


Coping With Sleep Disturbances During Depression

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Dealing with sleep disturbances while also living with depression can seem like a vicious circle. The more depressed you feel, the harder it is to sleep. And the more exhausted you feel due to a lack of sleep, the harder it is to fight depression.

It can feel like a neverending cycle, but it doesn't have to be. Here's what you should know about the relationship between sleep disturbances and depression, along with several actions you can take to improve both.

If you or a loved one are struggling with depression, contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline at **1-800-662-4357** for information on support and treatment facilities in your area.

For more mental health resources, see our National Helpline Database.

Link Between Sleep Issues and Depression

Up to 90% of people with depression experience sleep disturbances. While some have trouble falling asleep, others have difficulty staying asleep. And some find themselves sleeping too much. Why?

One reason is both depression and insomnia involve chemicals in the brain. So, changes in neurotransmitters and hormonal imbalances can affect both sleep and mood. It has also been found that these two conditions share many of the same genes and biological pathways, which is why they tend to co-occur.

Several researchers have sought to understand which comes first: depression or insomnia. While sleep issues were thought to precede depression, studies that have found the opposite suggest that the relationship is more bidirectional. In other words, sleep issues can contribute to the development of depression, and having depression can lead to sleep issues.

Each issue can also exacerbate the other. Someone with severe depression is often likely to have more trouble with sleep and a person with trouble sleeping may notice worsening depression symptoms—potentially even increasing their risk of depression relapse.

Health Risks Associated With Depression and Sleep Disturbances

Sleep disturbances can take a toll on physical health if left untreated. Lack of sleep increases the risk of heart disease, heart attacks, high blood pressure, stroke, and diabetes. Some studies have even associated a persistent lack of sleep with a higher risk of early death.

Depression is connected with physical health issues as well. It's common for people with heart issues, strokes, and cancer to also have depression, contributing to a poorer quality of life. People with depression can also experience a weakened immune system, aches and pains, and fatigue.

Getting Help for Depression and Sleep Issues

If you're having trouble sleeping and also dealing with depression, there are a few things you can do to find relief.

Talk to Your Healthcare Provider

Difficulty sleeping may stem from an underlying medical condition, such as obstructive sleep apnea. Restless leg syndrome and bruxism (teeth grinding) can also interfere with sleep. These medical issues may cause sleep problems that worsen or contribute to depression.

It's important to talk to your healthcare provider about any sleep problems or depressive symptoms you're experiencing. They can assess whether you have underlying health issues contributing to your conditions.

See a Mental Health Therapist

Talk therapy can be helpful in managing symptoms of depression, including sleep disturbances. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) specifically is effective in treating insomnia and depression.

Cognitive-behavioral therapists can help by changing your self-talk. Thinking you are helpless and hopeless, for example, may compound your symptoms. Reframing your thoughts can help you feel better and help you sleep better.

For sleep issues, a mental health therapist may assist you in changing your habits. For instance, they may suggest that you get out of bed when you can't sleep or that you get up at a certain time each morning to help you sleep better at night.

Medications Can Also Help

Medication can also be used to treat insomnia as well as depression. A physician or psychiatrist can help determine what type of medication will work best for you—as well as which symptoms should be treated first.

Tips for Better Sleep

Good sleep hygiene can also help you sleep longer and more soundly. A few changes to your daily habits and bedtime routine can make a big difference.

Press Play for Advice On Sleep Hygiene

Hosted by therapist Amy Morin, LCSW, this episode of The Verywell Mind Podcast, featuring neurologist and sleep expert Chris Winter, shares strategies for sleeping better at night. Click below to listen now.

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Avoid Alcohol

A glass of wine or a finger of brandy is often used as a tool for relaxation, as well as a way of coping with anxiety or depression. However, alcohol consumption disrupts your sleeping pattern. So, you are more likely to wake up during the night.

While a glass of vino might help when you're falling asleep, it's not going to do much for staying asleep throughout the entire night or feeling rested the next day. Skip it and you may find that you get more restful sleep.

Meditate and Relax

Depression can cause you to ruminate or think about the same things over and over, keeping you up at night. Meditation strategies and other relaxation exercises can help calm your mind and get you ready to fall asleep.

These might include yoga or deep-abdominal breathing. Take about an hour before bedtime to unwind by turning off all electronics, taking a warm shower or bath, and decompressing in preparation for sleep.

Journal About Your Worries

If your worries or repetitive negative thoughts aren't going away with relaxation strategies, find a notebook and write down the troubling thoughts. This includes the thoughts that keep you awake as your brain goes over them again and again.

You might even designate a bit of time before bedtime as your designated “worry time.” Give yourself a certain amount of time to journal about the things that bother you, then stop thinking about them. This can help clear your mind.

Get Out of Bed

If you're not tired, don't just lie there tossing and turning. Get out of bed, go into another room, and engage in some light activity, such as reading. When you feel drowsy, go back to bed for what will hopefully be a more successful attempt at sleeping.

Avoid using anything with a screen, such as your phone or laptop, during this time. The blue light that these devices emit interferes with normal circadian rhythms, leading to poorer sleep quantity and quality.

Spend Time Outside During the Day

The internal biological clock that regulates the sleep-wake cycle is influenced by light—when there's less light at night, your body releases melatonin. In the morning, the sun cues your brain and body to wake up. If you're spending all your time indoors in the dark, you might suffer from sleep problems.

Spending time in natural light during the day can help regulate your circadian rhythm. Regular exercise can also help with sleep issues, as well as depression, provided it's not done immediately before bed.

Summary

Depression and sleep difficulties can be a challenge. Seeking professional help is key to feeling better. You might find you sleep better when you are feeling less depressed, or that sleeping better eases your depression. Both conditions are treatable and they can get better with professional support.

Get Help Now

We've tried, tested, and written unbiased reviews of the best online therapy programs including Talkspace, BetterHelp, and ReGain. Find out which option is the best for you.

9 Sources

Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our editorial process to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

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