habits
- Caring commitments for others, such as a new baby
- Bedtime procrastination where you delay going to bed or going to sleep despite knowing you'll be tired in the morning

## What constitutes good quality sleep?

Perhaps we all have a different idea of what exactly constitutes a good night's sleep. Traditionally we're sorted into 'larks' or 'owls'. Some of us are light sleepers, while it seems others can sleep through just about anything.

NHS recommendations for sleep by age group

Age group	Recommended no. of hours
Adults	7-9h
Children	9-13h
Babies & toddlers	12-17h



There is a bit of deviation between us in how much sleep each of us needs. When we talk about what constitutes good quality sleep, it means:

- You fall asleep within 30 minutes of going to bed
- You sleep continuously through the night, waking up no more than once
- You get the recommended number of hours for your age group
- You should feel restored and refreshed when you wake.

If you often feel sleepy during the day, chances are you're not getting enough quality sleep

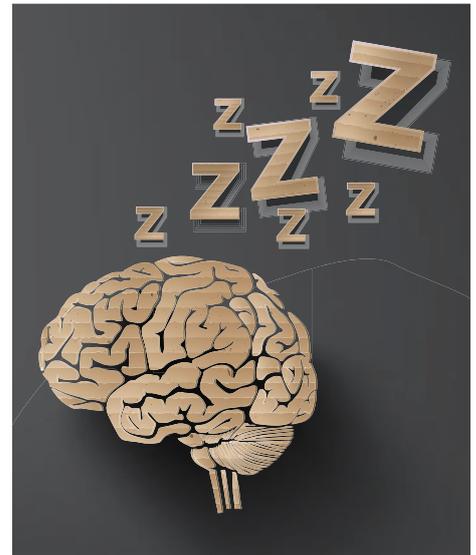
## Why is sleep hygiene important?

Sleep hygiene is all about creating good habits and establishing a bedtime routine that helps you settle down to relax, get comfortable and sets you up for a good night's sleep. Poor sleep hygiene is a major contributing factor to sleepless nights. By taking some practical steps to improve your sleep hygiene and bedtime habits, you can maximise your chances of having a restful and restorative night. Consider employing some of the following sleep hygiene tips and techniques to help you enjoy better quality sleep.

### **Tips to improve sleep**

- Setting a regular bedtime is important. Try to stick to a routine and go to bed and get up at the same time every day. Late nights and lie-ins may be tempting, but routine and predictability is key.
- Try incorporating the things that work for you into your winding down routine. You might find a warm bath, yoga, meditation (guided or self-guided) or breathing exercises relax you ready for bed. Some people enjoy winding down by reading or find adult audio sleep stories helpful in switching off.

- Make sure your bedroom is a comfortable, restful sleep sanctuary. Ideally it should be quiet, dark, and just the right temperature (this varies from person to person, but doctors recommend between 15.6 to 19.4 Celsius). Consider black-out blinds or an eye mask. Some people find white noise machines or nature sounds apps helpful in drowning out external noises and helping them to drop off to sleep. You might enjoy a herbal tea to promote relaxation and restfulness.
- Consider sleep scented candles or pillow sprays to help create a relaxing atmosphere. Some people find weighted blankets improve sleep quality by helping soothe and calm the body in preparation for sleep. You might also like a hot-water bottle or electric blanket. Heated eye masks can also be soothing.
- Your daytime activities can have a huge impact on your sleep patterns. Fresh air and exercise are crucial. Experts say keeping active during the day helps to physically tire us out before bedtime. Studies show that getting outside in the morning really helps regulate our Circadian rhythms, ensuring our body clock and our sleep-wake cycle functions correctly. Exercising too close to bedtime can impact your ability to fall asleep, so experts recommend avoiding strenuous exercise for three hours before bed.
- Watch your caffeine intake. As a stimulant, caffeine resides in your system for several hours after consumption and can affect your ability to sleep. Consider implementing a caffeine curfew from mid-afternoon and avoid coffee, energy drinks and soft drinks too late in the day.
- Watch your alcohol intake too and avoid a night cap. Alcohol does have a sedative property, which might be tempting to help you fall asleep, but it can affect sleep duration, especially in excessive quantities, meaning you'll struggle to stay asleep.
- Try not to eat or drink too close to bedtime, especially in large amounts. It can interfere with your sleep cycle.
- Be aware of the blue light emitted from screens such as phones and tablets that can inhibit your melatonin levels and disrupt your sleep cycle. Try not to expose yourself to blue light devices for at least an hour before bedtime. You might consider leaving devices outside of your bedroom entirely or at least switch to 'night mode' to limit blue light exposure before bed.
- If you find yourself worrying at bedtime, it might be useful to keep a pad and pencil at your bedside to note down those worries. Sometimes this can be helpful in quietening your mind and finding a bit of peace before settling down for the night
- If you're struggling to sleep, and lying awake fretting and frustrated, don't lie there exasperated. Get up and try a gentle activity such as reading until you feel sleepy enough to try going back to bed. It can be unhelpful to create negative associations with trying to sleep.
- If you struggle to sleep at night, daytime naps might feel really tempting but try not to if you can.



# Seeking help

## What sleep treatments are available?

There are online courses for treating insomnia available through the NHS in the UK. Your doctor may refer you to access these services.

