

Why therapy and not medication?

When you're desperate for sleep, it can be tempting to reach for a sleeping pill or an over-the-counter sleep aid. But sleep medication won't cure the problem or address the underlying symptoms, in fact, it can often make sleep problems worse in the long term. That's not to say there's never a time or a place for sleep medication. Sleeping pills can be effective when used sparingly for short-term situations, such as traveling across time zones or recovering from a medical procedure. Even if your sleep disorder requires the use of prescription medication, experts recommend combining a drug regimen with therapy and healthy lifestyle changes.

For many sleep problems, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) has been shown to be far more effective than taking sleep medication, without the unpleasant side effects or long-term health concerns. CBT produces the greatest changes in patients' ability to fall asleep and stay asleep, and the benefits continue after treatment ends. If you're suffering from a sleep disorder, therapy may be able to relax your mind, change your outlook, improve your daytime habits, and set you up for a good night's sleep.

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy for Insomnia

Cognitive-behavioural therapy for insomnia (CBT-i) can improve your sleep by changing your behaviour before bedtime as well as changing the ways of thinking that keep you from falling asleep. It also focuses on improving relaxation skills and changing lifestyle habits that impact your sleeping patterns. Since sleep disorders can be both caused by and trigger emotional health problems such as anxiety, stress, and depression, therapy is an effective way of treating the underlying problem rather than just the symptoms, helping you develop healthy sleeping patterns for life.

CBT-i is the most widely-used therapy for sleep disorders and is specifically designed for people who are unable to get the amount of sleep they need to wake up feeling rested and refreshed. Since the causes and symptoms of sleep disorders vary considerably, treatment should always be tailored to your specific problems.

The length of therapy also depends on the type and severity of your sleep disorder. While CBT is rarely an immediate or easy cure, it is relatively short-term. Many CBT treatment programs for insomnia, for example, report significant improvement in sleep patterns following a course of 5 to 8 weekly sessions.

Why see a Psychologist for sleep problems

Psychologists are experts in human thinking and behaviour. Psychologists with additional training in CBT for insomnia are well-equipped to assess your sleep, understand how other life challenges impact you and provide therapy to help you sleep better.

Making improvements to your sleep often takes time and commitment. Once you commence therapy, it's important to stick with treatment and follow your Psychologist's advice. If you feel discouraged with the pace of recovery, remember that therapy for sleep disorders is very effective in the long run. You'll reap the benefits if you see it through.

More information about CBT-i and how it works is detailed on the other side of this page.

How does CBT work for sleep disorders?

CBT addresses negative thoughts and behaviour patterns that contribute to insomnia or other sleeping problems. As the name suggests, CBT involves two main components:

Cognitive therapy teaches you to recognize and change negative beliefs and thoughts (cognitions) that contribute to your sleep problems.

Behavioural therapy teaches you how to avoid behaviours that keep you awake at night and replace them with better sleep habits.

Using a sleep diary in CBT

To identify patterns in your sleeping problems and decide on the best treatment approach, your psychologist may start by asking you to keep a sleep diary. The details can be important, revealing how certain behaviours are ruining your chance for a good night's sleep.

Challenging unhelpful thoughts in CBT

The cognitive aspects of CBT include thought challenging—otherwise known as cognitive restructuring—in which you challenge the negative thinking patterns that contribute to your sleep problems, replacing them with more positive, realistic thoughts. The idea is that if you change the way you think, you can change the way you feel, and ultimately how you sleep.

Since negative thoughts are often part of a lifelong pattern of thinking, replacing negative thoughts with more realistic ones is rarely easy. But with practice, you can break the habit. That's why it's important to practice the techniques you learn in therapy on your own at home.

Behavioural techniques used in CBT for sleep disorders

As well as changing the way you think about sleep, CBT also works to change the habits and behaviours that can prevent you from sleeping well. Depending on your specific symptoms and needs, your therapist may employ some of the following techniques:

Sleep restriction therapy (SRT) reduces the time you spend lying in bed awake by eliminating naps and forcing you to stay up beyond your normal bedtime. This method of sleep deprivation can be especially effective for insomnia. It not only makes you more tired the next night but builds a stronger association between bed and sleep rather than bed and lying awake.

Stimulus control therapy (SCT) helps to identify and change sleep habits that prevent you from sleeping well. This means training you to use your bedroom for just sleep and sex, rather than working or watching TV, and maintaining consistent sleep-wake times, even on weekends.

Improving your sleep environment and sleep hygiene. Your sleep environment should be dark, quiet, cool, and comfortable, so your therapist may recommend blackout shades, earplugs, or devices to block out noise. Sleep hygiene involves improving your daytime habits to include exercising regularly, avoiding nicotine and caffeine late in the day, and learning to unwind at night.

Relaxation training. When practiced regularly, relaxation techniques such as mindfulness meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, and breathing exercises can help you relax at night, relieving tension and anxiety and preparing you for sleep.