

Coping with sleep disturbance after trauma

This factsheet outlines some of the impacts that trauma may have on sleep, the impact of the lack of good sleep and some strategies to address sleep disturbance.

Further information can be obtained by contacting the VSS Helpdesk on 1800 VICTIM (1800 842846).

1. What is good sleep?

Sleep is a natural process that provides us with physical, mental, and emotional renewal. Good sleep allows us to rebalance our internal systems each day. During sleep, the brain sorts through the day's events and processes the information taken in. While we sleep our brain stimulates physical repairs to our bodies, relaxes our mental processes, and deals with emotional distress. Most adults require between 7 and 8 hours of undisturbed sleep in order to function well and between 4 to 5 hours of sleep to feel rested over a short period of time.

2. What do we mean by sleep disturbances?

Sleep disturbances include:

- finding it hard to fall asleep (taking longer than 30 minutes)
- waking up frequently after short periods of sleep
- waking up feeling drained and tired even after sleeping regular hours
- waking up feeling anxious
- waking from disturbing dreams or nightmares

3. I am sleeping more than usual. Is this normal?

You may find that you are sleeping for longer periods than usual or feel like you need to take lots of naps during the day to feel rested. You may wake from sleep still feeling tired. This is a common physiological reaction to trauma.

4. What is the impact of lack of good sleep?

Research suggests that insufficient sleep leads to the following:

- diminished energy levels

- poor decision-making
- lack of concentration
- feeling increasingly out of control
- increase in wear and tear on the body
- lesser resistance of the immune system
- less ability to be productive.

5. How are sleep disturbances and trauma related?

People react to crime in a range of ways. Sleep disturbance is a common physiological trauma reaction. During and after a crime, your body responds internally to the external threat. For example, the brain prepares the body to fight or flee by activating certain systems. It also slows or shuts down other systems, such as the immune and digestive systems and 'switches off' the sleep process.

Once the threat has gone, your brain may take some time to realise that the danger has passed, and may continue to act as though the threat is still there. This may mean you experience ongoing sleep problems.

It may be necessary to consciously work through some of the trauma before sleep patterns cease to be disrupted.

6. How are trauma and nightmares related?

While we sleep, the brain tries to make sense of what has happened to us during our waking hours. Dreams and nightmares are ways in which the brain tries to understand and process the trauma. Nightmares may start out being very violent or confusing, and may reflect your own level of confusion and fear associated with the crisis period after a crime. As you consciously begin to understand and adjust to what has happened, your nightmares and dreams may

change too.

7. How can you reprogram the brain to achieve good sleep?

Every crime is different and how we all respond to crime is different too.

As a result we have suggested a number of different ways that may work for you to help you get better quality of sleep. Not all of these ideas will work for you, but there may be some suggestions that you think will be effective in helping you increase the chances of achieving good sleep.

a. Counselling

Find someone you can talk to (e.g. a counsellor or therapist) to manage the issues that are disturbing your sleep.

Further information can be obtained by contacting the VSS Helpdesk on 1800 VICTIM (1800 842846).

b. Safety measures

Assess the risks around the home and take whatever measures help you feel more secure. You might want to leave a light on in the house or have sensor lights installed around the house.

VSS can assist with safety audits in some cases of domestic and family abuse and South Australia Police may also be able to assist with a safety audit of your home.

Have a safety plan prepared in case you need to leave the house. You are more likely to act effectively if you have an idea of what you can do to escape or confront danger.

Have telephones and mobile phones readily accessible with emergency numbers programmed on your phones for easy access.

c. Routines

Find relaxing activities that help you unwind before you get into bed. For example, have a warm bath, listen to relaxing music, read a book, sit quietly and drink herbal tea or warm milk, meditate or use aromatherapy oils along with music to set up a calm, relaxed environment.

Try to go to bed and get up at the same times each day; the body does better when it has a regular rhythm.

Avoid caffeine beverages or foods (such as coffee, cola drinks and chocolate) and try to finish your evening meal a few hours before you go to bed.

Take time before getting into bed to review the day and think about what the next day will bring. You may want to keep a journal of your thoughts or progress. Some people like to write down anything they are concerned they may forget for the next day so that their minds are released from as many distractions as possible before attempting sleep.

d. Exercise

Consider doing some form of physical exercise each day (at least three hours before bed); this helps to get rid of surplus adrenaline stored in the body. Walking is particularly good as it helps relax the mind as well as the body.

e. Breathing

You might practice deep breathing or relaxation techniques such as Yoga or Tai Chi before trying to sleep. Deep breathing helps relax the muscles in preparation for sleep and can help you fall asleep again quickly if you wake up during the night.

f. Grounding Techniques

If you awake during the night in fright, try touching or holding something solid to remind yourself where you are and to help bring you back to reality. For example, grab hold of the bedclothes, focus on a familiar, comforting object or look in a mirror to remind yourself that you are real and that you are safe.

g. Medication

Sleeping medication should be taken with care and with regular consultation with your doctor.

Sleeping tablets can be helpful in the short term for giving a solid block of sleep. Such medication may save you from exhaustion, thus preventing problems in general functioning. Taking sleeping tablets to assist sleep can break unhealthy patterns that may have developed as a result of trauma. However, medication will not address the underlying cause of the sleep disturbance and should only be used under supervision of a medical professional.

h. Other Ideas

If you're not asleep after 20 minutes of lying in bed trying to get to sleep, get out of bed, go to another room, and do something relaxing until you are tired enough to sleep.

Try to avoid looking at the clock during the night if you are finding it difficult to sleep. Often keeping track of how long you are not sleeping adds to the frustration.

Keep a record of all your dreams and nightmares - keep a notepad and pen by your bed so that you can write them down as soon as you awaken.

Take short naps if you need to (limit to 30 minutes at least four hours before your bedtime); this may help you function until you are sleeping normally again.

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you would like more information, please contact the VSS Helpdesk on

1800 VICTIM (1800 842846)
or view our website at victimsa.org

Useful information on sleep disturbance is available at the VSS Resource Centre which is free to join. You can have a look on our website to access the Resource Centre Catalogue.

12 Simple Tips to improve your sleep
healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/healthy/getting/overcoming/tips



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victimsa.org**