NHS Scotland funds access to Sleepio, a 6-week online course for the treatment of insomnia based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques. An initial assessment based on an extensive questionnaire will determine your sleep score, leading to a personalised treatment programme based on your sleep goals, access to step-by-step expert techniques and being able to track your improvement as the program continues. Statistics provided by Sleepio show 54% of participants fell asleep more quickly and 62% spent less time awake during the night.

Similar CBT-based online therapy courses such as Sleepstation are available on the NHS in parts of England. Online courses are often based on sleep restriction therapy, which is based on the idea that those suffering from insomnia start to form negative beliefs about sleep which then make going to sleep and staying asleep even more difficult. In the insomnia cycle, once you start thinking that you'll never get to sleep, that worry makes it even more difficult to get to sleep which, in turn, reinforces your belief that you won't sleep. Sleep restriction therapy aims to challenge these negative beliefs and change your mindset to a positive one. By restricting the amount of time you're in bed, the aim is to cut down on the hours spent awake and frustrated and improve your time in bed to time asleep ratio.

## When to seek professional help

It's not uncommon to go through stretches of poor sleep. We can all struggle with our sleep at times, whether that's our ability to fall asleep in the first place or to stay asleep throughout the night. One or two nights of bad sleep can be tough going in themselves, but you might really start to struggle if it goes on longer-term.

Don't be afraid to seek professional help when:

- You've tried changing your sleeping habits and improving your sleep hygiene, but it doesn't seem to be working
- Your difficulties in sleeping have persisted for several months. This may mean a prolonged bout of insomnia, or you are sleeping for longer than usual and find it difficult to get up
- Your difficulties in sleeping are causing you distress and/or are seriously impacting your ability to function in your day-to-day life.

“Don't be afraid to seek professional help when you've tried changing your sleep habits and improving your sleep hygiene, but it doesn't seem to be working.”

## How counselling can help with sleep problems

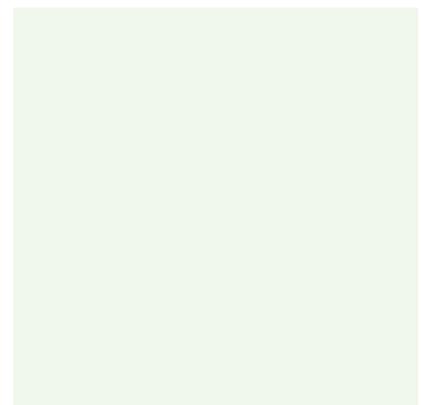
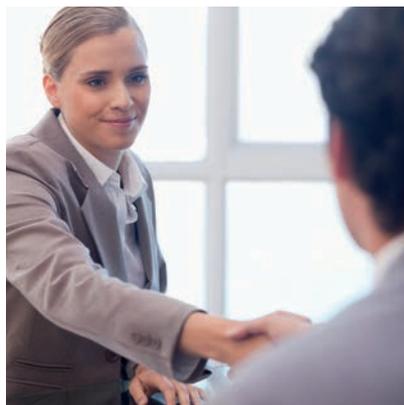
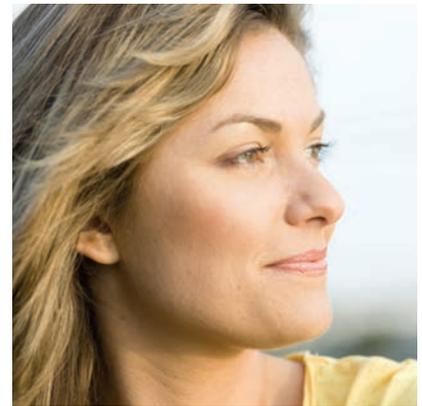
We've looked at how counselling can help with specific sleep problems such as insomnia, nightmares, and night terrors. The purpose of CBT-I is to look at unhelpful thoughts and behaviours around bedtime and sleeping and break a lot of the negative associations which can form around sleep difficulties.

Counselling and psychotherapy can also help in other ways. It can be helpful to explore what's going on in your life with a professional if there is something you are struggling with. Are there underlying issues and difficulties that are making you too anxious, depressed or stressed to sleep? Are your sleep difficulties having an impact on your life and your interpersonal relationships? Perhaps you are struggling to cope with lack of motivation and self-esteem because of your difficulties sleeping. These are all things that therapy can help with. Therapy can be a great space for discussing what's troubling you in your life and exploring any mental health concerns you may have in a safe and confidential space.



## Key points

- Sleep is essential for our physical AND mental wellbeing.
- Sleep can impact on your mental health, and your mental health can impact on your sleep.
- Aim for your recommended number of hours for your age group where possible.
- Employ good sleep hygiene to give yourself the best chance at sleeping well.
- Try not to fret or get frustrated at sleeplessness but get out of bed and do something else.
- Find what works for you and try to be kind to yourself when you're tired or frustrated.
- Consider seeking professional help if you're struggling or things aren't improving. There are resources available out there such as online CBT-I sleep treatment referrals through the NHS or accessing the services of CBT-I-experienced therapist.
- It may help to talk things through with a therapist if there are underlying issues in your life which are making it difficult for you to get the sleep you need. Don't struggle alone.



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