

## Fatigue Risk Management Info Sheet:

### How to adjust my beliefs and thoughts about sleep



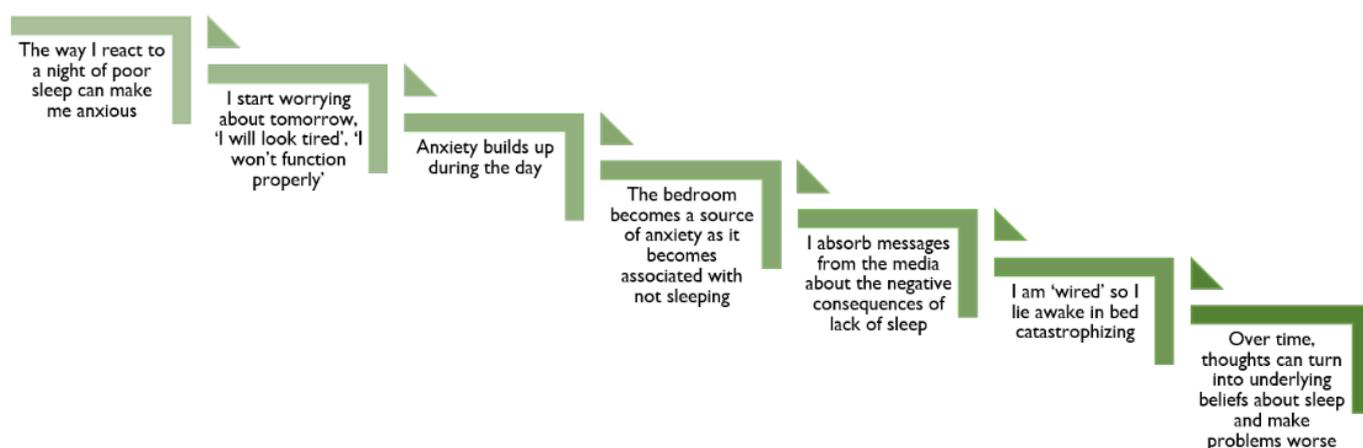
*“A ruffled mind makes a restless pillow”* Charlotte Bronte, English novelist (1816 - 1855)

#### Why read this?

If you are struggling to fall asleep or you lie awake during the night because of worry and anxiety, this information sheet is for you. Reading this will help you to understand how, over a period of time, negative thoughts can become negative beliefs that affect how we cope with ongoing sleep difficulties, and how changing how we think about a sleep problem can improve the way we cope with it to improve our quality of life. Finally, you will find eight strategies that you can use to calm a ‘racing mind’ in order to improve your sleep.

## How negative thoughts can affect your sleep

There is a complex relationship between how we feel during the day and sleep at night. Research shows that poor sleep affects our mood and mood regulation, and bad mood and worry affects our ability to sleep well, for example, in the evening worry about events we have experienced during the day can make it difficult to get to sleep. The sources of our worries are varied, but what matters is that they can disrupt sleep. We may struggle to sleep before going offshore, before attending an important meeting, or when we know we have a difficult day ahead. We have all experienced not being able to switch off and thinking about a problem over and over. Worrying before bedtime can lead to problems associated with falling asleep and staying asleep at night. Figure 1 shows an example of how our negative thoughts about sleep cause anxiety contributing to a difficulty to fall asleep.



**Figure 1.** An example of how our negative thoughts about sleep cause anxiety contributing to a difficulty to fall asleep

Crucially, some of us will sometimes go on to develop worries about sleep itself and the consequences of not sleeping well. This tendency to worry about sleep may be reflected in the increased trend to track our sleep with sleep tracking devices (for example, smartwatches). Worrying about sleep can take on a life of its own and can lead to all sorts of unhelpful behaviours to try to sleep more, for example spending more time in bed. These behaviours do not necessarily improve our sleep, and may make it worse, so we end up worrying about sleep even more.

## **Adjust your beliefs (way of thinking) about sleep difficulties to improve your quality of life**

Over time, we can develop fixed and pessimistic beliefs about sleep. We think about sleep mostly in a negative way and believe we are not sleeping well. Research shows that people who live with a chronic condition, for example, chronic pain or diabetes, form a set of well organised beliefs around the condition that can make things better or worse. For example, people who see their condition as uncontrollable, chronic and with serious consequences for their physical and emotional wellbeing will report more symptoms. Similarly, a study found that long haul crew who perceived jet lag as being cyclical (getting better and worse) and made up of many symptoms including sleep difficulties, reported worse levels of jet lag.<sup>1</sup> Negative beliefs can lead us to use ineffective strategies or reduce the likelihood of using strategies that can make a condition better. For example, people tend to try and cope with insomnia by increasing the time they spend in bed, which increases the time they spend awake in bed and reinforces negative beliefs about sleep.

