

Insomnia

Sleep is as essential to us as food, air and water. Sometimes in your life you may have difficulty sleeping—many people do. Sleep problems can be very common among young people. While it is not an illness and in no way life-threatening, insomnia can be very distressing, frustrating, exhausting and depressing.

Common Symptoms

- Being tired during the day
- Having frequent headaches, being irritable or lacking concentration
- Being tired and not feeling refreshed when you wake up
- Sleeping better away from home
- Taking longer than 30-40 minutes to fall asleep
- Waking repeatedly during the night
- Waking way too early with an inability to get back to sleep
- Only getting sleep with the aid of sleeping pills or alcohol

Main Causes

Insomnia is a condition that is usually caused by something else! Sometimes it won't be immediately obvious what the causes are in your own case, but the following list might give clues:

- States of mind—anxiety, depression, worry, anger, grief, trauma
- Change—moving to a new house/city, starting college
- Environment—noise, discomfort, time zone change
- Pain (one of the most common causes)
- Medical conditions—heart, breathing, digestive problems, high blood pressure, arthritis, anorexia
- Recreational use of drugs/alcohol
- Sleeping pills and tranquilizers (can actually cause sleep disturbance)
- Other prescription drugs—including some contraceptives, diuretics, diet pills, beta-blockers, stimulants

Things You Can Do to Help Yourself

Change Your Environment

You need a comfortable bed and a room that is quiet and dark enough with a comfortable temperature. Unfortunately, this is not always possible. You might have noisy neighbors, a cold room, a partner who snores or furniture you have to make do with, but there are some things you can do that will help.

- Your bed—put a board under the mattress if it sags or try putting your bed in a different position. Make sure your bedding is clean and that you are warm enough but not too hot.
- Light—if light troubles you, use thicker curtains or try putting a scarf or a sleep mask over your eyes. If you feel more comfortable with some light, leave the curtains open a little or use a night light.
- Noise—use earplugs if it's noise you can't do anything about. Take some "diplomatic action" (e.g. talking to noisy neighbors). If noise from neighbors continues to be a serious problem, speak to Residential Life staff if you are on campus or local law enforcement for off-campus issues.

Change Your Lifestyle

If you are having difficulty sleeping and are committed to improving things, it might be useful to adjust some aspects of your lifestyle. A good place to start is to cut out or cut down on any stimulants. These include coffee, tea, alcohol, nicotine, caffeinated drinks, some food additives, "junk food," diet pills or appetite suppressants.

Here are a number of other suggestions that are known to be helpful:

- Exercise regularly.
- Stay up until a reasonable bedtime even if you feel sleepy earlier.
- Go to bed only when you are feeling really tired and sleepy.
- Get up at the same time each day even if you fall asleep late.
- If you're a late sleeper, force yourself to get up earlier.
- Relax mentally and physically for an hour before bedtime.
- Take a warm bath, do some yoga or take a light walk before going to bed.
- Make a list of the things on your mind then forget about them.

Some things to avoid:

- Taking stimulants to keep you awake or sedatives or alcohol to help you sleep
- Sleeping during the day no matter how tired you are
- Going to bed when you're stressed, wound up or not ready
- Eating, drinking or smoking when you get up during the night
- Worrying yourself into not sleeping
- Getting angry with yourself if you can't sleep
- Using computers, tablets and smartphones one hour before going to bed

Adjusting things a little can make a tremendous difference.

Relaxation

If you are stressed or anxious here are a few suggestions:

- Change or resolve the things causing you stress when possible.
- Give yourself enough time to do the things you need to do.
- Don't take on too much, and avoid unrealistic demands.
- Give yourself some "quiet time" each day.
- Practice relaxation techniques, mindfulness or breathing exercises.
- Have some down time before going to bed—you need time to unwind.

Alcohol and Sleep

Alcohol is often more disruptive to sleep than caffeine. Your body will produce adrenaline to compensate for the alcohol in your system. Alcohol also makes you thirsty and disrupts your blood sugar levels which can cause you to sleep fitfully or to wake. You don't have to give up alcohol altogether, but in the interests of solving the problem of sleeplessness and establishing a healthy sleeping pattern, why not think about cutting down? Try not drinking late at night or decide to have a number of alcohol-free days a week. If you are concerned about the amount you are drinking or think you might have an alcohol problem, speak to your medical doctor or a counselor at the Kelly Center.

Getting Additional Help

There are a number of people who can help you—the Student Health Center, your medical doctor or a Kelly Center counselor. Don't feel bad about having to ask for help—insomnia is not a trivial matter. It can be debilitating. Professional help and encouragement may be just what you need.