

I can't sleep

Sleep is a very important part of your daily routine – as important as food and water for survival. The average human spends about a third of their lifetime asleep.

Sleep is involuntary, like breathing. We cannot deliberately remain totally awake for long, extended periods of time.

Sleep is regulated by two systems in the body: sleep/wake homeostasis and the circadian, or the 24-hour body clock. The sleep/wake homeostasis tells our bodies when a need for sleep is building. There is no set amount of required sleep for everyone. People need different amounts at different stages of their lives. The circadian rhythms regulate the timing of sleepiness and wakefulness, and is controlled by a group of brain cells that respond to light and dark. Most adults feel some of the strongest urges to sleep between 2pm-4pm and 1am-3am, although again this varies from person to person. Adolescents often go through 'sleep phase delay', which pushes these timings later into the day.

Our sleep can be broadly divided into four stages – three non-rapid eye movement stages (nonREM) and one rapid eye movement

stage (REM). They range from light sleep in NREM stages one and two, deep sleep in NREM stage three, to when our dreams occur in REM sleep.

But what purpose does sleep serve? It's biological purpose still largely remains a mystery. We do know sleep affects almost every system in the body, from the brain, heart and lungs to metabolism, immune function, disease resistance, and our mood.

If we do not get enough of it, or it is of chronic poor quality, we know there is an increased risk of developing chronic illnesses such as high blood pressure, diabetes, depression, cancer, heart attack and stroke. Furthermore, we know that is a major contributor to accidents on our roads.

Our lifestyle can affect our sleeping pattern.

Welcoming a new baby into the family is always a joyous occasion, but has a significant effect on the parent's sleep pattern. In 2007

the World Health Organization classified night shift work as a probable carcinogen due to circadian disruption. Working culture has shifted, and many people face long commutes to get to work and home, which leaves less time for health promoting activities like going to the gym, or cooking healthy meals, and inevitably less time for sleeping. Our consumption of alcohol and various other substances also affect our ability to have good sleep.

There are six main families of sleep disorders, including insomnia, sleep-related breathing disorders, sleep-related motor disorders, hypersomnolence, circadian rhythm disorders, and parasomnias.

In order to diagnose insomnia, we need have a period of at least three months of poor sleep, on 3 or more nights per week, with associated distress or impairment in daytime functioning as a result of the poor sleep.

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So how do we treat insomnia?

Most people end up approaching their GP for help, and is usually prescribed some medication. The problem with most of these medications is that people often develop tolerance, then require a higher dose. These medications also often come with unpleasant side effects, and many of these are highly addictive.

So that's not the answer then.....?

Sleep hygiene is often the best place to start to build good sleeping habits. Sleep hygiene refers to the practices and habits we have around sleeping, and quite often some changes there can be the key to unlock the door to good sleep. Here are just a few of the tips you can start to implement today:

- Build regular routines around your sleep – wake up at the same time .
- Spend time outdoors in natural light – this helps your body build melatonin, a hormone that makes us sleepy.
- Be active - regular physical

activity promotes restful sleep.

- Make your bedroom as restful as possible – cool, minimum light and noise, free from pets and a TV.
- Use your bed only for sleep or sex, and not to watch TV, or read or play on your phone.

Ultimately, if you have changed your lifestyle habits, and still find yourself staring at the ceiling night after night struggling to sleep, your answer may lie in attending one of our sleep-focused courses and workshops. Re-centre offers a two-hour workshop, Re-juvenate: Your Sleep, which provides you with strategies that could be your first step to a lifetime of good sleep. Your Re-centre specialist may recommend further therapy by attending our CBT-i course. This refers to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for insomnia, and is a structured programme that helps you overcome the underlying causes of your sleep problems. CBT-i has been proven to be highly effective, and is now worldwide recognised as the first line recommended therapy for chronic insomnia. The advantages of CBT-i is that it is safer in the

long-term than medications, and the effect is durable.

Our experienced psychiatrists and clinical psychologists are here to help. Contact us for a private consultation and create a personalised plan to help you get back to living your best life.

About Dr Zelda Strydom

Dr Zelda Strydom is a Medical Doctor at Re-centre. She believes recovery needs to be at the heart of all addiction treatment, and is passionate in supporting people with a wide variety of addictions to achieve their recovery goals.

Dr Strydom is available to offer assessment and discuss treatment options for people struggling with their use of opioids, benzodiazepines, alcohol and other substances. She is also available to offer assessment to people with chronic pain on managing their opioid use.

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