



## Sleep, Dreams and Nightmares

At the end of the day, without the distractions of daily demands and activities, thoughts about traumatic experiences, worries, or just a vague but pervasive sense of restlessness, anxiety or insecurity can surface, making it difficult to settle and sleep.

Or, maybe you get off to sleep fairly easily but have difficulty staying asleep. You might wake from nightmares or disturbing dreams in panic and cannot get back to sleep again.

Worrying about not being able to sleep only adds to the problem, and in fact is the most common cause of not sleeping.

Teaching the body and mind to relax can help undo patterns of poor sleep and soothe feelings of restlessness, making it easier to carry out daily tasks with energy and concentration.

Dreams that are exact replays of experiences of trauma are called *flashbacks in sleep*. Flashbacks and disturbing dreams that in some way relate to trauma suggest that your mind is trying hard to process and make sense of what you have been through.

Although frightening, these dreams are a sign that your mind is trying to do the work of healing from trauma. Refer to the Hints & Tips sheet about **Flashbacks, Intrusive Thoughts and Memories** for more information about this.

### What can help?

*Learn some writing and relaxation exercises you can do to help respond to intrusive thoughts that might be keeping you awake (below).*

### TIPS FOR GOOD SLEEP

#### SET A ROUTINE

- Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every day. Go to bed when you feel sleepy - don't wait till the end of the movie!
- Creating a *going to bed ritual* can be very helpful. Your ritual should include things that calm you from the busyness of the day, e.g. a warm bath with lavender oil, soothing music - anything that calms you down.

#### SOOTHING HABITS

- Avoid things that stimulate the mind and body or anything that reminds you of trauma. Do this every night.
- Avoid stimulants like coffee, tea, alcohol, cigarettes and news programs on TV before bedtime. It is a good idea not to drink coffee in the afternoon and evening at all if you have trouble sleeping.
- If you wake up in the middle of the night and cannot get back to sleep within 20 – 30 minutes - get up, walk around a little, have a warm drink (chamomile tea or warm milk is good, avoid caffeine) or try some of the relaxation suggestions on the next page.
- Don't nap during the day. This can make it harder to sleep at night.
- Exercise can help improve sleep, but don't leave it too late in the day as the body is stimulated immediately after exercise.

## Relaxation Techniques

Here are two relaxation techniques that help relax the body and slow the mind.

### 1. BODY CHECK

- Lie on your back on the floor or in bed with your body in a straight line, palms of your hands turned upward and fingers gently curled. Your legs should be slightly apart and the feet falling out to each side.
- Close your eyes. Let your mind drift from sound to sound around you. Don't stay with any sound - hear it and then let it go.
- Be aware of your body lying on the surface beneath you. Feel supported by this surface, as if you could sink into it, totally letting go but knowing that the support of the surface beneath you will hold you.



*Bring your attention to different parts of your body, feeling into each part without moving it:*

- Start with bringing your attention to the right hand thumb, then to the index finger, middle finger, ring finger, little finger, palm of the hand, back of the hand, lower arm, elbow, upper arm, shoulder, armpit, right side of the body, right thigh, knee, lower leg, ankle, top of the foot, each toe, sole of the foot and the heel. Repeat this for the left side of the body.
- Then feel the whole back, neck, chest, abdomen, back of the head, forehead, each eyebrow, the space between the eyebrows, the nose, lips, chin and jaw.
- Now feel the whole right side of the body, then the whole left side and finally the whole body.

*This may seem a little complicated to begin with. You can ask your partner or a friend to read this slowly as you do it until you learn the pattern for yourself, or you can record yourself on your phone or another device, then play it back to follow along with the exercise.*

*Do this before bed or when you wake in the night to help your body relax enough to sleep again.*

### 2. MENTAL ALTERNATE NOSTRIL BREATHING

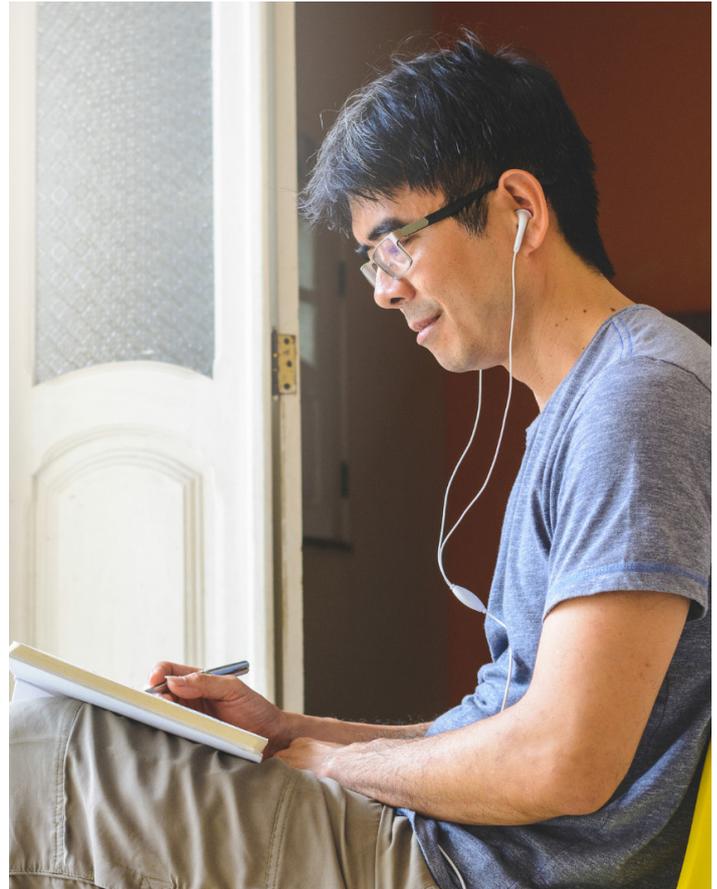
- Lie on the floor or in bed. If you feel comfortable doing so, close your eyes.
- Become aware of your breathing. Feel the air as it enters and leaves the nostrils.
- Now, imagine that the air enters the left nostril as you inhale and leaves through the right nostril as you exhale. Then as you breathe in again it enters through the right and leaves through the left. Thus, in left, out right. In right, out left, and so on.

*If your mind wanders don't worry, just begin again with the left nostril. There is no need to take a big breath, just let the breath be as it is, gently in, gently out. You are only imagining the alternate flow of the breath. This practice is also helpful to calm down from any strong emotions including feelings of anger.*

## Writing Exercise for Worry or Anxiety

*If you find worries plague you at night and make it hard to sleep, setting a time to write them down or talk about them can help.*

- Choose a time, perhaps an hour before bed.
- Take 5 -10 minutes to write down everything that is worrying you or making you sad or anxious. You can record yourself speaking instead of writing if you prefer.
- Once you have finished, you can decide to leave these issues for the night knowing that when you get up in the morning you can take any necessary action to begin to solve the worries. If you are seeing a counsellor it might be helpful to talk through these notes in your sessions.
- Follow this exercise by doing something quiet that relaxes you.
- Be strict with setting yourself a time limit! Dwelling on worrying thoughts for too long can be unhelpful for relaxation and sleep.



## Further Help

Besides the use of these techniques, you might like to consider talking with a counsellor.

A counsellor can help you plan the best strategies to suit you and is also someone you can talk with confidentially about how you feel and what you are experiencing.

Talking about your nightmares and dreams and coming to understand the meaning they have for you can help to reduce them significantly. You can refer yourself or someone else for counselling to QPASTT, through our website [www.qpastt.org.au](http://www.qpastt.org.au)

## Hints and Tips for Wellbeing are produced by QPASTT

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## References

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