

*Posted 17th November 2014:*

Having Sleep Problems? 'Sleep Hygiene' advice based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can help.

Isn't it awful when you can't sleep? The more sleep-deprived we are, the less well we can concentrate. People can get irritated; some start over-eating; work gets harder to get through; our bodies may become more open to infection.

Putting up with nights broken by noisy neighbours, sick children, or other people's spare mattresses can be bad enough at the best of times. In counselling I see many clients who are depressed or anxious, and not able to sleep. They can't get to sleep when they go to bed, or they wake in the night and lie there for ages going over and over their problems and worries again and again.

Unfortunately, sleep problems are a typical side-effect of low mood, along with that tendency to worry over the insoluble problems – stuff we can't fix during the day certainly isn't going to get fixed by thinking about it all night, after all. And often the less sleep we get, the harder it is to fight back to a happier way of coping.

So what's 'normal'? We are daytime animals, built to be awake in the day and hard-wired to rest during the hours of darkness. That's why nightshift working can be so difficult for many people. How many hours sleep does an adult need? Believe it or not there isn't really any definitive guidance on this. Apparently the late Margaret Thatcher thrived on four hours sleep a night, which is rather a frightening thought for many of us. It's unlikely that we all need eight straight hours, but less than five or six in total may leave some people feeling unrefreshed.

Does sleep really need to be uninterrupted? Historians say that before affordable artificial lighting in the home and outdoors most people went to bed at nightfall and got up around dawn. In winter particularly that was a long time – more than eight hours, certainly. But their habit was to sleep for three or four hours, then spend some time awake - maybe two hours or so talking, reading, having sex – then they would go have their 'second sleep'. So interrupted sleep isn't necessarily always unhealthy.

Getting up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night is absolutely normal for many people, both men and women, particularly in middle and older age. Ruling out those with an underlying medical condition, mostly our bladders just don't want to hold out all night any more. Most people simply get up, go to the loo, and go back to bed. If you are doing this then getting back to sleep, it's likely you do not have an insomnia problem. In fact worrying that you have a problem might actually result in you increasing your anxiety level for no reason, and keeping yourself awake.

The best, most up-to-date advice for solving sleep problems has been developed through Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. You'll find lots of this 'Sleep Hygiene' advice on the internet, usually giving the same basic set of ideas. It's based on the fact that we are more-or-less programmed to sleep at night, and that sleep is one of the most primitive, habit-based and habit-forming functions we carry out.

Here is a basic set of instructions:

*Regular bedtime and wake-up time.* Go to bed and get up at the same regular time every day (or at least every week day); think of midnight as your cut-off point. Do not nap during the day to make up for lost sleep – you're likely simply to set up a napping routine that will not help a return to normal night sleep patterns.

*Have a regular, gentle going-to-bed routine* and start winding down at least an hour before you want to be in bed and ready to sleep.

*Avoid stimulants.* The aim is to close yourself down for sleep, so avoid all stimulants. Eat early so you have time to digest your dinner before bed. In the evening avoid caffeine, alcohol and substances like cannabis. People tend to assume that alcohol and drugs help them relax and therefore get to sleep. Apart from the fact that alcohol and weed can add to depression, the truth is that they may relax you into a sort of sleep but this type of sleep tends to be light and short-lasting; your brain can't get into a proper sleep mode and you may wake too soon and not refreshed.

*Keep cool and dark.* Your bedroom at night should be dark, cool, quiet and calm. Sleep is about rebooting your brain and body: try to make your environment help that. If you wake to go to the bathroom, try not to put on too many lights. Go to the bathroom then straight back to bed.

*Bedrooms are for sleeping (and sex, if you're an adult).* They may be for a little light reading, but only on paper (see the next point). This is difficult in a world where many of us live in fairly small homes, but bedrooms should not be for internet surfing, TV watching or even studying.

*Keep the electronics out of the bedroom.* Reading or movie-watching or social media chatting will engage your conscious brain; it'll be too interested and lively to fall asleep easily. Screens also engage other, subconscious parts of the brain. They work by flashing lights at us, if subliminally. Our brains are attracted to light and movement: the brainwave patterns set up when you're watching TV or reading a phone or computer screen will interfere with the sleep waves your tired brain would really like to fall into.

Be kind to yourself. If your habit is to feel anxious about getting to sleep, try mindfulness relaxation techniques when you're lying ready for sleep.

*Keep your wakefulness out of the bedroom.* If you can't get to sleep after a reasonable time, either when you go first to bed or when you wake during the night, the advice is to get up. Go to another room, and don't make yourself comfortable. Sit or stand. No stimulating food or drink. No interesting books. No TV, phone or computer. Find something repetitive to do – ideal if you're good at knitting or sewing or sorting socks. If you must read, find something short and easy. Or if you really can't get away from your troubling thoughts, try writing them down for a limited time, say 15 minutes, then push the page away, or tear it up. When the wee small sensible voice in your head tells you it's ready to sleep now, go back to bed and relax. And if you don't get to sleep this time? Sorry, but you have to do it all over again...

If this all sounds dull and uncomfortable, possibly it's meant to be – it's meant to teach the very literal, ancient bit of your brain that needs sleep that the night is meant for lying in bed asleep and nothing else. People who try Sleep Hygiene and do it properly usually report that it works.

The important thing is to understand that our brains need routine, and they need the opportunity to wind down without having to respond to extra stimulation the whole time.

So if you're having trouble sleeping, try this out. It doesn't sound much fun, I know. It could take a couple of weeks to get your sleep patterns back to normal, but many of my past clients have found it helpful and it could be worth it for you.

You could also try some deep relaxation exercises and some mindfulness visualisation exercises – I will post about these another time, but you can look them up now if you're having problems.

Remember, if the main thing keeping you awake is worrying and/or panicking at night, you might be getting depressed or too anxious. Talking to an objective outsider is often the first step that helps many people. There are many counsellors in Gibraltar. If you want to see me, contact me now.

(Please Note: Frances is a qualified psychotherapist and counsellor; she is not a medical doctor. If you have concerns about your physical health, please see your doctor.)