Sleep: myths and facts

Some common beliefs that make sleep harder.

Myth	Fact
Everyone needs eight hours.	Need differs between people and changes across life. Seven to nine hours suits most adults. Some do well on less.
Good sleepers sleep straight through.	Everyone wakes several times a night. Good sleepers just drop off again without noticing.
You can catch up at the weekend.	Lie-ins confuse the body clock and make Sunday night harder. A steady getting-up time works better.
If you cannot sleep, stay in bed and rest.	Long periods awake in bed strengthen the link between bed and wakefulness.
A drink helps you sleep.	Alcohol helps you fall asleep, then causes lighter, broken sleep later in the night.
Older people need less sleep.	The need stays much the same. Sleep becomes lighter and more broken with age, and often shifts earlier.
Lost sleep must be paid back hour for hour.	The body recovers mostly by sleeping more deeply, not by sleeping as long again.
Watching TV in bed helps me unwind.	For good sleepers it may be harmless. With insomnia, it keeps the brain linking bed with being awake.
Insomnia means something is seriously wrong.	It is very common and usually kept going by habits and worry, which can be changed.

A belief about sleep I have held that might not be true

What I might do differently now

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Unhelpful thoughts about sleep

What you believe about sleep can keep you awake.

Name _____ Date _____

Worrying about sleep raises the alarm level in your body, which is the opposite of what sleep needs. Many of the things we tell ourselves about sleep are not accurate.

The thought	A more accurate view
"I need eight hours or I cannot function."	Need varies. Most people cope better than they expect after a short night, and the body compensates with deeper sleep.
"If I do not sleep tonight, tomorrow is ruined."	Tomorrow may be harder. It will not be ruined. I have managed on poor sleep before.
"I have lost the ability to sleep."	Sleep is automatic. It can be disrupted and it cannot be lost.
"I should stay in bed and try harder."	Trying keeps me awake. Getting up until I am sleepy works better.
"Lying there resting is nearly as good."	Long stretches awake in bed teach my brain that bed is for being awake.
"Poor sleep is wrecking my health."	Worry about sleep is a bigger problem for me right now than the sleep itself, and it can be treated.

The thought about sleep that bothers me most

How much do I believe it?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

Evidence for it

Evidence against it

Including days I coped better than I expected

A more accurate and calmer version

How might I act differently at night, and during the day, if I believed that?

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