

NOT GETTING A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP?

SOME WAYS TO TACKLE THE PROBLEM

Sleep problems are caused by different things for different people. Common causes include worry (for example, about being bullied or taxed), getting used to unpleasant shocks (such as being sent to prison, getting a longer sentence than you expected, a failed appeal), physical illness, too much noise, sleeping during the day so that you are not tired at night and drinking too much coffee and tea.

Sleeping pills are not the main answer

Sleeping pills are not the answer to sleep problems, except for short periods at a time - even if you are able to get them while in prison. Sleeping pills can be helpful for a period from a few days up to 2 weeks for someone facing a sudden problem, like hearing some very bad news, which is stopping them sleeping. But, if you take sleeping pills for longer than this, you may need larger and larger doses for them to work. If you then stop taking the pills, you may suffer severe anxiety, sleeplessness and nightmares. People who have been taking sleeping pills for a long time may need help from a doctor in order to come off them. Note too that sleeping pills can be very dangerous if taken with alcohol or other drugs

Generally the following is true about all substances which can make you sleepy, whether sleeping pills, alcohol or other drugs. They seem to help you sleep at the beginning. But, if you keep using them to get to sleep, they stop helping and can make your problems worse.

The answer to most people's sleep problems is to tackle the causes yourself. Prisons vary a great deal and things that are possible in one may not be possible in another. Here are some steps which are worth trying out, if you think they could apply to you and if you can do them in your prison.

Keep yourself awake and as active as you can during the day

Some people sleep a lot during the day, especially if they are locked up for a large part of the day with nothing to do. They may sleep to help the time pass or out of boredom. This then makes it likely that they won't be tired enough to sleep properly at night. Use any opportunity you can to get out of your cell, to go to work, to education or the gym. Regular physical exercise can help you sleep better. If you are not able to go to the gym very often or regularly, try doing some exercises in your cell - but do not do them near to your sleep time. The PE Instructor may be able to advise you on what sort of exercises to do.

Try to watch your coffee drinking and smoking in the evenings

For most people in prison coffee and cigarettes are their main luxuries and many people are heavy smokers. Although it may be very difficult to cut down on coffee and cigarettes in the evening, it may help you to sleep at night if you can manage to do so. Coffee, chocolate, tea and cola drinks all contain caffeine. Tobacco also contains chemicals that

keep you awake. Any caffeine drunk after 4pm will still have some effect by late evening and may keep you awake. Smoking cigarettes within an hour of going to bed or if you wake in the night is likely to keep you awake too. Fruit juices don't contain caffeine.

Do your thinking about problems during the daytime; do other things just before sleep

For many people in prison, it is when the cell door is locked in the evening that they find that their worries and problems trouble them most. If you find that it is worries or troubled feelings that are keeping you awake, it may help to talk your problems through with a friend, Listener, Buddy or member of staff during the day. Then, if you possibly can, find some thing completely different to do during the evening before sleep. A good book, a radio programme or a Walkman may help. Particularly during the 30 minutes before you try to sleep, make sure that you are doing nothing that makes you worked up in body or mind. Reading, listening to music or a relaxation exercise may be suitable.

Establish a bed time routine

Whatever you choose to do just before you settle down to sleep, try making it part of a short routine, which includes things like washing and tooth-cleaning, which you can do in the same order each bedtime. Having a regular bedtime routine can improve your chances of falling asleep quickly.

A relaxation exercise as part of your bed time routine

If you want to do a relaxation exercise as part of your bed time routine, here is an exercise - if you do not already know one.

- X breathe in slowly - counting to three (say in your mind 'one-hundred-and-one, one-hundred-and-two, one-hundred-and three')
- X when you get to 3, breathe out to the same slow count
- X pause and count slowly to 3 before breathing in again
- X after you've been doing this for 5 minutes or so, say the word 'relax' to yourself as you breathe out.

For the breathing, breathe through your nose, not your mouth. And let your stomach rise and fall as you breathe, rather than breathing only in your chest.

You could practice this exercise for 5 to 10 minutes each night, sitting or lying comfortably. For the exercise to bring benefits, you have keep repeating it for some days. You do not need to try to relax or sleep. Just to carry out the exercise is enough.

Try ways of reducing noise or light at night

If your sleep is upset by noise or light, you may be allowed to use foam ear-plugs or cloth eye-shades. Some people find these a great help. If these are not allowed, there may be other practical ways of reducing noise or light too - like bunk-side curtains or switching your pillow to the other end of the bed. You may be able to block out the noise by using

a walkman or headphones for a stereo if available. It's worth trying.

If you still can't sleep

Try to avoid lying in bed worrying or trying to sleep for long periods of time. If you cannot sleep, seek instead to do something else, if this is possible without disturbing those around you, like sitting up and reading or listening to a radio or tape-recorder. Make sure in advance you have your book, tape-recorder or headphones handy. Don't try to sleep again until you feel sleepy.

If you are troubled by nightmares

Nightmares are common when people are distressed, particularly after a big stress such as an assault. Often they disappear on their own. If frightening dreams happen repeatedly, people sometimes become scared of going to sleep. If this happens, it can be helpful to talk to someone you trust about the dream, or to write it down, describing it in detail. Do this several times reminding yourself that it is "only a dream" and cannot harm you.

When a doctor or nurse can help

There are certain illnesses which can cause sleep problems - like headaches, backaches, indigestion, heart disease, diabetes, asthma, sinusitis and ulcers. If you suffer from any of these, a doctor may be able to treat the illness so that your sleep improves.

Doctors can also help if you suffer from some special sleep disorders. You might be suffering from a special sleep disorder if any of the following apply to you:

- X You have been told that your snoring is loud and suddenly stops and starts.
- X Sudden attacks of sleepiness during the day when you cannot keep yourself awake, however much you try.
- X Uncomfortable feelings in your legs or feet before falling asleep or muscle twitching during the night.

Other organisations that may help

The Prison Phoenix Trust teaches meditation in prisons and supports prisoners to practice regularly. Meditation can be very helpful in helping people relax and to sleep better.

Contact: The Prison Phoenix Trust, PO Box 328, Oxford, OX2 7HF. Tel: 01865 512521 or 01865 512522.

The Prism Project provides prisons with books and tapes on self-help and spiritual topics. If your prison library does not have tapes on relaxation and how to cope with anxiety to lend to you, the Prism Project may be able to help. Contact: Trevor Wilson, The Prism Project, PO Box 6031, Bishop's Stortford, Herts, CM23 1PP. Tel: 01279 777007. Email: info@prismproject.org

**CHECK IT OUT FOR YOURSELF:
WHICH OF THESE COMMON CAUSES OF SLEEPLESSNESS MIGHT
APPLY TO YOU?**

Every now and then everyone has a night of poor sleep. It's normal to have a few bad nights after a bad event or when in a strange place – like when you first come into prison. But if you keep on sleeping badly, it's worth asking yourself whether any of the following apply to you. They are common causes of sleeplessness – and causes which often you can do something about.

	<i>Sounds like me</i>	<i>Like me sometimes</i>	<i>Not like me</i>
Much mental activity soon before bedtime	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Heavy physical activity soon before bedtime	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Little physical exercise during the day	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Daytime naps	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
No regular bedtime	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
No regular getting up time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Eating soon before sleep	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Coffee, tea or chocolate before bedtime	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Heavy smoking before bedtime	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Noise at night	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Too much light	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Worries on your mind	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Anger on your mind	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feeling sad or depressed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Frightening dreams most nights	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you have ticked any of the last four items, consider talking about the problem with someone you could trust - maybe a Listener, Personal Officer, Chaplain or Health Care staff.