



Wellness Tips To
Better Your Life

In Flight

Wellness Weekly

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Healthy Weight & Nutritional Fitness | Physical Activity | Tobacco Free Living | Sleep Optimization

Trauma & Sleep

How To Overcome Trauma To Achieve Better Sleep



Sleep disruption as a result of experiencing a traumatic event such as witnessing a death, exposure to violence, natural disasters, military combat and being assaulted can lead to a variety of sleep issues like insomnia, daytime fatigue, and bad dreams. Flashbacks from the event and troubling thoughts surrounding the experience can make falling asleep and staying asleep difficult.

Traumatic events are events during which an individual experiences perceived threat and helplessness, terror, or horror [American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2000]. Victims of traumatic experiences feel that they need to maintain a higher level of vigilance, which can make falling asleep difficult. Yet for those who have experienced a traumatic event, sleep is possible.

How Traumatic Events Affect Sleeping Habits

Many of those who experience a traumatic event develop what is called an “**acute stress disorder**.” People who experience acute stress may feel like they are in a constant “daze” and have a hard time shaking off any intense feelings of hopelessness, horror or fear. Symptoms may be delayed and may not appear until days or even weeks later. When the feelings and stress lasts for more than a month, it becomes “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” - PTSD.

Sleep problems are to be expected as the stress from the event creates a more heightened awareness of the sights, sounds and smells around them which can trigger the individual to re-experience the event. Chronic stress as a result of the traumatic event causes the brain to become hyper-aroused and affects the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). This strain on psychological functioning creates an imbalance that can significantly disrupt sleep, dreaming and overall health. According the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and the Center for Deployment Psychology, disruption in dreaming due to stress can trigger nightmares as they may relive the event in a way that seems shockingly realistic to them.

It's important to note that not everyone will experience trauma in the same way or have the same stress responses. There are those who may experience traumatic events on such a regular and become desensitized to it and not affect their sleeping habits at all.



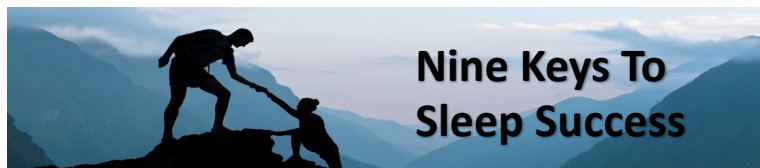
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Sleeping After a Traumatic Experience

Sleep is important for the mind as it is restorative. Coping and dealing with a stressful or traumatic event is very tiring. Teaching the mind and body to relax will help and aid in the transition to better sleep and the road to recovery can begin.

Re-establishing a regular sleep pattern is an important part in sleep health. Recognizing what thoughts, feelings, and images are the triggers for the stressor and creating a healing balance that helps to restore a more neutral and pleasant feeling will help prepare the body and mind for sleep. Realize that the life experiences of the present moment should be the focus and stop stressing about the past. Allow for healing and distress to occur by moving towards, and not away from the traumatic memory to allow for a better understanding of what is causing the sleep disruption.



- **Get more sunlight during the day.** Sunlight helps to boost melatonin levels which aids the body in falling asleep.
- **Have positive thoughts.** Repeat positive thoughts and nurturing affirmations before going to bed and upon arising in the morning.
- **Make your room dark, cool and uncluttered.** Clutter and objects that are laying around the room can trigger flash backs as the objects may resemble an item or bring back the memory that caused the traumatic event.
- **If you can't fall asleep, get up.** Don't stay in bed if you are struggling to fall asleep.
- **Avoid caffeine.** Caffeine can increase adrenaline, cortisol, and dopamine within the body causing greater agitation and irritability.
- **Avoid alcohol.** Consuming alcohol will interrupt the circadian rhythm and blocks the mind from achieving REM sleep.
- **If your not sleepy, get up.** Get out of bed to do some low-stimulation activities to occupy your mind until tired.
- **Allow your mind to rest.** Don't read or watch upsetting news reports or TV shows in the evening.
- **Get help.** Contact the local Behavioral Health Office (BHOP) or sleep center for help if sleep problems are severe or persist for more than a month.

Additional References & Resources:

1. VA, Acute Stress Disorder; <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treatment/early/acute-stress-disorder.asp>
2. HPRC, PTSD and sleep disruption: Which to tackle when; <https://www.hprc-online.org/articles/ptsd-and-sleep-disruption-which-to-tackle-when>
3. HPRC, PTSD And Sleep Disturbance: A double whammy; <https://www.hprc-online.org/articles/ptsd-and-sleep-disturbance-a-double-whammy>
4. TUCK, How Does Trauma Affect Sleep; <https://www.tuck.com/trauma-and-sleep/>

A Personal Message From Your Health Promotion Health Myth Busting Team



Dear Health Myth Busters,

I returned a few months ago from Afghanistan and have had some trouble sleeping. I was never directly involved in any major combat incidents, but did come under some small fire a few times. I've been experiencing what I believe to be PTSD since returning and have had more difficulty getting a good nights sleep than in the past. During my post-deployment health assessment, the tech told me that I may experience some residual affects like difficulty sleeping. Is this true? Is there a correlation between PTSD and sleeping problems?

Sincerely,
Sleep Concerned

Dear Sleep Concerned,

I would like to say that I am glad that you have returned home safely. To answer your question, yes there is a correlation between traumatic events and sleeping problems. When a person, such as you, has experienced a traumatic event, the body and brain can become over stimulated as the brain becomes flooded with neurochemicals such as adrenaline and epinephrine, making it more difficult for the mind and body to wind down. If you are still in a heightened state for more than one month after the traumatic event has occurred, it becomes Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. This continuous heightened state can interrupt your normal sleep cycle resulting in difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep as well as horror like visual experiences while asleep, or nightmares.

Experiencing a traumatic event, no matter how big or small, will cause you to be "on alert" and may feel the need to be on guard or "on the lookout," to protect yourself from danger. Because your mind is still in a hyper-state, you may experience flashbacks that may make it harder to fall asleep and may startle more easily awake from even the smallest of noises. Going through a traumatic experience such as the one you experienced, may cause you to worry more or believe the event will revisit you when you are least prepared or aware. These thoughts can make it difficult for you to fall asleep as you may feel that you are in constant danger.

Some have turned to alcohol to help cope with their symptoms. It is highly encourage that you do not go down that road as alcohol can get in the way of attaining good quality and restful sleep. Except where prescription medications are prescribed by a physician to help in the aide of sleep, use of illicit drugs to cope should not be an answer.

To get the recommended 7-9 hours of sleep per night after experiencing a traumatic event, change your sleeping area, keep a bedtime routine and sleep schedule, try to relax if you can't sleep, modify your activities during the day to less stressful ones. A couple of ways that you can try and relax if you can't sleep are to imagine yourself in a peaceful, pleasant scene and focus on the details and feelings of being in a place that is relaxing. If you can't sleep, get up and do a quiet activity such as reading, until you feel sleepy. If you can't sleep because you are in pain or have an injury, feel anxious at night, or have bad dreams or nightmares, talk to your doctor or a sleep specialist.

Sincerely,
Health Myth Busters

Got questions on other health issues related to sleep health, physical activity, tobacco, or nutrition? Share them with us and we will help you "Bust The Myths!" Send your questions to usaf.jbsa.afmoa.mbx.hpo@mail.mil. Make sure to include in the subject line "Health Myth Buster." For more online health tips visit the Air Force Healthy Living webpage <http://www.airforcemedicine.af.mil/HealthyLiving/>

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