Insomnia

Why Does A Good Night's Sleep Matter?

Don't underestimate the negative impact of sleep problems on your schooling, work, relationships, and general well being. Academic performance can be sabotaged by poor sleep patterns. Not sleeping for more than 24 hours affects performance as much as a blood alcohol level above the legal limit.

There's also evidence that an inadequate amount of sleep can:

- Increase moodiness
- Decrease ability to concentrate
- Decrease retention of new information
- Reduce your ability to manage stress
- Lessen your body's ability to fight off illness

For these reasons, it can be costly to ignore sleep problems or bad sleep habits.

Getting The Right Amount of Sleep

Some people only need 6 or 7 hours, but others require up to 9 hours to feel wide awake and to function at their peak level. Moreover, it isn't simply how many hours of sleep you're getting that matters, but how good you feel and how well you're able to perform each day. Quality of sleep can be as important as quantity.

How To Get A Better Night's Sleep

One of the best ways to improve your sleep is to replace a poor sleep routine with one that promotes sleep. In order to get a good night's sleep, you need to:

- Strengthen your mind's association with the bed or bedroom as only a place for sleep,
- Weaken the mind's association with the bed or bedroom as a place for stimulating activities that might interfere with sleep (like studying, watching TV, eating, etc.), and
- Develop a consistent sleep schedule.

The two essential ingredients for sleep are being tired and relaxed. Most research shows that when individuals are tired, they fall asleep within five minutes or less. Falling asleep is something you allow yourself to do, not make yourself do. When you focus on "trying" to go to sleep, this could increase stress, thereby making you less relaxed. Tell yourself that you are waiting for sleep to come, and allow yourself to relax in the meantime.

If you are committed to following these instructions, you should experience some sleep improvement. Remember, it will take time for changes to happen, so be patient and don't give up!

Additional tips for improving sleep

- Wind down for the night at least 30 to 60 minutes before bed.
- Eliminate caffeine and tobacco use late in the day (after 2:00pm).
• Limit or avoid alcohol before bedtime. While alcohol consumption may initially help some people fall asleep, it interferes with a restful night’s sleep by interrupting the sleep cycle.

• Exercising late in the afternoon or early evening can help, but you should avoid any significant exercise within 2 hours of going to bed.

• Relax before bed. Light stretching, a warm shower or bath, or any other activity that you find relaxing may be helpful.

• Have a light carbohydrate or dairy snack before bedtime, but avoid chocolate or sugar. A bottle of milk puts a baby to sleep; the same principle can work for adults.

• Avoid drinking large amounts of fluid late in the day. A full bladder can interfere with sleep.

• Do not have a visible bedroom clock. “Clock watching” often intensifies insomnia. Turn the clock face away from you or put it in a drawer.

• Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day. This can be difficult to achieve with MWF classes being different than TTH classes, but greater consistency will improve your sleep habits.

• On nights that you are staying up late, try to go to bed within a few hours of when you would normally go to sleep. The more off-schedule you get, the harder it is to get back on schedule and to stay rested and alert during the day.

• If you experience a large number of distressing thoughts when you are trying to fall asleep, try scheduling a “thinking time” during the daytime. Pick a 20-minute period when you can focus on the types of thoughts that come to you when you are trying to fall asleep. When these thoughts come to mind as you are trying to fall asleep, dismiss them and remind yourself that you will deal with them during the next day’s “thinking time.” If this doesn’t work, keep a pad of paper by your bed so you can “download” your thoughts to reconsider the next day. After a good night’s rest, you will think and resolve those concerns better.

• If you are dealing with a severe crisis or you are under extreme pressures, there are some non-addicting sleep medications that can be provided for short periods of time by a physician. Consider a consultation with a physician. Sleep difficulties can also be caused by other physical or mental health concerns such as depression.

Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The RMIT Counselling Service can be contacted at **9925-4365** between 9am and 5pm.