Little Book Of Sleep

How to get your best night’s sleep.
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CHAPTER ONE

Who This Little Book Is For
Who This Little Book Is For

A little note from Dr. Becky Spelman

This is a short guide to the key ideas for getting healthy natural sleep. Why did I feel it was important to write this? Learning how to improve your sleep has incredible benefits including:

- Better energy
- Better immune function
- Better resistance to infection
- Better concentration & memory
- Better weight control
- Better Mental & Physical health
- Overall improved sense of well being

Even aside from understanding all of the many restorative psychological and physical qualities of sleep we all viscerally feel the impacts on the clarity of our thinking and our ability to perform at our best when we’ve had a full night of quality sleep versus a broken, short, or absent night’s sleep. There are natural cycles in nature and it is clear that humans do best when we work with these cycles rather than staying outside of them or not being able to benefit from joining in with their rejuvenating cycles.
If you only take one thing away from this guide I would hope to convey the important of seeking help. Books, courses, doctors, sleep experts, do whatever you can to access these and start the conversation as soon as you can. The average time it takes a person to seek out professional help whether a doctor or therapist is around 15 years and to me this seems like a small tragedy when it is such a treatable set of symptoms. Often the reluctance is to do with the fear of pills being offered as the only solution. As I discuss later this is no longer standard to put forward as the first option, we have other effective tools and strategies to provide.

There are additional symptoms effecting sleep that are not covered in this guide. Narcolepsy, restless leg, hypersomnia, are just some of the many sleep impacting conditions that can be helped but aren't covered here due to the general focus. Again, I'd encourage you to start exploring for help.

With sleep especially it is important to remember you are not alone. Insomnia and sleep problems are amongst the most prevalent mental health issues in the world today and affect almost everyone at some point in their life. It is also one that is overcome by huge numbers of people. There are many things that will need to change in your approach if you have been struggling with this problem for a long time but getting smart about looking for research and answers is the first step so I will do my best to prepare you as you start out on your journey to a life with consistent quality sleep.

I hope you take this with the healing intention it was written with.

All my best,

Dr. Becky Spelman
Do You Have Sleep Problems?
Do You Have Sleep Problems?

There are two spectrums you need to consider for problems in the area of sleep. The first is the type of problem you are having and the second is the level of the problem or its impact.

Firstly, the type of sleeping problem comes in one of three forms:

1. Sleep Onset Insomnia. (Difficulty falling asleep.)
2. Sleep Maintenance Insomnia. (Difficulty remaining asleep.)
3. Non-Restorative Sleep. (Low quality sleep.)

There is perhaps a fourth worth pointing out which is Insufficient Sleep Syndrome which typically has more of a volitional cause as you find yourself choosing to go to bed later or wake up earlier in order to work or manage other life tasks. ‘Choosing’ is used lightly here as modern life does not always allow a lot of choice but it basically means you would have the ability to sleep adequately if circumstances allowed. Just because there is a choice doesn’t mean you should underestimate the impact of compounding sleep debt which can be just as severe as chronic insomnia.

Secondly, the scale of the problem can significantly change your approach depending on the severity of your symptoms.
1. Length of time symptoms have been present.
2. Length of time it takes to fall or return to sleep.
3. Length of total sleep time / stages of sleep completed.
4. Restorative quality of sleep (demonstrated in daytime wakefulness, memory function and ability to concentrate).

Typically the length of time you have suffered sleep problems should suggest to you whether you would be well advised to seek guidance from your local doctor or a therapist. Insomnia of periods ranging one to two weeks are fairly normal for everyone to experience at certain points in their life. Periods of more than two weeks are a sign you should be exploring solutions and strategies to address this.

With Sleep Onset Insomnia it’s important to realise a period of up to 15 minutes from going to bed before falling asleep is entirely normal. Indeed, if you regularly fall asleep immediately this may actually point to an excess of sleep debt resulting in excessive sleepiness when you go to bed. A short period of moving from a relatively awake state to a drowsy state and then to sleep is most typical for healthy sleepers. If you consistently take more than 20 minutes to go to sleep then there is definitely some optimisations we’d look to make and if you take considerably longer than this then a new approach to sleeping could be incredibly beneficial.
Sleep Maintenance Insomnia can vary from awakening once each night for a short or long time, to awakening multiple times either falling back to sleep quickly or with much difficulty. Awakening once during the night may in fact be entirely normal and there were points in our history where it was more common culturally to be awake for a small time in the middle of the night so there may be a routine that is better to build around this but if you are awake for too long, or wake up repeatedly then there are improvements to be made.

Non-Restorative sleep can be as a result of not being able to fall asleep for the earlier part of the night or the later part, the earlier typically associated to deep sleep and the later associated to dream sleep though there are also cycles within these and both have important benefits to convey.
CHAPTER THREE

Triggers Of Sleep Problems
Triggers Of Sleep Problems

There are a variety of noises which can disturb our ability to get a restful night’s sleep. This isn’t just limited to literal sound noises either.

Noise comes in three distinct categories.

1. Biological – Your body, including food and drink.


3. Environmental – Your place of sleep. This includes your bedroom, the bed, the curtains, etc.

The way to think about noise is as a stimulus that in itself isn’t wrong, but its timing is.

