

HANDOUT 5: SLEEP PROBLEMS/NIGHTMARES

SLEEP PROBLEMS

People who have experienced a disaster often experience sleep problems. Common problems include **difficulty falling asleep** and **waking up frequently** during the night. These problems may be related to fear and anxiety, which can make your thoughts race and impair your ability to fall asleep. The problems can also be due to the overarousal symptoms of PTSD, which make it difficult to get to sleep. Another common sleep difficulty is **waking up too early** in the morning and being unable to return to sleep or just **not feeling rested** in the morning. These problems are often related to depression. **Hypersomnia**, or sleeping too much, is another sleep problem some people experience after a disaster. This can also be related to feelings of sadness and depression, as well as to attempts to avoid thinking about what happened. Sleep problems can be worsened by the use of alcohol or drugs in response to a disaster.

NIGHTMARES

In addition to difficulty sleeping, some individuals experience nightmares after a disaster. Nightmares may involve themes that are related in some way to the disaster, but often are not obviously related to what happened, but are nevertheless frightening. Nightmares are a type of **reexperiencing** symptom common in PTSD (discussed in Handout 2: Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder). When people awaken from nightmares, they usually feel fearful and anxious, and often experience physical symptoms such as a racing heart, labored breathing, and sweating. These **emotional and bodily reactions** then make it difficult for the person to return to sleep and may make you fearful of sleep altogether.

HOW CAN I IMPROVE MY SLEEP QUANTITY AND QUALITY?

- Do not use alcohol or other drugs, as they can impair your ability to stay asleep.
- Limit your use of substances that contain caffeine (e.g., soda, coffee, some over-the-counter medications), especially after 4-5 pm.
- Try to set a regular sleep/wake schedule. It is especially important that you get out of bed at roughly the same time of morning each day, regardless of how much you slept the night before. Do not get in bed until you are tired. Also, although you may feel the need, try not to take naps. They can further disrupt your sleep-wake cycle.
- Avoid arousing activities (such as exercise) for at least 2-3 hours before going to sleep.
- Make your sleeping area as free from distractions as possible. Try not to do anything in bed that might provoke anxiety (e.g. don't watch the evening news in bed before you go to sleep). The idea is to associate your bed with relaxation and sleep, rather than anxiety and worry.

- Try to develop a relaxing bedtime ritual that is consistent each night that will be a cue for your body that you are winding down for sleep. Consider a light nighttime snack (free of caffeine) to prevent hunger from waking you during the night.
- If you haven't fallen asleep after 30 minutes, get out of bed and do something relaxing until you feel tired enough to go to sleep. Try going back to bed at that point. Limit lying in bed tossing and turning – again, the idea is to try to associate the bed with restful sleep and not with anxiety and worry. It's better to get out of bed and try returning once you are fatigued. (we know this is difficult!).

Download the Insomnia Coach App for free from iTunes (iOS) or Google Play (Android) for more help with sleep problems.