



Conquering Insomnia

By Amy Mistler, Ph.D.

Getting a good night's sleep can be a challenge for many people. The good news is that once we understand the psychological mechanisms involved in getting restful sleep, there are specific things that we can do to improve the quality of our sleep.

Classical conditioning. You may have heard of Pavlov's famous experiments with salivating dogs. We expect dogs to salivate when presented with food. Meanwhile, Pavlov found that the dogs in his experiment began salivating *before* they were presented with food, in response to the sound of the footsteps of the experimenter. The dogs had paired those footsteps with food.

How does this apply to sleep? First, think about the physical sensations that you feel when you get into bed – the feel of your pajamas, sheets, and covers against your body, the comfort of lying down, and the feel of your head on the pillow. If you are relaxed and calm when you get into bed, then your mind will pair relaxation with the physical sensations of being in bed. As these are paired over and over again, the physical sensations of being in bed will begin to trigger relaxation and sleep automatically.

Many people are not relaxed or calm when they get into bed though. Many are still running themselves ragged trying to complete stressful work and family related tasks into the evening. This may be followed by watching the news and hearing about frightening crimes and aggravating injustices. Then when people do get into bed, they start thinking, processing their day, contemplating a to-do list, and worrying about how to address their problems. The next thing they know, they look at the clock, see that it is very late, and begin to think about how frustrated they are that they have not fallen asleep yet.

If the above paragraph sounds like you, your mind is probably already pairing the physical sensations of being in bed with emotional responses of anxiety, stress, and frustration. As long as we are experiencing these emotions, it will be just about impossible for us to fall asleep. And when this pairing happens over and over again, the physical sensations of being in bed can start to trigger anxiety, stress, and frustration on their own.

Although this may sound and feel like a hopeless situation, there are many things that you can do to get your sleep back on track:

1. **Set a precise bedtime and a precise wake-up time and be consistent with these every day.** The wake-up time is the most important part - You must get up out of bed at the same time every

day. While people who do not have sleep problems can sleep in once in a while, you cannot do this while you are going through this process of getting your sleep back on track.

- 2. Create a relaxing bedtime routine.** Your body needs cues that it is time to wind down. About an hour before your bedtime, disengage from stressful issues, turn off the news, and do something that makes you feel calm. This may include reading, taking a bath or shower, or meditating. This will begin to cue your mind and body to relax and calm down.



- 3. Use your bed for sleep and intimacy only.** How often do you read, watch television, check email, or play video games in bed? Any time that you are physically in bed, your mind will pair your arousal level with the physical sensations of being in bed.

Therefore, you should **never ever** do any activities in bed except for sleep, which is relaxing, and intimacy, which naturally ends with a relaxation response. Even if you find that reading usually relaxes you, your mind is still more active than we would like it to be in the deep relaxation state of entering sleep. Television in the bedroom can also cause problems. Even while we are asleep, part of the mind is alert, attending to the flickering light and the sounds of people's voices from the television. This leads to increased difficulties falling and staying asleep as well as less restful sleep. If you feel uncomfortable without background noise when you go to bed, use calming instrumental music or calming sounds without voices or words. You can also use a night light if you like having the television on to provide some light.

- 4. Put the bedroom clock out of sight.** When people have trouble sleeping, the bedroom clock is only a source of aggravation. As we lie in bed trying to fall asleep, we see the clock and think, "Oh no! Even if I fall asleep in the next fifteen minutes, I'll still only get five hours of sleep! I can't function on five hours of sleep! Tomorrow is going to be a horrible day! Arrrrgh!" This process just makes us more agitated, which makes it less likely that we will be able to relax and fall asleep. You can set your alarm and turn the clock around.



5. Stop tossing and turning. The longer we lie in bed feeling frustrated that we are not sleeping; the more we are pairing the physical sensations of the bed with being awake and frustrated. The more that this happens, the more likely it is that the physical sensations of the bed will actually trigger being awake and frustrated! If you go to bed or wake up in the middle of the night and are not asleep within 20 minutes (estimating, since the clock remains turned away from your sight), you need to get out of bed and go do something relaxing until you are tired enough to feel ready to fall asleep. Only then can you return to bed. This is an important step and calls for some additional pointers:

- a. Select and plan for calming activities that you can do while awake at night.** Keep in mind that these activities should not be so interesting that they will increase your arousal level. Action movies and most video games are not good options at this time. If computer and television do come to mind, it is important to dim the screen as much as

possible. Both of these involve shining a big light in your face. This can trigger the sensors in our brain that tell us to wake up because there is daylight, which is not what you want as you are passing the time until you are tired enough to go back to sleep.

- b. **Know that while this may seem tiring at first, this will pay off in the long run.** Many people are surprised that when they come in to work with me for sleep problems, I usually tell them to stop trying to make themselves sleep. People often worry that now they will get even less sleep. This may be the case for the first few days but is a necessary process in getting your sleep back on schedule. The tiredness that you save up across the day is what will help you to fall asleep at night, within your designated schedule.
- c. **If you get out of bed and do not feel tired again by your designated wakeup time, you are up for the day.** This is unlikely to happen more than once or twice. Make sure to plan for energizing activities in the morning to help yourself wake up. Doing something outside can be especially helpful.

All of my clients who have applied these tips to their sleep habits have seen improvements in the amount and restfulness of their sleep. This even applies to clients with medical or other psychological



problems expected to interfere with sleep, although people dealing with nightmares, trauma, bipolar disorder, and other concerns have benefitted from additional work on those problems as well. The therapists at Arizona Family Therapy can help you to get better sleep, whether you have mild insomnia or a complex set of concerns affecting your sleep. We would be happy to work with you to support you in the process of applying psychological theory to improve your sleep.