

insomnia and your thinking

What is Insomnia?

Primary insomnia is persistent problems with sleep, lasting for more than one month, and may include:

- Difficulty falling asleep - also known as onset insomnia
- Waking up on and off during the night - also known as middle insomnia
- Waking up very early and not returning to sleep
- Unsatisfactory sleep quality

Insomnia is the most common mental health complaint, affecting up to 30% of adults, and may require specific treatment even when it occurs as part of another disorder (e.g. depression, generalised anxiety disorder, post traumatic stress disorder).

Insomnia and the Role of Thinking

Insomnia may begin due to a range of factors including stress or pain. Usually, however, different factors keep the problem going. Negative thoughts about sleep can play a very important role in maintaining sleep problems, as shown in 'The Vicious Cycle of Insomnia' below:

Initial poor sleep due to stress, pain, or other reason



Negative thoughts

e.g. *I will not be able to cope if I don't have 8 hours sleep a night ... If I don't sleep well I will surely feel terrible tomorrow and perform badly at work*



Continued poor sleep and increased focus on how poor sleep is impacting on daytime functioning

Emotional and physical problems

e.g. Anxiety and worry about not being able to sleep, apprehension, muscle tension




Change in habits intended to improve sleep

which in fact make things worse e.g. napping, lots of time spent in bed trying to sleep, and unhelpful bedtime routines or surroundings that increase likelihood of sleeplessness, such as mobile phone use, or watching TV in bed

This diagram shows that negative thoughts about getting to sleep, quality of sleep, and consequences of poor sleep can actually *increase* the chances of having poor sleep. It is as though these negative thoughts become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and they can get in the way of returning to regular, good sleep habits.



Types of Negative Thoughts About Sleep

- 1) **Assuming the worst** about the meaning or cause of sleep problems. For example, someone who thinks "I haven't slept well this past week, it must mean that I have lost the ability to sleep" is likely to feel much more distressed than someone who thinks "I haven't slept well this past week - I might be stressed about something at work or at home, I should address it." 
- 2) **Blaming everything on sleep** is another common thinking trap. It is true that poor sleep can affect mood, concentration, memory and work performance, but sleep is not the only cause of problems in these areas. People with insomnia tend to assume that their sleep problems are the cause of *everything* that goes wrong with the day.
- 3) **Unrealistic expectations** about how much sleep is needed can make people feel worse about problems with sleeping. For example, people who sleep poorly tend to hold a strong belief that everyone requires 8 hours of sleep per night to function well. In fact, people vary greatly in terms of how much sleep they need. Some people cope quite well on 4-5 hours per night, while others need 9-10. Setting strict rules or targets for your sleep duration will increase anxiety and interfere with the process of falling asleep.
- 4) **Unhelpful thinking styles** such as catastrophising, black & white thinking, overgeneralisation, and selective attention can also contribute to maintaining sleep problems. For example, people with sleep problems tend to remember the times they slept poorly but forget the instances of good sleep, or will notice every little body sensation when trying to get to sleep. People with insomnia also tend to classify a night's sleep as either "great" or "terrible" without leaving room for "ok" and "good enough."

Challenging Negative Thoughts

You can use the Thought Diary process (described in other information sheets) to challenge negative thoughts about sleep. Research has shown that negative thinking is connected to negative emotions and behaviour, and so healthy thinking is a very important part of healthy sleeping. Thought Diaries are a useful way of identifying your negative thoughts about sleep, and the feelings and behaviours associated with these thoughts. You can then challenge these negative thoughts and generate more helpful and balanced ways of thinking.

