

Sleep Deprivation

Types of Sleep Disturbance

There are many types of sleep disturbance. Some are rarer than others. Narcolepsy, for example, involves falling asleep unexpectedly at a moment's notice, even in public places. Sleep apnea, which is less rare, involves interruptions in breathing while asleep. We will not address such relatively uncommon sleep disorders. Instead, our focus here will be on the most common forms of sleep disturbance: namely, falling and staying asleep.

Causes of Sleep Disturbance

The causes of sleep disturbance are many and varied. Sleep disturbance can, for example, be triggered by relatively simple environmental events, such as excessive noise or too much light. It can be related to physical factors, such as diet or exercise. Sleep can also be disturbed by stressors, either chronic or acute, and emotional events. In addition, difficulty falling asleep may or may not be accompanied by difficulty staying asleep, and the two may have different causes as well as different meanings.

For a variety of reasons, college students are particularly prone to sleep disturbance. Simply starting college and adjusting to college life can be very stressful and have an impact on the student's ability to sleep properly. The same can be said for keeping up with the ongoing academic and social demands of college life. For students who room together, differences in nightly routines can cause sleep disturbance, as can interpersonal frictions and tensions. Between meeting academic deadlines and socializing, the college student's schedule can become highly erratic and interfere with normal sleep patterns. The use of alcohol and caffeine are common causes of sleep disruption in college students, as are relationship changes and family difficulties.

Some college students are at risk for sleep disturbance primarily because they don't recognize the importance of sleep. They may view time asleep as wasted time and consciously disregard the need for sleep. Yet sleep is essential to optimal functioning, and ignoring the need for sleep has many negative consequences, including irritability, exhaustion, lack of concentration, and impaired judgment.

Sleep disturbance can also be an indication of a larger medical condition or psychological disorder. It may, for instance, be a symptom of an Anxiety or Mood Disorder. Furthermore, sleep disturbance that is chronic or severe can bring on or exacerbate serious psychological disorder. Thus, it is generally advisable to consider getting a medical examination and/or psychological counseling if sleep disturbance persists.

Improving Your Sleep Habits

There are a number of things you can do to combat or prevent sleep disturbance. To begin with, you should give some thought to what's been interfering with your sleep. What's been keeping you awake, or waking you up once you've fallen asleep? Who or what is involved? It might be readily apparent to you, for example, that your sleep environment is too noisy. In that case, you'll need to find some appropriate way to either diminish the noise or neutralize it. You might need to ask someone to be a little quieter; you might wear ear-plugs to bed; you might use a white-noise machine to drown out the offending noise; or find some similarly appropriate solution. Inappropriate solutions would include: lying in bed, plotting revenge on whoever's making the noise; drinking until you pass out; and taking unprescribed medication to get to sleep each night.

Depending on what's been causing your sleep disturbance, you might consider one or more of the following:

- Acknowledge your need for sleep. Allow yourself enough time to sleep.
- Establish a regular sleep schedule. Go to bed at the same time every night, and get up at the same time every morning.
- Establish a regular nighttime routine. Spend the hour before bedtime engaged in some relaxing behavior.
- Avoid caffeine. Caffeine is a stimulant that can stay in your system for 8 hours or more.
- Avoid alcohol. Alcohol can have a temporarily sedating effect, but it can also have a “kickback” effect and wreak havoc on the body's natural sleep system.
- Engage in regular physical activity. Lack of exercise can lead you to be “keyed up” and unable to relax at night.
- Avoid physical exertion too close to bedtime. Your body needs time to settle down before sleep.
- Avoid worrying or dwelling on problems too close to bedtime. Your mind also needs time to settle down before sleep.
- Make your sleep environment as comfortable as you can. Make adjustments to sound, light, and temperature if necessary.
- Learn and employ relaxation or meditation techniques. These techniques can help ease your tension and lower your frustration as well as help you sleep.
- Directly address whatever ongoing issues may be causing you stress or anxiety. You might find that discussing your concerns during the day with someone you can trust is surprisingly helpful at bedtime.

Practices Conductive to Good Sleep*

- Try to sleep only when you are drowsy.
- If you are unable to fall asleep or stay asleep, leave your bedroom and engage in a quiet activity elsewhere. Do not permit yourself to fall asleep outside the bedroom.

- Return to bed when - and only when - you are sleepy. Repeat this process of often as necessary throughout the night.
- Maintain a regular arise time, even on days off work and on weekends.
- Use your bedroom only for sleep and sex.
- Avoid napping during the daytime. If daytime sleepiness becomes overwhelming, limit nap time to a single nap of less than one hour, no later than 3 pm.
- Distract your mind. Lying in bed unable to sleep and frustrated needs to be avoided. Try reading or watching a videotape or listening to books on tape. It may be necessary to go into another room to do these.
- Avoid caffeine within four to six hours of bedtime.
- Avoid the use of nicotine close to bedtime or during the night.
- Do not drink alcoholic beverages within four to six hours of bedtime.
- While a light snack before bedtime can help promote sound sleep, avoid large meals.
- Avoid strenuous exercise within six hours of bedtime.
- Minimize light, noise, and extremes in temperature in the bedroom.

For More Information

If you've been having difficulty getting to sleep and/or staying asleep, you know how frustrating dealing with a sleep disturbance can be. Altering your sleep habits, as described above, can go a long way toward getting back on track. But you may still have difficulty overcoming your sleep disturbance or dealing with the factors that drive it. If so, please consider speaking with one of our experienced psychologists. Appointments can be made by stopping by the front desk of the Wicker Wellness Center or by calling (518) 388-6161.