

Insomnia

Brian Burke, PhD
Fort Lewis College

It's a precious gem that lights our way through the darkness, a magical journey that each of us undertakes at least once every 24-hour cycle, a nocturnal rebirth – sleep. Sleep has several critical functions that are necessary to sustain life – in fact, without sleep, we would eventually die. Sleep is needed to restore our mind and body to peak health, as well as to consolidate the learning that we have done during the day. Many studies have shown that students remember detailed course material better the next day if they get a good night's sleep rather than stay up all night trying to “cram” more information into their already bursting brains. Researchers have found that the average human needs an average of 8.29 hours of sleep per night in order to function optimally; college students sleep an average of 6 hours per night. Do the math – most of us are not getting enough sleep, and so we are functioning at less than 100% effectiveness – in terms of our memory capacity, our physical health, and our tolerance for mental effort.



What follows are a set of instructions to follow for several weeks (at least) if you are experiencing insomnia or not sleeping as well as you would like to. The principle is that you want to train your body/mind to connect your bed with sleep and nothing but. This is based upon a heavily researched behavioral technique called “stimulus control.” Here are Stimulus Control Instructions for Insomnia:

1. Lie down in your bed intending to sleep only when you are sleepy!
2. Do not use your bed for anything except sleep; that is, do not worry or read in bed.
3. If you find yourself unable to fall asleep, get out of bed. Stay up as long as you wish and then return to your bed only when you are sleepy.
REMEMBER: The goal is to associate your bed with sleep quickly. If you are tossing and turning, or even just thinking, in your bed for more than 10 minutes, you are not following this instruction.
4. Repeat step 3 as often as necessary throughout the night.
5. Get up at the same time every morning regardless of how much sleep you got during the night. This will help your body acquire a constant sleep rhythm.
6. Do not nap during the day.
7. Do not take sleeping pills.

These instructions take, on average, about 2-3 weeks to kick in and have been shown to be highly effective in scientific studies for the treatment of insomnia. In fact, the worst treatment for insomnia is sleeping pills; the best is patience, stimulus control, or sleep education (see below for workshop). Of course, in order to follow these instructions, you have to plan sleep time into your study schedule and make the investment in your own sleep, which will undoubtedly be rewarded with increased alertness and more efficient studying/learning.