

Sleep Consolidation & Stimulus Control

Instructions

Rationale

- Worry about not sleeping and trying harder to sleep are counterproductive.
- Short consolidated sleep feels more satisfying than longer fragmented sleep.
- Sleep debt can promote good sleep as long as it is not associated with increased effort to sleep.
- Sleep needs are variable. By following the recommendations below you will discover your personal sleep need.

To help you sleep better you should focus on improving sleep quality first. Later you will slowly increase the total amount of sleep you get.

Step 1: Limit the amount of time you stay in bed: You should begin by allowing yourself to be in bed no more than the amount of actual sleep time that you estimate you are currently getting. (You may add an extra half an hour to your estimated total sleep time at present because even good sleepers do not spend 100% of the time they are in bed actually sleeping). Though this may sound very drastic, it will quickly help reduce fragmentation of your sleep and make it more consolidated.

Step 2: Begin extending the time you stay in bed: Once your sleep is consolidated, you will gradually increase the time you allow yourself to be in bed. The procedure for increasing your time in bed is described in a different handout.

Rule 1: Fix your wake time: The timing of your sleep period should be in synch with what we estimate to be your natural tendency based on output from your biological clock. The best way to anchor your biological clock is to adhere to your fixed wake-up time and stick to it every day regardless of how much sleep you actually get on any given night. Get out of bed no later than 15 minutes after your wake up time. Anchoring your wake-up time is essential for optimal sleep. This practice will help you develop a more stable sleep pattern and will strengthen the natural cues from your internal biological clock that regulates your sleep-wake cycle. An irregular sleep-wake schedule, particularly an irregular wake up time, can weaken the signal from your biological clock that regulates optimal time for your sleep. In fact, you can create the type of sleep problem that occurs in jetlag by varying your wake-up time from day to day. If you stick to a fixed wake-up time you will gradually notice that you become sleepy at roughly the same time most evenings, which will eventually allow you to go to bed earlier, get more sleep, and, thus, satisfy your sleep need.

Rule 2: Determine your earliest allowed bed time: Your ideal bedtime is determined by the fixed number of hours allowed in bed and your fixed rise time. However, it is essential that you consider this recommended bedtime as your earliest allowed time to go to bed. Do not go to bed before sleepy. Sleep is an unfolding process. It cannot be

forced. Trying to force sleep is ineffective and it is, moreover, counter productive. If you do not feel sleepy at your prescribed time wait until you do feel sleepy. By going to bed only when sleepy you increase the likelihood that you will fall asleep easily.

Many people misjudge the state of sleepiness. People often confuse the sense of being sleepy with the sense of being tired, fatigued, and the wish to rest the mind and the body. The state of being very sleepy is a state of having to almost struggle to stay awake. When you are close to that state, you are sleepy.

Rule 3: Get out of bed when unable to sleep is often not easy: Your bed is comfortable, you might want to at least get some rest, and you might be hopeful that your continued trying to sleep will make it happen. The following points might help clarify the rationale for this seemingly counterintuitive rule and we hope it will motivate you to follow it consistently.

Prolonged periods of being awake in bed usually lead to tossing and turning, becoming frustrated, or worrying about not sleeping. These reactions, in turn, make it more difficult to fall asleep. The longer you lie in bed awake trying to sleep, wanting and hoping to go back to sleep, you are training yourself to be awake in bed. When sleep does not come on or return quickly, it is best to get up, go to another room, and only return to bed when you feel sleepy enough to fall asleep quickly. Generally speaking, you should get up if you find yourself awake for 15 to 20 minutes or so and you do not feel as though you are about to go to sleep. We strongly discourage the use of a clock in making this decision because awareness of the clock time could lead to dwelling on not sleeping, which further increases wakefulness. Instead, we suggest that you use your internal sense so that if you feel that sleep is not imminent, leave the bed and, if practical, leave the bedroom. Do not dwell on this. Just learn to calmly observe your state of mind and let it guide you. Sleep naturally emerges when the body and the mind are calm and content. Therefore, the activities that you choose to do when you are out of bed should promote that state of mind. Inconsistent observance of this rule compromises the potential benefits you stand to gain. It is through absolute consistency that, over time, your body “unlearns” conditioned arousal. Most importantly, stop trying harder to sleep. This means not only that you should stay of bed when your state of mind is not compatible with sleep, but also that when you are out of bed you should be fully present with whatever activity you do and avoid thinking about sleep or its absence. This process of getting out of bed, will also teach you to better distinguish between feeling sleepy and feeling tired and will therefore maximize the chance of meeting your natural sleep need.

Rule 4: The “buffer zone”: Set aside an hour before bedtime as a “buffer zone”. This is a time to engage in activities that are enjoyable on their own rather activities that are taken as a means to an end. Shedding off the day’s excitements and tensions will allow sleep to naturally unfold.

Rule 5: Dealing with intruding thoughts: Preoccupation with small and big worries, mulling over one’s problems, planning future events, while in bed increase arousal and interfere with the sleep process. If you can’t seem to shut off your thoughts, get up and go to another room until you can return to bed without this thinking interrupting your sleep. When this disruptive thinking occurs frequently, you may find it helpful to

routinely set aside a time each day to do the thinking, problem-solving, and planning you need to do. With time, you will probably have fewer intrusive thoughts while you are in bed. Obviously, the time you set aside for this purpose should not be close to bed time.

Rule 6: The bedroom environment: While in bed, you should avoid doing things that you do when you are awake. Do not read, watch T.V., eat, study, use the phone, or do other things that require you to be awake while you are in bed, particularly things that are activating. If you frequently use your bed for activities other than sleep, you are unintentionally training yourself to stay awake in bed. If you avoid these activities while in bed, your bed will eventually become a place where it is easy to go to sleep and stay asleep. Sexual activity is the only exception to this rule. This will help make the bed a strong stimulus (or cue) for sleep. The most important activity that you should eliminate from the bed is the activity of “trying to sleep” because it inevitably increases arousal and interferes with the natural sleep process. If you find yourself thinking about sleep while in bed, get out of bed as in Rules 4 & 5.” In some situations, such as dorms, or studio apartments you will need to reorganize your room to make a separation between the space you use for sleep and the spaces you use for other activities.

Rule 7: Naps: During this period of transition to a better sleep, you should avoid napping. Sleeping at times other than your specified time in bed, particularly for more than an hour, might weaken your sleep drive and could undermine the sleep consolidation process. However, if you find yourself very sleepy (not just tired, but actually sleepy), take a brief (30-60 minutes) afternoon nap (7 to 9 hours after your morning rise time) to ensure your safety. If you do nap, it is best to nap at approximately the same time daily. Irregular naps may weaken the signal from your biological clock. Long nap may weaken your sleep drive. Regularity of rise time and, when needed, the time of a short nap help strengthen your biological clock, and should not interfere with your sleep at night.