



Understanding sleep problems

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SAMH
Scottish Action for Mental Health



This resource explains insomnia and other sleep problems, giving practical suggestions for what you can do and where you can go for support.

Since 1923, SAMH has represented the voice of people affected by mental health problems in Scotland. We are here to provide help, information and support.

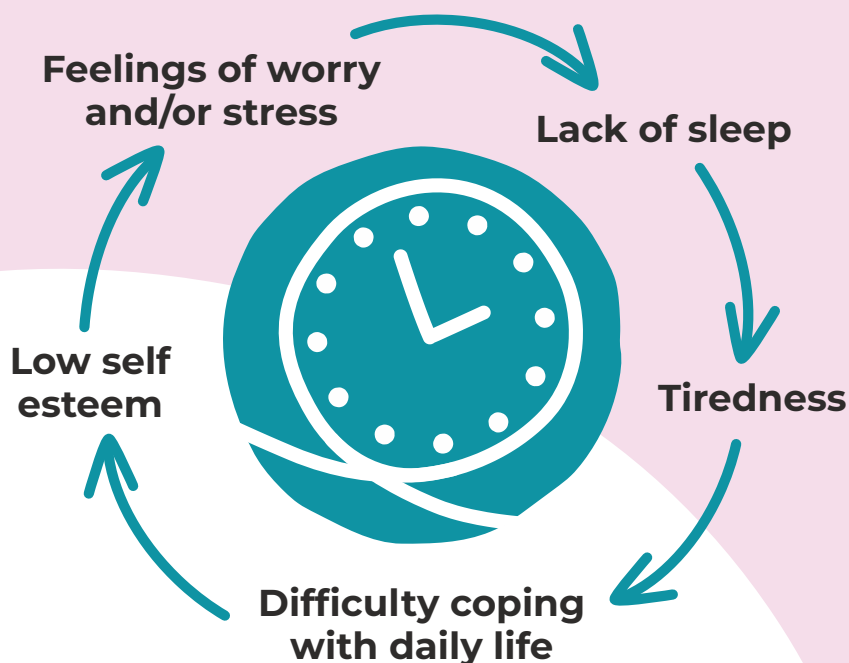
CONTENTS

How does sleep relate to mental health?	4
What problems might I have with sleep?	5
What causes problems with sleep?	6
How could mental health problems affect my sleep?	8
How can I improve my sleep?	9
Support during the night	15
Treatments to help with sleep problems	16
Useful contacts	17



HOW DOES SLEEP RELATE TO MENTAL HEALTH?

There's a close relationship between sleep and mental health. Living with a mental health problem can affect how well you sleep, and poor sleep can have a negative impact on your mental health.



“When I get depressed, I sleep so much – at its worst it was 18 hours a day, because it was the only way that I could stop thinking and stop my mind from saying awful things to me.”

WHAT PROBLEMS MIGHT I HAVE WITH SLEEP?

Everyone needs sleep, but many of us have problems with it. You might recognise some of the experiences listed below, or have other difficulties with sleep that aren't mentioned here.

You might:

- find it hard to fall asleep, stay asleep or wake up earlier than you'd like to (also known as insomnia – find out more on the [NHS Inform website](https://www.nhs.uk/healthcareprofessionals/inform))
- have problems that disturb your sleep, such as panic attacks, flashbacks, nightmares or psychosis
- find it hard to wake up or get out of bed
- often feel tired or sleepy – this could be because you're not sleeping enough, not getting good quality sleep or because of health problems
- sleep a lot – which could include sleeping at times when you want, or need, to be awake.

If you're having problems sleeping, you might:

- be more likely to feel anxious, depressed or suicidal
- be more likely to have psychotic episodes – poor sleep can trigger mania, psychosis or paranoia, or make existing symptoms worse
- feel lonely or isolated – for example, if you don't have the energy to see people or they don't seem to understand
- struggle to concentrate, or make plans and decisions
- feel irritable or not have energy to do things
- have problems with day-to-day life – for example, at work or with family and friends
- be more affected by other health problems, including mental health problems.

