

# Sleep Problems and Nightmares



Cambridge Rape Crisis Centre

Registered Charity No. 1179871

# Background

The effects of trauma and sexual violence can affect various aspects of your life, including your sleeping habits.

A traumatic event can interfere with your normal sleep cycle, often due to the stress that the event caused. This can lead to insomnia, nightmares and difficulty concentrating during the day.

It is common for survivors of sexual violence to have sleep problems, such as:

- Troubling thoughts that can make falling asleep difficult.
- Nightmares that can frighten you awake, and make getting back to sleep more difficult.
- Problems staying asleep, for example waking up early in the morning or during the night.
- Poor quality sleep so you do not feel refreshed by the sleep you do get.
- Fear of going to sleep or experiencing nightmares, which can lead to avoiding sleep as much as possible.
- Fear of beds and the associations of night time.
- A need to be on alert all the time which can make it difficult to relax in order to sleep.
- Aches and pain that may be otherwise unexplained.
- Lowered resilience.
- Flashbacks

Some survivors use alcohol or other drugs to numb the emotional and physical pain, and sometimes just to fall or stay asleep. While these may work in the short term, they can affect your health and can also worsen sleep problems in the longer term. Getting enough sleep, and quality sleep, is important for your both your body and your mind.

## How do nightmares and sleep problems affect survivors of sexual violence?

Sleep problems, when they are long-term, can affect your emotional and physical health and impact your day to day life and cognitive functioning. As you may know, a night or two of bad or little sleep can leave you experiencing fatigue, short temper and a lack of focus.

After several sleepless nights, you may experience 'brain fog', making it difficult to concentrate and make decisions. You may start to feel down, and may fall asleep during the day. Your risk of injury and accidents at home, work and on the road also increases.

For survivors of sexual violence who are experiencing sleep problems, poor sleep can make everything feel that much worse. You may have big decisions in front of you that seem insurmountable on a good day, and are expected to make them on little to no sleep.

If you are experiencing nightmares regularly as well as other intrusive thoughts or flashbacks about the abuse, you may feel as if you cannot escape what has happened. There can also be a vicious cycle of anxiety, stress and sleep problems/nightmares that lead to anxiety and stress around going to sleep.

If this is happening to you, it is important to know that this is a natural response to sexual violence, it does not mean that there is anything wrong with you.

## What are nightmares and flashbacks?

The trauma of sexual violence can lead to nightmares, which are more than simply 'bad dreams'. You may feel like the abuse or an aspect of it is happening to you again, which can be incredibly frightening. If you have nightmares regularly, it is common and very natural to be worried or anxious about going to sleep. It is natural to want to avoid sleep or avoid going to bed in this situation.

Try to remind yourself that nightmares are an effect of the abuse you experienced. It is possible to develop ways of reducing the effects of nightmares and of coping with the after effects. It can be helpful to try to understand the nightmares as part of your recovery. Your brain is recalling images or sensations that it needs to process before moving on.

# What you can do:

While it will not solve the underlying problems, having healthy sleep habits can help to a degree. Some suggestions of healthy sleeping habits include:

- **Try not to go to bed until you feel tired.** While it may seem counterintuitive, it can ensure that you are not lying awake for hours and getting frustrated.
- **Avoid napping** or sleeping late if you can.
- **Try to eat early.** The NHS suggests that you eat at least 4 hours before bedtime, and avoid rich, spicy or sugary foods, red meat and cheese.
- **Regular exercise.** This is helpful for mental, physical and emotional health, and contributes to restful sleep. Try not to exercise strenuously within 4 hours of going to bed. If exercise before bed helps you feel calmer, yoga or pilates may help as they are less likely to get your adrenaline pumping.
- **Choose something special which you find comforting.** A pillow, a blanket, a teddy or a photograph – take this to bed with you or have it close by in case you need or want it.
- **Try to de-stress before bed.** Some people find that yoga, a warm bath or a milky drink help them relax.
- **Avoid caffeine, alcohol and nicotine if you can.** These all affect sleep in different ways. While alcohol especially may feel that it helps in the short-term, over time it can become problematic.
- **Think about your sleeping arrangements.** Try to make your sleeping environment as comfortable and relaxing as you can.

## Temperature, light and noise levels can impact how we sleep.

Sleeping in a room that is too cold or too hot can lead to a less restful sleep and more awakenings (meaning more remembered dreams). Try to ensure that you have opened/closed your windows as necessary, or perhaps use a lighter duvet or pyjamas if you get too warm in the night – temperatures around 15-21°C are considered best.

*“Humans are designed to sleep in the dark: when the sun comes up, the light receptors in the retina at the back of the eye tell us it’s time to wake up by inhibiting the release of melatonin, the hormone that makes us sleepy.”* Dr. Guy Meadows from The Sleep School.

