



## **The Counterintuitive Guide to Better Sleep**

Getting too little restful sleep is not uncommon in the United States – less than 50 percent of active duty service members and less than 75 percent of civilians get the recommended seven to eight hours of sleep per night.<sup>1,2</sup> The risk of not getting quality sleep may increase following a wound, illness, or injury due to factors such as medications, pain, or anxiety. Sleep is more important than ever when you are recovering because your body fights infection and repairs cells while you are sleeping. Chronic lack of sleep, on the other hand, can make current medical conditions worse, or cause new ones, by increasing heart rate and blood pressure, increasing inflammation, hindering the body's ability to tolerate blood sugar, and increasing appetite.<sup>3</sup>

There are lots of tips available for those who are experiencing sleep disturbances, or those who are looking to optimize their sleep. Most of them are pretty intuitive: keep the bedroom at a comfortable temperature, keep the bedroom as dark and quiet as possible, do not take naps greater than 30 minutes or after 3 p.m., and develop a relaxing routine before bedtime. Others, however, seem to fly in the face of logic. Why would someone who has difficulty sleeping force themselves to stay up late, or not take advantage of the days they are able to sleep in? Although it may not be immediately apparent, there is a method to the madness. Below are explanations for some of the seemingly counterintuitive practices your healthcare provider may recommend.

### **Stay up later**

It is not uncommon to feel tired during the day if you are getting poor sleep, and it may be tempting to go to bed early. So why might your healthcare provider recommend that you force yourself to stay up late? After a few days of being that sleepy when you go to bed, it should become easier to fall asleep quickly, making it more of a routine. Once you experience several consecutive nights of good sleep, your healthcare provider will work with you to adjust your bedtime.<sup>4</sup>

### **Get up early**

If you do not have to get up early, it can seem like the perfect time to sleep in late and “catch up” on sleep. This is actually one of the most counter-productive tactics people use. Sleeping in late sets a new sleep cycle that involves going to bed later and getting up later. This means that when you try to go to sleep at night, it will only make it more difficult to fall asleep.<sup>5</sup>

### **Spend less time in bed**

One goal when combatting sleep disturbances is to teach the body that bed is for sleep. This means if you are lying in bed and cannot sleep after 15 – 30 minutes, it is time to get up. This is true if you have trouble falling asleep, wake up in the middle of the night, or wake up early in the morning. If



you spend too much time in bed trying to fall asleep, your body will learn that the bed is a place to be awake.<sup>4,5</sup>

## Schedule time to worry

Some people find that it is difficult to fall asleep because as soon as they lie down, they start to worry. Whether it is about work, family, finances, or even sleep itself, worrying can keep you awake. Common sense would seem to indicate you should try to stop thinking about whatever is worrying you, but in most cases this is not effective. By actively trying to avoid the thoughts, you are actually forcing yourself to concentrate on them.<sup>6</sup> Try setting aside a time each day as your worry time, when you actively think about your concerns or problems and brainstorm things you can do to address them. For example, you could schedule your worry time from 5:00 – 5:20 p.m. each day when you get home from work. If a worry pops into your head during the day, write it down and tell yourself you will think about it later. Don't forget to keep a [notepad at your bedside](#) to write down things that are keeping you awake at night. Once you have written it down, tell yourself there is no need to worry about it right now – you can do that later during your scheduled time. Once your worry period is over, put the list aside until the next day.

## Learn more

Sleep is a complicated issue, and can become even more so when you have been wounded, ill, or injured. If you are experiencing difficulty sleeping, talk to your healthcare provider about potential causes and treatment options that are specific to you and your situation. You can also visit the following websites for more information:

- The Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center's [Sleep for WII](#) page contains information on the importance of sleep to recovery, as well as tips to help you sleep better.
- [Afterdeployment.org](#) offers a sleep assessment and provides recommendations based on your results. They also have resources to help you sleep, including a sleep guide, video stories, and a sleep workbook.
- [Human Performance Resource Center](#) provides strategies, mobile apps, assessments, and tools to help optimize sleep.

## References

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