“During the day, my brain is fuzzy, my memory is noticeably affected. I barely have energy to function.”

WHAT CAUSES PROBLEMS WITH SLEEP?

The things that affect sleep differ for everyone. They can include:

- stresses or worries – for example, issues with money, housing or work
- problems with where you sleep – for example, if you sleep somewhere uncomfortable or you're easily disturbed
- health conditions related to sleep, also known as sleep disorders
- being a parent or carer
- taking medication, including starting and coming off medication
- recreational drugs and alcohol
- working at night or being a shift worker
- current or past trauma
- mental and physical health problems, many of which can affect your sleep.

For more information about sleep disorders, see the [Royal College of Psychiatrists](#) website, and our list of 'Useful contacts' on p.17.

If problems with sleep are worrying you or affecting your day-to-day life, it's a good idea to see a doctor who can give you a health check and help you access treatment and support. If you fill in a sleep diary, you could take this to your appointment to show your doctor.

“It’s not possible to relax if you don’t have anywhere comfortable and safe at night. This leads to not sleeping and worrying most of the night.”



“My sleep problems are [...] more a case of bedtime procrastination than insomnia as such and, as a consequence, being too tired the next morning. I still haven’t found out what works for me as I can get to sleep once I do get to bed.”



HOW COULD MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AFFECT MY SLEEP?

If you live with a mental health problem, this could affect your sleep in lots of ways. For example:

- **Anxiety** can cause racing or repetitive thoughts, and worries that keep you awake. You may also have panic attacks while you're trying to sleep.
- **Depression and seasonal affective disorder (SAD)** can make you sleep more, including staying in bed for longer or sleeping more often. Depression can also cause insomnia.
- If you've gone through **trauma**, this can cause flashbacks, nightmares or night terrors that disturb your sleep. You might feel unsafe or uncomfortable in bed or in the dark.
- **Paranoia and psychosis** may make it difficult to sleep. You may hear voices, or see things you find frightening or disturbing.
- **Mania** often causes feelings of energy and elation, so you might not feel tired or want to sleep. Racing thoughts can also keep you awake and cause insomnia.
- **Psychiatric medication** can cause side effects including insomnia, disturbed sleep, nightmares and oversleeping. Stopping psychiatric drugs can also cause sleep problems.

"I feel safe sleeping during the day but the world isn't geared that way."

"My sleep was the first red flag that started waving wildly to warn me that something was wrong."

HOW CAN I IMPROVE MY SLEEP?

Here are some tips and suggestions for improving your sleep. Some people find these ideas useful, but remember that different things work for different people at different times.

Only try what you feel comfortable with, and try not to put too much pressure on yourself. If something isn't working for you (or doesn't feel possible just now), you can try something else, or come back to it another time.

Try to establish a routine

It could help to establish a regular sleeping routine or habits. You might need to try different things before you find what works for you.

You could try going to bed and waking up at around the same time every day. Or it might help to go to bed only once you feel ready to sleep, but still get up around the same time.

“I was told to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, but lying in bed, in the dark, for hours and hours [...] left me far too distressed to be able to fall asleep. So now I only go to bed when I feel like I will fall asleep within about 15 minutes or so, no matter what time of night that is, and then I try to get up at the same time every day.”

Relax before you try to sleep

You may find a relaxation routine can help you prepare for sleep. Here are some ideas you could try.

- **Do something calming**, for example, listening to relaxing music or having a bath.
- **Do breathing exercises** – see the [NHS Inform website](https://www.nhs.uk/healthcareprofessionals/inform) for ones you can try.
- **Relax your muscles** – consciously tense and relax your muscles, one after the other, starting with your toes and working up your body until you reach the top of your head.
- **Visualise** – picture a scene or landscape that has pleasant memories for you, or that you imagine would be a calming or peaceful place to be.
- **Meditate** – some people find it helps to try meditation techniques, like mindfulness. You could learn these at a class or from self-help guides.



Fill in a sleep diary

You may find it difficult to work out what's affecting your sleep. A sleep diary involves recording information about your sleep habits to help you understand your sleep problem and what's affecting it.

