

CHANGING YOUR BELIEFTS AND ATTITUDES ABOUT SLEEP

We have thus far concentrated on changing your sleep habits. As you implement these behavioral changes into your new lifestyle it is important to examine your attitude and beliefs about sleep and insomnia. The way people think about a particular problem can either alleviate or aggravate that problem. What you think also effects how you feel and what you do. For example, when you worry during the day about how poorly you slept the night before, it is likely to make you more apprehensive about the upcoming night. Excessive concerns about the consequences of poor sleep can also feed into your problem. An overly preoccupied mind and emotional upset are not very conducive to sleep. This treatment component is designed to help you address these concerns. To regain greater self-control over sleep you must first set aside previously held beliefs and replace them with more adaptive ones.

Sole attributions of insomnia to external causes such as “my sleep problem is entirely due to pain or to some biochemical imbalance” or “because I am getting older it is normal to have sleep problems” are self defeating. Although, age, pain or physical ailments may contribute to sleep difficulties, psychological factors can either alleviate or exacerbate those difficulties. Thus, it is important to adopt a more constructive attitude and assume some control over these factors.

Blaming sleep for mood swings, lowered energy and poor nights sleep only aggravates your problem. Although chronic sleep deprivation impairs functioning research shows that performance decrements due to insomnia are minimal. When you worry about those presumed consequences, it only makes you more anxious and decreases your tolerance for sleep loss. It also feeds into the vicious cycle of insomnia, emotional distress and more disturbed sleep.

Expectations such as “I must sleep eight hours every night” or “I must fall asleep in minutes” are unrealistic. Sleep needs vary widely among individuals and short sleep is not necessarily pathological. There is no universal standard for sleep duration. Sleep as much as you need to feel rested in the morning and remain alert during the day, but no more. Do not place pressure on yourself to achieve certain sleep standards as this will only increase your anxiety and perpetuate your insomnia. Although the average sleep duration for adults is between 7 ½ and 8 hours per night, some people can lead very productive lives with as little as 4 to 5 hours. The speed with which one falls asleep is also variable. Your spouse may go to sleep as soon as their head hits the pillow, yet if you fall asleep in less than 30 minutes dont worry about it. This is the cutoff criteria to define sleep onset insomnia. The number and duration of awakenings increase with aging, but these changes are not necessarily indicative of insomnia. The chances are that you wake up more often than you think, in as much as you dont remember awakenings shorter than 5 minutes. It is best to avoid comparing your sleep pattern with others. There will always be someone who is taller, wealthier or sleeps better than you. Simply acknowledge these individual differences and try to remember how much more productive you can be with less time spent asleep.

Catastrophizing after a sleepless night only makes matters worse. Sleep loss is more likely to be distressing if you perceive it as a stressful rather than as a challenge. So dont panic after a sleepless night; stay calm and accept the fact you did not sleep well the night before. The only certain consequences of sleeplessness is that it will eventually lead to sleepiness. Furthermore, there is no need to make up for all sleep loss. Usually one good nights sleep is enough to put you back in shape.

After an insomnia night minimize problem-solving on the following day as everything may seem more complicated or more difficult to handle than it really is. Stay on cruise control for that day. If you must perform certain demanding tasks, schedule those to coincide with times when your performance is usually optimal (diurnal variations).

Self-imposed pressure to achieve certain sleep standards, excessive concerns about the consequences of poor sleep and false assumptions about sleep can feed into your sleeping problem. If you can change your expectations and challenge previously held beliefs about the causes and consequences of sleeplessness, you will regain more control over your sleep.