



Dr. Bill Moorcroft

10 Mistakes People Make That Can Ruin Their Sleep

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Talk to an insomniac about how miserable their life is. I hear it all the time. They struggle through the day fighting off fatigue. They have major problems thinking and concentrating. They are moody and irritable. Their nights are filled with frustration and anger as they seek sleep. They may spend hundreds of dollars a year on remedies that promise good sleep but often don't work or soon stop working.

How did they get into such a state? Many times it was because they made mistakes – mistakes of ignoring their sleep, not knowing what they should do, or even doing the wrong things when their sleep started to go bad. You need not be one of these people if you avoid these pitfalls.

1. Not taking sleep seriously

Whether it is because of too many other “more important” things to do, too many entertainment temptations, or just plain thinking the sleep is a waste of time many people simply don't consider sleep as important. They may believe, falsely, that they can learn to get by with less sleep. It may seem that way for a while, but it catches up to them eventually. Or they may value and desire sleep but the need or want to do other things too so their sleep gets sacrificed. They get a short-term gain but often pay a severe long-term cost.

2. Have an uncomfortable sleeping environment

Whether it is a old, lumpy mattress, too much noise, a bedroom that is too warm or too cold, or too much light in the bedroom, a poor sleep environment can mean poor sleep. This can soon lead to poor sleep habits and poor sleep in an effort to compensate.

3. Awake in bed too much

The bed and bedroom should stimulate sleep. This association can break down if too much time is spent in bed awake. This can be from lying in bed awake too long when trying to get

to sleep to staying in bed longer in the morning in the hopes of making up for lost sleep. Also from doing activities in bed other than sleeping such as watching TV. doing taxes, or even just reading. It is better to use the bed only for sleep (but sex is also allowed), go to bed only when sleepy, and to get out of bed if not asleep within about 20 minutes. This last suggestion might mean a bit of sleep time is sacrificed now but more and better sleep will be obtained in the future.

4. Don't have a relaxing pre-bedtime ritual

Work right up to bedtime. Watch the news on TV. Do some emailing. Exercise. Whatever it might be, jumping into bed directly after doing these arousing things can mean difficulty falling asleep. And this difficulty can become a pattern. Your mind needs a buffer between the hectic waking activities and calming, refreshing sleep. A routine. The same thing done every night before bed for 10 - 20 minutes. It might be listening to soft music, taking a warm bath, meditating or praying, light reading, and so forth. The same thing done every night before bed sends a strong message to the brain that it is time to turn off the day-shift and allow the night shift to take over.

5. Don't Eat and Exercise Regularly

Grab a bite of whatever, whenever. Don't exercise or get it only occasionally. Such things throw your body off rhythm and can affect your ability to sleep. It is better to eat healthy meals on a regular schedule. And you should avoid large meals too close to bedtime although a light snack then benefits sleep for some. Exercise daily, preferably in the mid-afternoon.

6. Drink too much caffeine and drink it close to bedtime

Caffeine is wonderful for keeping us alert and reducing fatigue. Caffeinated drinks, and food containing caffeine, are also enjoyable and sociable. However, caffeine can prevent and disturb sleep. The rule of thumb is to consume only a few cups of coffee or equivalent per day and to have nothing with caffeine in it 6 hours prior to bedtime. However, some people are so sensitive that they might have to curtail it even more.

7. Use alcohol to get to sleep

Yes, alcohol makes you sleepy and can speed sleep onset. Thus many people use it to help them fall asleep. However, this is another example of a short-term gain that is harmful in the long-run. First, it causes sleep to be fitful especially toward the end of the sleep time. Second, regular use of alcohol in this way can result in eventual problems with even sleep onset and other health issues. Alcohol as a sleep aid causes more problems than it solves.

8. Keep irregular sleep times

Going to bed and getting up at different times every day causes your body clock to be confused as to exactly when you should be sleeping. Late weekend nights followed by



“sleeping in” the next morning is a typical example. The result is problems with getting to sleep and staying asleep regularly. Most important is aiming to keep the same wake up time every morning as much as possible. This is the major clue to keep your body clock properly set. Adding a regular bedtime to this helps ensure that you are getting the amount of sleep you require every night.

9. Nap too much

A mid-afternoon “power nap” of 20 to 30 minutes can be wonderful and work wonders. More than one or one longer than half an hour can reduce your sleep need making it harder to fall asleep the following night.

10. Watch the Clock

Looking at the time from your bed and calculating how much sleep you will be able to get (or have missed) only causes worry and tension. This makes it even harder to get to sleep. And what difference does it make, anyway, if you know how much or how little sleep you may get? If you have to, turn the clock so that it is hard to see from the bed; that way you will not be tempted.

Even if you have done every one of these things and are sleeping fine now, you, like others before you, can develop insomnia. Once the insomnia develops attending to these things then is not enough. Stronger measures will be needed. Don't let it happen to you. Attend to these things now and continue to sleep well.

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