

Disturbed sleep is a common complaint among veterans. The majority of individuals will experience periods of sleep disturbance at some stage of their lives. Sleep disturbance can be caused by many different factors.

For example, it can be caused by an illness and stress, or by poor sleep habits (e.g., too much alcohol or caffeine before sleep, too much physical or mental stimulation before going to bed). Sleep problems can also develop as a consequence of disrupted sleep patterns (e.g., from shifts during the night when in the military).

It should be noted that sleep disturbance can also be related to mental health problems. For example, depression can result in too much or too little sleep, and replaying anxious thoughts can keep people awake. Also, frequent nightmares, sometimes associated with posttraumatic stress disorder, will disrupt sleep patterns.

Prolonged periods of sleep disturbance can have negative impacts on your physical and mental wellbeing, and interfere with your daily work and social functioning. For example, people can experience attention and memory problems and increased irritability.

## Self-management strategies

Sometimes sleep problems can be improved by improving sleep habits. The first step is to recognise these habits (keeping a sleep diary can help), and then you can choose the specific strategies that will help you change them.

Bad sleep habits:

- Too active or too much stimulation before bed
- Irregular sleep routines
- Napping during the day
- Other activities in bed (e.g., watching TV)
- Lying awake for hours and worrying
- Consuming caffeine late in the evening
- Drinking in the evening
- Smoking a lot
- Frequent use of sleeping pills

Good sleep habits:

- Spend 30 minutes doing something non-stressful before going to bed and avoid exercise for 3 hours before going to sleep
- Try to go to bed at the same time most nights (it will become a signal for your body that it is time for sleep) and get up at the same time most mornings
- Avoid naps
- Use your bed only for sleep and sexual activity, and reading material that is not too stimulating
- If you do not fall asleep in about 20 minutes, get up and go to another room until sleepy, then try again
- Avoid coffee, tea, cocoa, or cola drinks after about 4pm
- Don't have any alcohol for several hours before going to bed (alcohol might help you get off to sleep but causes early waking 2-3 hours later and a disrupted sleep pattern)
- Smoking (nicotine) will make you more alert. You may also have breathing-related sleep disturbances caused by long-term smoking (such as sleep apnoea). Avoid smoking as much as possible, and consider giving up
- Avoid frequent use as they are dependency forming and end up disturbing your sleep further

## Other things to consider when identifying what drives your sleep difficulties include:

- Do you get anxious about lack of sleep?
- Are you telling yourself things like: “If I don’t get enough hours of sleep I won’t be able to function well the next day”, or “Poor sleep is having a serious effect on my physical health”? This kind of thinking will make it harder to get off, or back to sleep. Instead, tell yourself realistic things like: “One night’s poor sleep will not make much difference”, or “If I am busy I will hardly notice the difference.”
- Are you worrying about other things at night?
- Your bed is not a good place to think and worry because it interferes with sleep. Do a deal with yourself. Tell yourself that you will give yourself some ‘worry time’ the following day, or write down your worries to deal with them the next day.

## Getting help

If sleep difficulties persist after you have tried the above strategies, it may be useful to see a mental health professional for assistance. During this therapy you will learn:

- strategies to develop good sleep habits
- strategies to avoid thinking or worrying about the day’s events when lying in bed
- information on the realistic consequences of minimal sleep and the amount of sleep required.

## Self-management resources

Written materials for you and your family are available from websites such as:

- Open Arms (<https://www.openarms.gov.au/>) has information on mental health and wellbeing, wellbeing programs, smartphone apps and information booklets.
- Health Direct ([www.healthdirect.gov.au](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au)),
- Sleep Health Foundation (<http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/informationhome.htm>).

Open Arms - Veterans & Families counselling can be reached 24 hours a day across Australia for crisis support and counselling. Call 1800 011 046.