If you want to, you can show your sleep diary to healthcare professionals to help explain what problems you're having. For example, you could take it with you to a doctor's appointment.

You should keep your sleep diary for at least two weeks.

You can find a [sleep diary template](#) on the NHS website.



A sleep diary could include information about:

- what time you go to bed and get up
- your total number of hours of sleep, or a rough idea if you're not sure
- overall quality of sleep, ranked 1–5
- how many times you wake up in the night, how long you're awake and what you do while you're awake
- whether you have nightmares, night terrors or sleep paralysis, or have sleepwalked during the night
- whether you sleep during the day and for how long
- any medication you're taking, including the dose and what time you take it
- the amount of caffeine, alcohol or nicotine you have
- the amount of physical activity you do
- what you eat and drink
- your general feelings and moods, including any anxious or repetitive thoughts.

“[I] write what’s happened, what did or didn’t help, anything I need to scribble to let out anger when the words and the tears are stuck.”



Try to make your sleeping area more comfortable

You might not have much control over where you sleep – for example, if you're staying in hospital or temporary accommodation. But there might still be small changes you can make, or ask someone to help you with. For example:

- Try different temperature, light and noise levels to see what works for you.
- Lots of people find dark, quiet and cool environments best, but everyone is different.
- If you can't sleep in darkness, try keeping a light or bedside lamp switched on.
- If silence makes it harder to sleep, listen to music, nature sounds, a podcast or the radio.
- You might find it helpful to try different bedding – for example, a warmer or cooler duvet, or a different pillow.
- If you're affected by issues with a partner – for example, snoring or problems sharing a bed – the [British Snoring & Sleep Apnoea Association](#) has information on its website and a helpline.

Think about screens and device settings

Using screens in the evening, including on tablets and mobile phones, can negatively affect your sleep.

It can help to think about when and how you use screens. For example, you could try:

- avoiding screens an hour or two before bed
- cutting down on screen time before you try to sleep
- avoiding stimulating activities, such as playing games
- using a blue light filter, night mode or dark mode – you might be able to find these options in your device settings and in individual app settings
- adjusting other settings – for example, changing the brightness, or using silent, flight, airplane or do not disturb modes.

“Reminding myself that a bad night of sleep won’t make or break me (because I can make it through, even if it sucks) has helped a lot to allay stress/anxiety about sleep.”

Look after yourself

Looking after yourself physically can help improve your sleep. Try the tips below to see if they help.

- **Think about your diet** – some types of food can affect your sleep, including caffeine and sugar. It can also help to avoid eating large meals right before going to bed. Our pages on [food and mood](#) have more information.
- **Try to do some physical activity** – physical activity can help you sleep, including gentle physical activity. It can be particularly helpful to be active outdoors. Some people find they need to stop any physical activity a few hours before going to sleep. Our pages on [keeping active](#) might be helpful.
- **Spend time outside** – being outside in green space can help you relax and improve your wellbeing. Spending time in natural light can also be helpful for your sleep.



Find support for connected issues

If you're experiencing other issues alongside sleep problems, such as money worries or addiction to recreational drugs or alcohol, getting support for these things can help with your sleep problems too. Some medication, including psychiatric medication, can affect your sleep. If you're taking any type of medication and having problems with your sleep, talk to your doctor or a pharmacist.

“Music and brisk walking help me settle down at night because the pace of my thoughts I can match to the pace of my walking – thus it helps settle my mind a little and tires me out before bed.”

SUPPORT DURING THE NIGHT

If you're awake and you need support with difficult feelings or worries, here are some options that are available overnight.

Samaritans

To talk about anything that is upsetting you, you can contact the [Samaritans](#).

Breathing Space

You can call [Breathing Space](#).

Shout

You can text the [Shout](#) service.

Our 'Useful contacts' on p.17 has more options for getting support, including contact details and opening hours.



"Sometimes when I'm trying to fall asleep I don't like being alone with my thoughts. I have found [podcasts] an amazing comfort because it's a friendly voice just speaking so soothingly and telling a winding bedtime story – it just keeps my mind occupied enough not to start spiralling, and to fall asleep."