A flickering TV light, or any other light sources around you as you fall asleep stops melatonin being released and your sleep will be affected. It is best to remove or turn off light sources like TVs, phones and alarm clocks, and consider blackout blinds or a sleep mask. It’s thought that the ‘blue’ light from electronics like TVs and tablets affect our circadian rhythms and therefore our sleep, so it’s best to turn them off at least 30 minutes before bed, or invest in a ‘red’ light app such as Twilight. If you find

that noise or light helps you feel safer, soft light from a nightlight along with calming music or the radio or audio book may be a substitute that works for you.

### Other things you can build into your routine:

- **Try to interrupt unwanted thoughts.** You can try this with activities or positive thoughts about a person or place.
- **Practise a relaxation technique before you go to bed.** Breathe in deeply, for a count of 5 and out for a count of 7. Put your hand on your tummy and watch this rise and fall as you breathe.
- **Practise Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR).** This is a process where you gradually tense and relax different groups of muscles all over your body to reduce stress and tension. This is ideal to do just before you drift off to sleep.
- **Don't try to force sleep.** It might make you feel more anxious. Try keeping your eyes open instead and, as they start to close, tell yourself to resist. The more you try to stay awake, the sleepier you'll become.
- **Do not feel that you have to stay in bed.** If you cannot sleep, get up after 20 minutes and go through your relaxation routine again. Try to avoid turning on bright lights or 'blue' lights from electronic devices as these can make you feel more awake.
- **Try out complementary remedies.** Yoga, meditation, or herbal remedies, such as lavender or valerian, may help. A German study found that those who slept in rooms smelling of roses reported more positive dream content than those who slept in a room that smelled like rotting eggs.
- **Sleep where you feel comfortable.** If you feel more relaxed or safe sleeping somewhere other than your bed, like your sofa or the floor – this is OK. Try to make your sleeping space as comfortable for you as you can with blankets, pillows, cushions and duvets. The most important thing is that you feel safe and relaxed enough to sleep.
- **Keep a regular routine.** Keeping a regular sleep-wake routine (that is, going to sleep and waking up at the same time each day) is a key part of supporting your internal clock. As tempting as it may be, sleeping in or staying up late can disrupt your sleep cycles, and have a knock on effect.
- **Sleeping through the night is not always possible.** However, if you can, try to wake up with at your regular time. You can use very bright lights in the morning such as daylight lamps/SAD lamps to help wake yourself up. Sunlight helps the body's internal clock reset itself daily and so an hour of morning sunlight or bright light can support normal sleeping patterns to develop and also help you feel more awake during the day.
- **Avoid scaring yourself before bed.** This may mean avoiding watching or reading things that scare you or are related to your triggers before you go to bed.

# Nightmares

Controlling nightmares remains largely unresearched, although there are few different suggested techniques when it comes to managing them. The main issue with nightmares is being woken up during them, which means you're likely to remember them, and have all the negative experiences of fear surrounding them which can make it harder to get back to sleep.

- **Remind yourself that nightmares are not real.** They are very distressing but they are a memory of what happened; they are not happening now.
- **Keep a diary of when you have nightmares to see if there are any patterns.** Do your nightmares have the same images or content?
- **Practise relaxation techniques.** Deep breathing, yoga, or anything that helps you reduce stress and anxiety when you wake from a nightmare.
- **Ground yourself in the present.** There are many ways to do this, some of which are suggested on the next page. Remind yourself that the nightmare is not real, but that it is natural to feel fear and stress. Notice your environment and try to establish a routine that you find soothing and can rely on if you have a nightmare, either through the night or in the morning.
- **Develop a safe place image.** Create a place in your mind which makes you feel safe or comfortable. Imagine the feelings, the sounds, the temperature and the sights. It could be real or from your imagination. Practise visiting this safe space when you are feeling good, so when you need it, you can go there.
- **Talk about your nightmares.** Some psychologists believe that talking about your nightmares can put them into perspective and therefore help reduce the inevitable anxiety following waking from a nightmare. This might take the form of talking out dreams with a therapist or discussing them with a trusted person. If you can see patterns to your nightmares, a support worker could help you to develop ways of changing or coping with these.
- **Try Image Rehearsal Therapy.** IRT is a type of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy that involves recalling your nightmare and then writing out a new, more positive version of it. You then go over this new scenario daily to displace the original nightmare theme. IRT is a well-researched type of therapy, and is highly recommended for PTSD-related nightmares.

# Grounding and Relaxation

## Grounding:

Grounding can be done anywhere, any place or any time, and there are many different types of techniques. These may be a good starting place for you, but you may find that others work better for you or that you can make up new and better techniques for yourself.

### Mental Grounding

1. Have a good look around and describe your environment in detail, e.g. 'I am on the train, I can see trees and a river...'
2. Mental games, e.g. go through the alphabet thinking of different things such as types of dogs, cities etc.
3. Describe an everyday activity in detail, such as how to make a recipe.
4. Imagery, e.g. imagining a stop sign in your head, gliding on skates away from the pain, changing the 'TV channel' in your head to a better 'show' or imagining a wall as a buffer between you and the pain.
5. Safety statements, thinking 'I am safe now, I am in the present not the past, I am in this location and the date is...'
6. Use humour, think of something funny.
7. Use concentration, say the alphabet backwards or do some tricky sums like practising your 37 times table.