An environmental example, could be if you’re listening to your favourite podcast during the day then it’s something you enjoy. If your favourite podcast starts playing at 3am and wakes you up from a deep and pleasant sleep then this is noise. Lights, bed quality, blackout curtains, abrupt noises can all be environmental noise.
A psychological example could be the problem solving you do during your day. This is key to your success in work and other activities but if this same problem solving thinking kicks in when you are starting to fall asleep then it becomes noise and interferes with sleep. Depression, anxiety, and many other psychological conditions can also interfere with sleep in this way.

A biological example could be a natural feeling of energy and exuberance during the day which is incredibly beneficial, but if that same state crops up while you are laying in bed trying to drift off to sleep it becomes noise. Stimulants such as caffeine are an synthesised form of this alertness but other causes can be eating large amounts of food or working out vigorously shortly before you go to bed.

All of these examples, and there are countless more for each, are examples of where we have to start working on building strategies and support mechanisms to provide ourselves with a much more straightforward and easier path towards getting the kind of sleep that we really want.
CHAPTER FOUR

Self-Care Solutions
Self-Care Solutions

‘Sleep is the golden chain that binds health and our bodies together.’
- Thomas Dekker

There are two things that create sleep,

1. Sufficient levels of sleepiness.

Insomnia is most often caused by excessive noise rather than a lack of sleepiness.

The key is to address noise then. The best way to approach this is with a broad holistic set of strategies and methods focusing on minimising or eliminating each possible area of noise.

People’s typical approach addresses some but not all areas of noise and this does not go far enough to help sleep as even one area ignored could be sufficient to disturb your overall sleep quality of time asleep.

There are two periods you need to focus on for a good strategy to support a good night’s sleep.
Firstly, the ultimate aim for creating a natural solution to good sleep is to focus on a good day being awake.

This is composed of many things.

1. Avoid alcohol, caffeine, and medication where it is safe to do so.

Stimulants are well-known as a problem source for getting to sleep, maintaining sleep, and sleeping with quality. This doesn’t stop many people taking too much and too late in the day. There is a huge variation between people’s sensitivity to caffeine and stimulants with some people able to drink a coffee or eat chocolate straight before going to bed. Most people are negatively impacted by this and even more will at least have their sleep quality impacted so it’s worth being aware of this when creating a strategy around good sleep.

Alcohol is often cited by people as a solution to help them get to sleep and while it can indeed have this effect the quality of the sleep and your ability to maintain sleep are impacted by this strategy so it is important to avoid alcohol in trying to achieve rejuvenating sleep. It’s also possible medications you are taking are impacting your sleep but always consult with your doctor or practitioner before stopping or changing medicine you take.

2. A healthy diet eaten at the right times and in the correct portions.

The quality of what you eat is important. Getting a balanced diet low in sugar and processed foods, and high in natural foods with balanced macros and nutrient dense choices is the ideal. One other thing to bear in mind is that when and how much you eat is incredibly impactful. Eating large portions close to bed is highly likely to impact your sleep.
3. Regular exercise.

Exercise is important for both energising you during the day when it is best to do exercise, and also for promoting sleepiness when you get to bed. Depending on the type of exercise it may be best to avoid doing cardiovascular or high-intensity training shortly before sleep. Stretching, yoga, or meditative and slower-paced exercise can be done as part of a wind down routine before sleep.

4. Learn relaxation and breathing practices.

It may not sound like they will do much but there are few things more effective than breathing techniques for relaxation and promoting sleepiness while also reducing noise.

Harvard Doctor and author Andrew Weil recommends the 4-7-8 technique. Which can be done whenever you need it in the day to relax both body and mind.

Inhale through your nose and close your mouth for 4 seconds. Hold your breath for 7 seconds. Exhale through your mouth for 8 seconds. Then repeat three more times (so four repetitions total).

Another very powerful technique is to just sit and listen to yourself breathing as you lay in bed before sleeping. If you find your mind races with thoughts concentrate on both listening to the sound of the inhale and exhale while counting each out breath from 1 to 4. Then start from 1 again. You may find yourself counting beyond 4 after you repeat this a few times and your mind begins to naturally drift.

Guided meditations, audio books and relaxing music can also all help in the transition period between wakefulness and sleep.
4. Ensure a comfortable environment free from noise and stimulus.

The checklist includes but is not limited to a comfortable bed but that is firm enough to support your back, along with neck-supporting pillow, cool room temperature around 16-18 Celsius or 60-65 Fahrenheit with enough duvet to keep your temperature comfortable, dark/blackout curtains, minimal noise or steady ambient/white noise or a fan to mask any disruptive noises that occur in or around your environment. Eye masks and ear plugs are an option but be careful to maintain hygiene to keep ears and eyes infection free.

5. Keep to a consistent rhythm for waking and sleeping time, and as close to the natural cycle as you can.

Not all jobs or lifestyles can allow for this but where possible it helps to keep in tune with the cycles of nature and to sleep during the dark hours of the night and be awake for as much of the daylight hours as possible. Daylight increased production of cortisol in the brain increasing wakefulness, and darkness increases melatonin production which increases sleepiness. These can be shifted to some degree through environmental control (or things such as supplementary melatonin) but few things beat the natural remedy of adjusting your schedule to make the most of the natural rhythms of the day.
Let Us Know If We Can Help

We know how hard it can be taking the first steps to finding someone you trust to speak to about your mental health. That’s why we offer a no obligation chat to help you find out where you’re at before committing to anything. Click below to learn more about our:

Free 15m Consultation

Alternatively call us on:
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