

“Sleep Better” – An Information Sheet

Taking better care of yourself in terms of the physical dimensions of your life includes getting good sleep. Sleep problems are increasingly common amongst a wide segment of the general population. Veterans are particularly susceptible to poor sleep hygiene. The sleep changes that you have faced over the months and years may have impacted on the regular rhythm of your sleep.

Fortunately, like breathing, sleep, to a large extent remains under your individual control. By getting back to a disciplined sleep regime, you can prevent or lessen the impact of sleep loss on your mental performance. There's no doubt about it; getting proper sleep is essential for maintaining your physical and emotional wellbeing.

People often ask how much sleep is 'normal'. The normal amount of sleep is widely variable and can be dependant on a variety of factors; age, gender, employment and levels of daily activity. As a rule of thumb 6-8 hours will suffice for the majority of people. However, for limited periods, you can tolerate sleep restrictions of 4 to 4.5 hours per sleep cycle. (It is worth noting that for the first 6 months of a babies life, the child's mother gets an average of 3.5 hours per day!) If you are getting limited amounts of sleep, you will quickly get into 'sleep debt'. When conditions allow, try to make up the sleep loss by getting additional rest.

Nightmares can be generated a wide number of issues, they are often caused by previous combat experiences. Whilst you may have been able to cope with issues whilst deployed, poor sleep hygiene can become a real issue when you return to your home environment or in later life. Irrespective of when they started, nightmares and/or poor sleep patterns may have a direct or indirect link with your combat experiences.

Veterans often report a number of common symptoms relating to poor or broken sleep:

- I can't get to sleep
- I have broken sleep through the night.
- I awake covered in sweat
- I have nightmares that wake me up
- I'm afraid to sleep so I stay awake through the night.

What can you do about your sleep issues? Listed below are some tips to help you get a better quality of sleep:

- Don't use alcohol (or drugs) as an aid to sleep
- Use your bed only for sleep & sex! Bin the TV, computer & food from the bedroom. Your bed should only be associated with two pleasurable activities – sleep & sex.
- Don't consume food or drinks containing caffeine within 6 hours of bedtime. The caffeine acts as a stimulant & will effect your sleep.
- Avoid or limit naps in the day – if you do nap in the day limit it to 15 minutes and don't nap late in the afternoon.
- Stop watching the alarm clock – clock watching will make you more anxious and upset about not sleeping
- Exercise regularly & stay active – maintaining a regular exercise regime is a really useful tool for diminishing insomnia & attendant symptoms. Also, engaging in hobbies or stimulating work tasks helps you attain better levels of sleep. However, be careful not to exercise too close to bed time. If you are too highly stimulated by the exercise, you will encounter sleep difficulties.
- Don't eat a heavy meal prior to bed time – heavy meals can cause a wide range of difficulties that can effect your sleep cycle. If you find you are hungry as sleep time approaches, eat a light snack that is high in carbohydrates & low in protein.

Getting sufficient deep sleep is an essential component for your physical & emotional health. Sleep deprivation can rapidly change you as a person. It can quickly establish itself as bad habit that has the potential to effect your personality & productivity. Value good sleep and make it a priority, try to make your goal to have between 6 to 8 hours of deep sleep a day. If you are encountering difficulties, seek help, speak to your GP – this is a problem you can't afford to lose sleep over.