### Physical Grounding

1. Run warm or cool water over your hands.
2. Focus on your breathing, notice each inhale and exhale, slow it down and repeat the word safe on each inhale.
3. Touch different objects, your pen, your keys etc.
4. Dig your heels into the floor; remind yourself that you are connected to the ground.
5. Have a grounding object by your sleeping space, it might be a pillow, a blanket, a teddy or a photograph.
6. Stretching, extend your arms, fingers or legs as far as you can.
7. Clench and release your fists.

### Soothing Grounding

1. Say kind statements to yourself, e.g. I will get through this.
2. Picture people you care about, or look at photos of them.
3. Think of a safe place, it could be real or imagined, for example the beach, mountains etc.
4. Say coping statements such as 'I can handle this, I have done it before'.
5. Plan a safe treat such as a nice dinner, bubble bath etc.
6. Think of things you are looking forward to, like seeing a close friend.

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation:

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is a relaxation and grounding technique which can help manage stress and anxiety, and ground you. It is based upon the simple practice of tensing, or tightening, one muscle group at a time followed by relaxing them.

Most practitioners recommend tensing and relaxing the muscle groups one at a time in a specific order, generally beginning with the lower extremities and ending with the face, abdomen, and chest. You can practice this technique seated or lying down.

1. While inhaling, contract one muscle group (for example your feet or calves) for 5 seconds to 10 seconds, then exhale and suddenly release the tension in that muscle group.
2. Give yourself 10 seconds to 20 seconds to relax, and then move on to the next muscle group (for example your thighs).
3. While releasing the tension, try to focus on the changes you feel when the muscle group is relaxed. Imagery may be helpful in conjunction with the release of tension, such as imagining that stressful feelings are flowing out of your body as you relax each muscle group.
4. Gradually work your way up the body contracting and relaxing muscle groups.

## Image Rehearsal Therapy


IRT is usually done with the support of a trained therapist as it can be upsetting or intolerable to some survivors given that the therapy asks us to recall our nightmares in detail before re-writing them. If you want to try it on your own or with the support of a loved one, it may be best to start with 'lesser nightmares'. If the idea of IRT feels too much for you, that's very natural and understandable. It may be that this is not something you want to do or will work for you, or it may be something that you want to try with the support of a trained therapist.

Image Rehearsal Therapy involves:

1. **Write down** the narrative or the central elements of the bad dream. It can be helpful to leave a notepad and pen by your bedside for this purpose.
2. **Later, fill out your dream** in more detail. A paragraph or two describing what happened.
3. **Re-write the dream** on another piece of paper, changing the narrative or arc of it to a positive ending. The story can be as outlandish as you can imagine, such as invoking super hero powers, or can be more realistic – whatever works best for you!
4. **Induce the intention to re-dream:** you can do this by imagining your new scenario or by repeating a mantra to yourself as you fall asleep.

People who have used grounding, PMR and IRT say that they do work but they require practise to make them as effective as possible. The more you practise, the better it will work, so try to do some every day and it will become automatic after a while. You don't have to use the methods listed above, you could think up your own method - you may find that it works better for you. Notice which method or methods work best for you.





Remember: you are important. Your feelings matter. You do not have to cope on your own.

### Which parts of this guide have you found useful?

We are always striving to listen those we support and improve our services, so if there are parts of this guide that you feel have particularly helped you, or equally, if there is something that we could improve or information that we could include, please do feel free to get in touch and let us know.

### How can we support other survivors better?

We would really like your thoughts, experiences and tips so that we can anonymously share ideas with other survivors in the future. If you feel that there are any other services that would be useful for yourself or others, please let us know.

*Email us at: [contact@cambridgerapecrisis.org.uk](mailto:contact@cambridgerapecrisis.org.uk) or call us on 01223 313 551*

# Further Resources

## Cambridge Rape Crisis Centre

Helpline: 01223 245 888  
Email: [support@cambridgerapecrisis.org.uk](mailto:support@cambridgerapecrisis.org.uk)  
Web: [www.cambridgerapecrisis.org.uk](http://www.cambridgerapecrisis.org.uk)

## Peterborough Rape Crisis Care Group

Web: [www.prccg.org.uk](http://www.prccg.org.uk)

## Rape Crisis National Helpline

National helpline run by Rape Crisis South London

Helpline: 0808 802 9999  
Web: [www.rasasc.org.uk](http://www.rasasc.org.uk)

## Rape Crisis England and Wales

Online information and links to services in each county.

Web: [www.rapecrisis.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk)



We also have a self help guide, a guide for family and friends supporting survivors, and are always trying to expand our resources. We are happy to help you find more information.