

INSOMNIA MANAGEMENT - 4

Stimulus Control Therapy

Sleep problems can be related to stressful or disturbing life events such as serious illness, hospitalisation, divorce, death or exams. Once the situation or issues surrounding the event has been resolved sleep usually returns to normal.

Sometimes however, although the original cause of the sleep problem has disappeared the insomnia can remain.

Being unable to sleep may be because an association has developed between going to bed and not sleeping. The bed, bedroom, turning the lights out and attempting to go to sleep has become the stimulus that triggers negative emotions such as frustration and worry.

The process of going to bed has developed into an automatic trigger for negative emotions. This is conditioned insomnia.

Can these responses be changed?

YES!

These emotional responses have been learned by frequent association. They can just as easily be unlearned and replaced by new responses.

This will make the bed and bedroom become a positive trigger for sleep, ensuring that when you go to bed tired, or wake up during the night you can expect to fall asleep easily.

This is what you do...

Step 1

Keep your bedroom only for sleep or sexual intimacy. Do not use for activities such as eating, smoking, working or arguing.

Step 2

Wake up and get out of bed at the same time each morning. This includes weekends even when you may stay up later at night than usual. Choose a wake up time that suits your **usual** circumstances.

Step 3

Go to bed at night only when you feel sleepy, not because of a standard routine. Going to bed **before** you are sleepy or drowsy is likely to result in a long period of wakefulness in bed.

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Step 4

If after going to bed and turning out the light, you do not fall asleep in a reasonably short period of time (approx 15 minutes) get out of bed, go to another room and do something relaxing.

When you feel sleepy, go back to bed and give yourself another chance to fall asleep. You should not try hard to fall asleep, as this will only raise your alertness and prevent sleep. Just relax.

Step 5

If again you do not fall asleep quickly, repeat Step 4. Continue this procedure until you fall asleep quickly.

Step 6

Do not nap during the day even after a night of little sleep.

Step 7

Follow the program strictly for several weeks to establish a regular and organised pattern.

What will happen?

At first, it will probably take several times out of bed before you fall asleep quickly. The result will be less sleep than usual resulting in a build-up of sleepiness over the first few days. This will help you to fall asleep more quickly after a few nights. The more experiences you have of falling asleep quickly after turning out the lights, the stronger the influence your bed and bedroom will have to trigger sleep rather than wakefulness.

Gradually, over several days or weeks, you will fall asleep on few attempts. You will also notice that you get sleepy earlier in the night and will gradually gain more sleep.

For a while you will experience more sleepiness than you do now.

The length of treatment required before positive results will depend on how long you have experienced your sleep problem. However, if you follow the instructions for the stimulus control technique it will work quickly and its effects will be long term.

Once your sleep pattern has improved and your bed and sleep routine has returned, you should not stop using this therapy. If you want to have an occasional sleep-in remember this may delay you falling asleep that night. Remember it is important not to have long periods awake in bed especially if you start to feel worried or frustrated.

It may be beneficial to consider the promotion of good sleep habits (see Sleep: Facts & Hygiene). These minor lifestyle changes can be included into your day, night and bedtime routine and can help you develop a good ongoing sleep pattern.