

WHAT IF I HAVE SLEEP PROBLEMS? A NATIONAL CENTER FOR PTSD FACT SHEET

Julia M. Whealin, Ph.D.

Many people who have been deployed for combat or peacekeeping experience sleep problems, for various reasons. Some individuals may suffer from nightmares related to the deployment, and wake up feeling terrified. Others may feel the need to stay awake to protect themselves from danger. For example, some service members who have been in combat feel a need to "stand guard" at night, rather than sleep. Individuals may also have poor sleep habits that lead to insomnia, such as extended napping or an irregular sleep schedule.

What Can I Do If I am Having Sleep Problems?

We are creatures of habit. Our sleep habits can either make sleeping easier or more difficult. The following 10 suggestions have been shown to help reduce sleep problems:

1. **Keep bed only for sleep** – Do not watch TV, talk on the phone, review work, study, or solve problems while in bed. Go to bed only when you are drowsy and ready for sleep.
2. **If you don't fall asleep within 30 minutes, get up** – Go to another room and do something relaxing until you feel drowsy.
3. **"Wind down" before bedtime** – Do something calming, like light reading, listening to soothing music, praying, taking a warm bath, doing a crossword puzzle, or playing an enjoyable computer game before bedtime.
4. **Have a regular bedtime and rising time** – Go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day.
5. **Limit naps** – A mid-day nap as short as 10 minutes can improve mood and mental performance. However, limit your nap to 15 minutes and don't take it later than 4pm, or the nap may interfere with your sleep cycle.
6. **Increase regular exercise** – Just not too close to bedtime.
7. **Decrease stimulants** – Avoid smoking, or drinking coffee or soda with caffeine in the afternoon or evening.
8. **Decrease alcohol** – Because alcohol causes mid-night awakenings, have no more than one serving of alcohol with dinner. Of course if you are in recovery from alcohol abuse, it is important to avoid alcohol entirely.
9. **Inspect your bedroom environment** – Is your bedroom dark and free of noise? Is your bed comfortable? Is the temperature comfortable? Do you feel safe and serene in your bedroom? If not, you can add images that are calming—a picture of your children, pet, an outdoor scene, a poem, or a prayer—to your room.
10. **Get help** – There are treatments that can help your sleep problems. If you continue to have sleep problems, see a trained sleep specialist to help identify what is the best treatment for you.

What If I Am Having Nightmares?

After a traumatic event, many people experience nightmares. For some, nightmares may continue to repeat for a long period of time. During nightmares, you may feel like you are “reliving” the event, with the same fear, helplessness, or rage experienced during the original trauma. Nightmares are not a sign that you are “going crazy.” They are a way of working through a trauma.

Some people try to avoid nightmares, by using drugs or alcohol, or by avoiding sleep altogether. These “solutions” only lead to new problems, such as substance dependence and sleep deprivation. When you wake up from a nightmare, leave the bedroom and go to another room to get your bearings. It may take a while to re-orient yourself to the present. Do something relaxing. If possible, reach out to someone who supports you. If you live with others, discuss the fact that you are having nightmares. Discuss ways in which you might want to handle the situation and share this handout with them. A small percentage of sufferers act out their nightmare in their sleep. You may want to rearrange your bedroom so that you are safe. If you share your bed with a partner, you may need to make sure he/she is not in harm’s way.

How Are Sleep Problems Treated?

There are effective treatments for sleep problems. Choosing one that is right for you will depend on the situation. Medications are available for quick, short-term relief of insomnia and nightmares. Some medications can be addictive, however, so check with your doctor to find out which is best for you.

Some “talk therapies” will help bring about long-term relief of sleep problems. “Cognitive Behavioral Therapy” targets your beliefs and behaviors that can make sleep problems worse. “Sleep Hygiene” Therapy helps people develop habits that can improve sleep. Breathing and relaxation therapies also may be used to help reduce muscle tension and promote sleep.

Therapies to treat nightmares are also available. For example, “Imagery Rehearsal Therapy” focuses upon helping people change the endings of their nightmares, while they are awake, so the dream is no longer upsetting. This therapy has been shown to reduce nightmares in survivors of combat and sexual assault.

Where Can I Find More Information About Sleep Problems?

National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: www.ncptsd.org

National Alliance for the Mentally

Ill: http://www.nami.org/Content/ContentGroups/HelpLine1/Sleep_Disorders.htm

Stanford University Center for Excellence in the Diagnosis and Treatment of Sleep Disorders:

<http://www.med.stanford.edu/school/psychiatry/coe/>