

Ten Tips for a Better Night's Sleep

Counting sheep is no longer considered the only strategy for falling asleep. The following 10 tips are based on substantial research and the frequency of insomnia as a presenting or corollary problem for mental health counseling clients.

1. Keep regular hours, even on days off.
2. Avoid caffeine, nicotine, and other stimulants for about six hours before bedtime. Skip sugary snacks and drinks before bedtime, too!
3. Get regular exercise, but avoid strenuous activity for at least one hour before bedtime.
4. Have a light snack before bed, not a heavy meal. For your snack, choose foods such as dairy or turkey, which contain high amounts of tryptophan, an amino acid that your body uses to manufacture melatonin, a brain chemical that helps you relax and sleep.
5. Your brain naturally increases its melatonin production as the sky darkens and then decreases it as the morning sky brightens. Artificial light interferes with this natural sleep/wake process. You can prepare for sleep by using dimmer lights as you near bedtime. Using lower-wattage bulbs and lamps rather than bright overhead lights are strategies to help your brain begin preparing for sleep.
6. Television, movie screens, and computers all emit a type of light that is very similar to sunlight at noon. These media may help distract you from concerns from the day, but they send your brain messages to be alert because it looks like daytime. Avoiding TV, movies, the computer, and hand-held electronic devices for an hour or more before bed will help reduce brain stimulation.
7. Quiet prayer or meditation practices not only reduce stress chemistry, they also help rebuild brain structures damaged by stress and help you sleep better. They also help you build a stronger memory! Taking some time at day's end for quiet prayer and meditation is an excellent sleep habit.
8. Be a little boring! Make your preparations for bed a regular routine. For example, if you always have a light snack, brush your teeth and wash your face, say your prayers, and then go to bed, your brain will begin to recognize the pattern and start preparing you for sleep each time you begin that pattern.
9. Alcohol may help you fall asleep through its brain-depressing chemistry, but it also contributes to middle-of-the-night sleep disruptions and/or waking. It's better to avoid alcohol before bedtime.
10. Don't get upset if you have difficulty falling asleep. If relaxation strategies don't help, either relax and close your eyes and reassure yourself that occasional sleeplessness, as long as you're getting physical rest, won't hurt you; or, get up and read quietly in a low-lit, quiet room until you feel sleepy. Don't turn on the television, computer, or hand-held electronic device; doing so will further stimulate your brain and make achieving deep sleep more challenging.