

The Thirteen Commandments for People with Problems Sleeping

Dr Meir Kryger, Gaylord Sleep Medicine

All of us have an occasional poor night's sleep. But for some people, almost every night can be a struggle. About 50 million North Americans aren't getting enough sleep to be fully alert the next day. However, there are some simple yet effective things you can do right now to ensure a better sleep. First make sure that your bedroom offers the right environment to lull you to sleep. At night your bedroom should be dark, quiet, and the temperature comfortable. The mattress and pillows should be comfortable. Once you have created the right environment, you can concentrate more on sleep itself, keeping the following rules in mind.

1. Use the bedroom for sleep and sex only. *This is no place to balance your checkbook, surf the internet, or run on a treadmill. You want your brain to only associate your bedroom with sleep and sex and not those other activities.*

2. If you can't fall asleep, after fifteen to twenty minutes get out of bed and do something else that is relaxing. *Lying in bed, becoming angry and frustrated because you're not falling asleep makes things worse.*

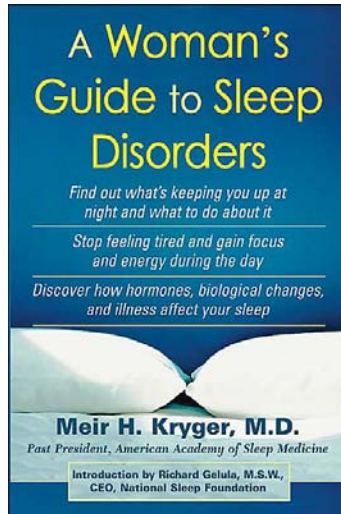
3. Avoid any activity that might cause your brain to be excessively aroused before going to sleep. *That means no arguments, no discussions about money or major problems, and no exciting TV or books. Avoid any vigorous activity for four to five hours before going to bed (however, sex seems not to present a problem). You want your brain in a relaxed state when it's time to sleep.*

4. Do not consume heavy or spicy meals, which might cause heartburn or discomfort. *You do not want to feel too full or hungry before bed. Heartburn or acid reflux can both keep you from falling asleep and wake you from sleep.*

5. If you use an alarm clock turn it away from you. Avoid checking the time throughout the night. Better yet, get rid of it. *There is not a thing except frustration that you'll get from staring at an alarm clock.*

6. Have a relaxing ritual at bedtime, for example, reading non-arousing books. *When you were a child, your parents probably bathed you and read to you to get you into a relaxing frame of mind to help you sleep. Such rituals are a good idea for all ages.*

7. If there are caregiving duties during the night (children, elderly parents, pets), share the duties or get help. *Often there are caregiving duties that must be done at night and their burden should be shared or alternated so that one person does not bear the brunt of these duties.*



8. Avoid daytime or evening naps, especially in the four to five hours before bed. If you must nap, make sure that it is no longer than 10 to 20 minutes. *Longer naps may leave a person groggy and might make it more difficult to fall asleep that night.*

9. Get plenty of exercise but not too close to bedtime. *If you exercise right before bedtime, your body may release chemicals that wake up your brain and make it more difficult to sleep. The one exception is sexual intercourse, which does not seem to have this negative effect on sleep.*

10. Restrict time in bed. Spending more time in bed than you need may worsen your

sleep. *Some people assume that if they are tired because they have had a bad night that they should go to bed earlier to recover the lost sleep. Actually when people do this their sleep may be broken up and not refreshing. The best is to try to maintain a regular time of going to sleep and getting up.*

11. Try having a warm bath or a hot drink (without alcohol or caffeine) to help you relax. *Research shows that raising body temperature makes deep restful sleep more likely.*

12. Cut down or eliminate cigarettes. Limit caffeine dramatically and if the insomnia is severe, avoid caffeine after lunch. Reduce your consumption of alcohol, which can actually disrupt sleep. *Some people awaken when nicotine or alcohol levels drop during sleep. Drinking more than the equivalent 2-3 cups of coffee per day, especially in the afternoon or evening can cause insomnia in some people. Remember that there are many products that contain caffeine. To calculate your daily caffeine intake go to: <http://www.sleepfoundation.org>.*

13. If you're taking medications and have insomnia, check with a doctor to make sure that it is not the medication that is not causing this symptom. *There are many medications that have insomnia as a common side effect.*

If trouble sleeping is still a problem, it may be a medical condition and you may need to be evaluated by a medical practitioner or even referred to a sleep specialist. If you can't sleep because a bed partner snores, stops breathing or moves excessively the bed partner may have a medical problem that needs treatment. Treating the bed partner may solve a potentially dangerous problem in him or her and will make your sleep much more restful. If you sleep better you will feel refreshed in the morning, alert all day, more productive and be in a better mood.

These Thirteen Commandments are adapted from:
Dr. Meir Kryger's book *A Woman's Guide to Sleep Disorders*©
McGraw-Hill, 2004.. WWW.Guidetosleep.com