

**90% of sleep problems involve not being able to “switch off.”**

The causes of sleep problems can be varied. But one common result is losing old habits that help us sleep well.

Even after the original cause disappears, bad habits can remain. Instead of adopting a passive ‘let it happen’ attitude as they used to, many people will lie in bed trying too hard to get to sleep - sometimes for hours.

Along with this desperate quest for sleep may be a habit of thinking over what is currently happening in their lives. In fact, 9 out of 10 people who have trouble sleeping say they can’t “switch off”.

After a while the old connections between bed and sleep are loosened or lost. Rather than being a place where sound sleep occurs, bed becomes a ‘wake’n’worry’ place. Our bodies come to expect long periods of sleeplessness.

And our brains keep processing like a computer that won’t shut down. In turn, a distressing unrelieved tiredness mounts.

Fortunately there are some things you can do to retrain yourself, usually within a few days to 2 weeks.

The most important rule is to get out of bed if you find you are not sleeping for any 20 minute period. Occupy your mind with any activity. Read. Watch TV, with headphones if you are concerned about others. Do some ironing or gentle floor exercises - whatever fills your time.



*If you can’t go off to sleep within 20 minutes, get out of bed. Return only when you feel so drowsy that you will probably soon drift off. This reforges the link between bed and sleeping.*

Just wait for drowsiness to set in - even if this takes hours during the first week or so. We become relatively less alert in cycles of up to 90 minutes through the day and night. Watch for the changes in your body and take yourself back to bed the moment you are fairly sure you will sleep. Do not be too concerned if you can’t sleep. Simply get out of bed after 20 minutes and repeat the procedure.

**Stick to the ‘20 minute’ rule for 2 weeks if necessary.**

Some other requirements are:

- Do not go to sleep anywhere else but your bed. You are trying to improve your sleep in bed, not on the couch.
- Go to bed and start your day at approximately the same times. Use an alarm clock, if you need it, to re-train your body into the habit of sleeping until a certain time.

**Retire and rise at roughly the same times. Avoid napping to catch up.**

Resist the urge to catch up on lost sleep during the day until better habits are re-established. While afternoon naps are normally healthy (one study found a 30% reduction in heart attacks), it will pay in the short run to save your tiredness.

**Return to bed only when you feel sleepy. Notice the dip in your body's cycles of alertness and drowsiness that can take up to 90 minutes. Then act on it.**

By following these suggestions you are repeatedly reminding your body what the rules of sleep are. It has confused and forgotten them. Be patient while persistent. Our bodies can be slower to re-set their internal clocks than we might like.

These techniques may be used alone or they can help medications prescribed for sleep work more effectively. An hour before bed consider a supper of foods containing tryptophan, e.g. milk or ice cream. It acts as a natural sedative. Foods like bananas aid its absorption. Proteins reverse the effect. Alcohol can aid sleep onset but it can fragment sleep and waken you earlier.

### "Switch Off" With Autosuggestion.

While the strategies already described will help by replacing mental over-activity with physical tiredness, you may want to give them a boost. To give your mind a rest from constant processing and to slow it down sufficiently to allow sleep to set in:

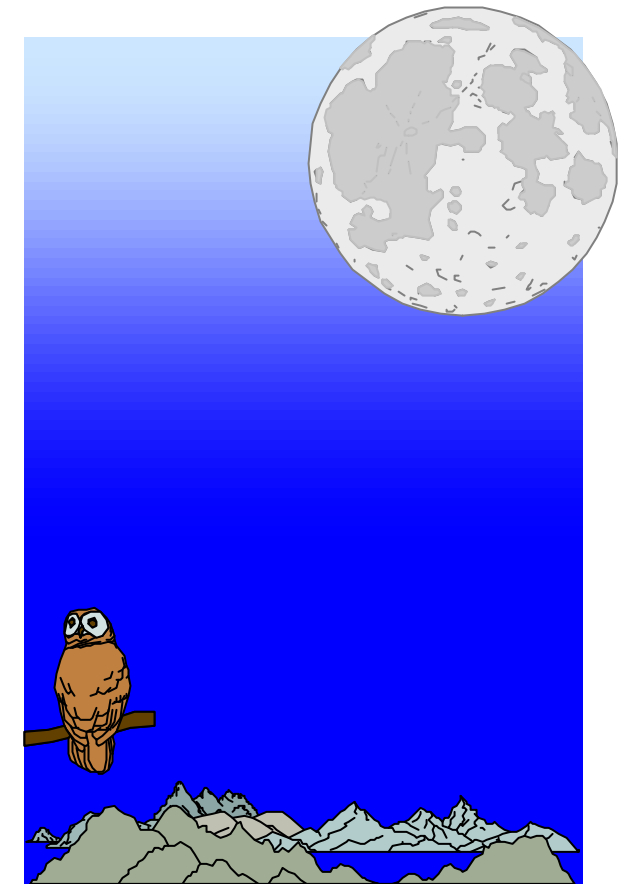
1. Focus your attention on a neutral stimulus such as the space between the tips of your forefinger and thumb held about 2 cm apart. Keep staring at the space, not your fingers. It will automatically grow smaller as you continue to concentrate. As your fingers draw closer, allow your eyelids to grow heavier and close when your fingers touch. Let your hand come to rest in a comfortable position. (Using a mental device that starts to narrow attention is a crucial first step. But it is often forgotten. You may want to turn off your bed lamp now in a slow, fluid movement.)
2. Repeatedly suggest to yourself slowly, lullaby-fashion, that you are "sinking down ... deeper ... and deeper down ... into the darkness" until eventually you can see, hear or feel yourself in a place or activity that you would be fascinated by. (Your experience or imagination will tell you what that might be. Work this out before you start. The subconscious mind seems to know what to do when it hears the word "deeper." It also seems to like words with sibilants or "s" sounds - "sinking, slowly, softly" ... "drowsier and drowsier" ... "darkness" and no more than 3 words per phrase.)
3. All through this try not to fight any thoughts that will enter your mind. Just let them pass - like the words of the ads you see at the bottom of the TV screen while watching cricket. Or see them as strings of words gently being washed down the plughole of a large basin in your mind. Then let your mind return to the focus of your attention, at its own pace and rate.
4. Breathe yourself "softly ... slowly ... steadily ... into a drowsy ... deeper and deeper ... sleep ..." Repeat with a soothing rise and fall to your words. Gradually, stretch words out: "deeper... sssleep."

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# Sleeping Better . . .



## Psychological techniques.

## Sleeping Better . . .



This is another autosuggestion strategy that helps to “switch off” mental activity as a prelude to sleep. Begin by checking that all the muscles in your body are relaxed. Do a mental tour from the tips of your toes to the top your head. Relax any tight spots with 5 to 7 seconds of low level tightening or stiffening and then 30 seconds of relaxation. See a psychologist who can give you training in physical relaxation if you need it.

1. Picture yourself standing before a large chalkboard. Perhaps it is one you remember from your schooldays. In your mind’s eye draw a large a circle on it.
  2. Take a piece of chalk, then slowly and carefully write the number 100 in the middle of the circle.
  3. Next to the circle see yourself printing the words “DEEP SLEEP” letter by letter.
  4. Then take a duster and in a slow, anti-clockwise sweep or two, erase the number 100 without touching the edge of the circle, replacing it with 99.
  5. Write over the words “DEEP SLEEP” - seeing them grow thicker and more heavily laden with chalk. Make sure there are no double lines.
  6. Erase the number 99 and slowly write 98. Again, letter by letter, write over the words “DEEP SLEEP” as again they become thickened with more chalk.
  7. Continue in this way, subtracting one number each time, until you are asleep.
- Using a combination of muscle relaxation and this imagery technique, subjects in one study increased their average hours of sleep from between 3 and 5 to between 6 and 8. They maintained this improvement over a 1 year follow-up period.
  - Normally the descent into sleep begins with a series of ordinary quick visual images - a phantom slide-show known as “hypnagogic hallucinations.” But these can startle you awake if they become too realistic. This procedure lures you gently into sleep because you are keeping your mind occupied with something other than worry or distress, problem-solving or upsetting snapshots of events from your day or life. If you like, add the extra task of slow, steady breathing. Because your mind cannot concentrate on more than two things at once, all this will keep it pleasantly distracted.
  - If there is no improvement, there is probably something specific bothering you that is making your mind too active. Causes may be heavy meals, cigarettes, coffee or alcohol in the evening; grief or depression; illness or medication side-effect; anxiety or guilt. Analyse just what it is and try to sort it out, either on your own or with someone’s help.