

Sleep Tips for Trauma Victims

Sleep disturbance is one of the most common problems victims face following violent trauma. If you *can* relax enough to fall asleep, nightmares can prevent a truly restful night's sleep. Yet sleep is essential to the mental, physical and emotional healing processes, and a lack of sleep can make an already difficult situation even worse.

In the first few weeks following a violent experience, it is helpful to look at sleep in a different light. Your body is "on guard" and your mind can be racing; these are typical physical responses to trauma. It can take weeks or months to "calm down." Insomnia and nightmares are the most common sleep problems experienced by victims, and most survivors will notice that these disturbances subside within a month or so. If they persist, it is important to seek assistance from a medical professional and/or sleep specialist so that the condition does not become chronic. As a survivor, you may not be getting enough sleep, or at least not enough quality sleep, while your body and mind are working hard to cope, understand and heal, and this condition can lead to exhaustion. It is important to know that your energy level will be reduced, so it may be helpful to cut back on certain activities, when possible, until you feel more rested.

Many victims turn to alcohol in an effort to ease their physical and emotional pain, and to help them sleep, but alcohol can have a negative impact on sleep and on the healing process, in general. Research shows that alcohol leads to less restful and lower quality sleep during the second half of the night, and it can damage your airways, which makes snoring worse and breathing more difficult—all playing into a poor night of sleep. It is best to avoid alcohol, especially if you are experiencing sleep problems.

The more you know about sleep problems, how to work through them and when to seek the assistance of a medical professional or sleep specialist, the better you can advocate for your own health and healing.

Common Sleep Problems Following a Trauma

- Flashbacks and troubling thoughts.
- Feeling the need to maintain a high level of vigilance, which can make sleep difficult.
- Nighttime and darkness can, in and of themselves, bring about added anxiety and restlessness.
- Once asleep, nightmares can frighten a survivor back to consciousness, and getting back to sleep can be very difficult.
- Many survivors use alcohol or other drugs to numb the emotional and physical pain following trauma. These substances can not only impact the healing process, they can also exacerbate sleep problems.
- Feelings of distress, leading to concentration and focusing problems during the day.

Trauma-Informed Sleep Tips to Consider

- **Sleep in a location where you will feel most rested and safe.** While the bedroom is optimal, it may not be possible to rest there soon after the trauma if you experienced violence in that room.
- **Create an environment in which you can sleep well.** It should be safe, quiet, cool and comfortable. While it often helps to sleep in a dark room, if keeping a nightlight on helps

bring about a more safe feeling, then consider keeping the room dimly lit. It may also help to have a friend or family member stay in the room, or perhaps in a nearby room, while you are sleeping.

- **Engage in a relaxing, non-alerting activity at bedtime such as reading or listening to music.** For some people, soaking in a warm bath or hot tub can be helpful. Avoid activities that are mentally or physically stimulating, including discussion about your violent experience, right before bedtime.
- **Do not eat or drink too much before bedtime and recognize the negative role that alcohol can have on your sleep.**
- **Rest when you need to rest.** It is common to feel exhausted after a violent trauma, so you may need more rest or to rest differently during this time. Relaxing and resting for brief times throughout the day and taking short naps (15-45 minutes) may help.
- **Go to bed when you feel ready to sleep.** Try not to force sleep, which can add to the pressure of wanting to get to sleep. Developing the harmful habit of lying in bed awake for long periods when you want to sleep is counter-productive.

During the day:

- **Consume less or no caffeine,** unless it helps you drive safely.
- **Avoid alcohol and nicotine,** especially close to bedtime.
- **Exercise,** but not within three (3) hours before bedtime.

Information from the National Sleep Foundation, Barry Krakow of The Sleep and Human Health Institute and Dr. Gregory Belenky, provided to the Witness Justice Web site.