TREATMENTS TO HELP WITH SLEEP PROBLEMS

Any treatments you're offered for sleep problems will depend on what type of problems you're having and any particular causes.

Talking therapies

Cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) is a type of CBT designed to help with insomnia. You may also be offered talking therapy to help with mental health problems that are affecting your sleep. See our pages on [talking therapy and counselling](#) for more information.

Medication

You might be offered sleeping pills to help with short periods of severe insomnia, or you might be prescribed medication for other types of sleep problems.

“I started to learn about what I’d been experiencing and ways to make it more manageable.”

Referral to a sleep clinic

Sleep clinics are used to assess sleep problems. They can give you equipment to use at home or you may stay overnight for an assessment. To access a sleep clinic, you'll usually need a referral from your GP.



USEFUL CONTACTS

SAMH Information Service

T: 0344 8000 550

W: samh.org.uk/info

E: info@samh.org.uk

Whether you are looking for more information, have questions or are seeking support, SAMH can help.

The SAMH Information Service provides information and signposting for pathways to better mental health and wellbeing over the phone, through emails and through a range of online information.

The SAMH Information Service is open from 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday, except on Bank Holidays.



Who else could help?

This section contains details of organisations or support services which you may find useful. SAMH does not endorse any particular support service, including those listed on this page. This is not an exhaustive list. You may be able to find other services near you.

Listening and crisis services

Breathing Space

T: 0800 83 85 87

W: breathingspace.scot

Offers a free, confidential phone and webchat helpline for people in Scotland experiencing low mood, depression or anxiety.

Samaritans

T: 116 123 (Freephone)

W: samaritans.org

Provides 24-hour emotional support over the phone, webchat or email for anyone struggling to cope.

Shout

T: 85258

W: giveusashout.org

Shout is the UK's first 24/7 crisis text service, free on all major mobile networks, for anyone in crisis anytime, anywhere.

General services

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

T: 01455 883 300

W: bacp.co.uk

Information and details of accredited counsellors and psychotherapists.

British Snoring & Sleep Apnoea Association

T: 01284 717688

W: britishsnoring.co.uk

Information and support for people affected by snoring and sleep apnoea.

COSCA (Counselling & Psychotherapy in Scotland)

T: 01786 475140

W: cosca.org.uk

COSCA is Scotland's professional body for counselling and psychotherapy, and provides a directory of accredited practitioners.

Mindfulness Scotland

W: mindfulnessscotland.org.uk

Information about mindfulness and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), including guidance on how to learn mindfulness.

Narcolepsy UK

T: 0345 450 0394

W: narcolepsy.org.uk

Supports people with narcolepsy, their families, carers and others interested in improving their quality of life.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

W: nice.org.uk

Produces clinical guidelines for the treatment and management of sleep-related disorders including insomnia and sleep apnoea.

NHS Inform

W: nhsinform.scot

Information about health problems and treatments, including details of local NHS services in Scotland.

The NHS Inform information below may help you with sleep problems:

- [Sleep problems and insomnia CBT self-help guide](#)
- [Struggling with stress](#)
- [Chronic pain CBT self-help guide](#)

NHS Live Well

W: nhs.uk/live-well

Advice, tips and tools to help with health and wellbeing.

Royal College of Psychiatrists

T: 0208 618 4000

W: rcpsych.ac.uk

Professional body for psychiatrists. Includes information about mental health problems and treatments.

Sleep Apnoea Trust

T: 0800 025 3500

W: sleep-apnoea-trust.org

Information and support for people who experience sleep apnoea, and their partners and families.

“Reminding myself that a bad night of sleep won’t make or break me (because I can make it through, even if it sucks) has helped a lot to allay stress/anxiety about sleep.”



@SAMHtweets



SAMHmentalhealth



@samhscotland

To read or print SAMH's information booklets visit **samh.org.uk**. If you require this information in Word document format for compatibility with screen readers, please email **communications@samh.org.uk**

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