To combat the downward spiral of sleep difficulties linked to pessimistic beliefs, we need to learn to calm our thoughts. Research indicates that not sleeping well is associated with increased brain activity before bedtime or having a ‘racing mind’ or being ‘wired’. We are less likely to switch off and fall asleep, which makes us more vulnerable to insomnia. It could be that sleep difficulties lead to a racing mind, or it may be that a tendency to worry in general makes us more vulnerable to experience sleep difficulties by keeping our mind alert at night.<sup>2</sup>

Try to stop intrusive negative thoughts about sleep that involve exaggerating the consequences of not sleeping well, for example: ‘I won’t function properly’, ‘My work will suffer’, ‘I will lose my job’. This way of thinking is called ‘catastrophising’ because we think the consequences of not sleeping well will lead to a catastrophe (Figure 2). In the light of day, we are more likely to see how this kind of sleep worry is unrealistic.

But how do we stop intrusive thoughts at bedtime or during the night? The trick is in finding strategies to adjust your thoughts that work for you, and the next section provides some strategies that you could try.



**Figure 2.** Catastrophising: 'View or present a situation as considerably worse than it actually is' (Oxforddictionaries.com).

## 8 strategies for calming a racing mind

### 1. Be realistic about your sleep need

You may not need to sleep 8 hours a night, which is the 'ideal amount of sleep' often cited in the media. We are all different in terms of the amount of sleep we need each night to fully function during the day and be healthy.

### 2. It is normal to have occasional sleep problems

It is normal to experience occasional, short-term, sleep problems, particularly during challenging times at work or at home. Your sleep will return to 'normal', unless you develop worry about sleep and carry on the negative thought pathway in the long-term (Figure 1).

### 3. Know your coping style

Some of us tend to cope with difficult events by trying to solve problems, while others address the emotional feelings associated with problems. If you are a problem solver you are likely to try to compensate for sleep difficulties by napping in the afternoon or going to bed earlier. This can make it more difficult to fall asleep at night, which promotes anxiety and exacerbates sleep difficulties.

If your coping style is more emotion-focused, you are more likely to use denial to minimise the emotional impact of sleep difficulties. However, ignoring the anxiety provoking feelings associated with sleep disturbance can result in leaving problems to fester. Denial, in this context, has negative consequences as you leave a sleep problem to ‘get worse’. This means that over time sleep difficulties can turn into insomnia, a long-term problem. However, used wisely, denial can help to cope with a sleep disturbance by not getting obsessed about a short-term period of sleep difficulty.

It is important to use your coping style to your own advantage. If you tend to be a ‘problem solver’ make sure you are using effective strategies to improve sleep. If you prefer dealing with the emotional side of a problem first, try the thinking strategies for improving sleep that are explained in the rest of this information sheet. The case of insomnia shows that thoughts and behaviour interact to create chronic insomnia. Therefore, changing both thoughts and behaviours around sleep can improve a sleep problem. However, research also shows that change is more likely to be successful if we adopt the right approach for us so why not start with change that suits your personality more?

This test can help you identify your coping style when dealing with difficult problems:

<https://psychologia.co/coping-strategies/>

#### **4. Try mindfulness**

Mindfulness can help us be more in control of our thoughts. It is a type of mental training whereby we are encouraged to be in the present moment and observe our thoughts without being judgemental or reactive. It is not designed to get us to sleep, but to step back and see a thought for what it is: just a thought. Mindfulness allows us to notice and accept our thoughts rather than react to them. This in turn reduces anxiety.

Sleep anxiety can start during the day, so practice mindfulness during the daytime. When practised in bed for 5 to 15 minutes, mindfulness is a type of meditation that can promote sleep. The same meditation can be used if you wake during the night, to help you to get back to sleep. Athletes can suffer from pre-game insomnia, caused by worry, with negative effects on physical and mental performance. A study found that university student athletes who watched a six-minute mindfulness induction video after training, and before bed, had reduced pre-sleep anxiety before bedtime and slept better. The athletes who just watched a non-mindfulness video (bell chimes sounded without mindful attention instructions) did not experience any sleep improvements.<sup>3</sup>

#### **5. ‘Let it be’**

We may not be able to control what thoughts enter our head at night, but we can stop making judgements which can spiral out of control. For example, ‘I will look tired’, ‘I won’t function’, ‘I will never sleep well again’ can be replaced with: ‘Actually, the last time I had a bad night, I still managed to get a few hours of sleep’, ‘I wasn’t at my best but I got through the day OK’. When we stop judging, we are more in control and being more in control makes us feel calmer. The likelihood is that we will fall asleep more quickly. Stopping yourself from judging your thoughts can be difficult but using mindfulness can help.

## 6. During the night, lock away your thoughts

Whatever is keeping you awake at night can wait until tomorrow. In the middle of the night, we are unlikely to solve anything, so mentally blocking your worries can help. What's more, at night, our mood and alertness are low and catastrophising is particularly likely.

## 7. Stop trying to fall asleep

'Trying hard' to get to sleep doesn't work. In fact, trying to fall asleep actually causes you to stay awake for longer and increases anxiety, whereas we feel sleepy when we try to stay awake. The aim is, instead of actively trying to fall asleep, to think about trying to stay awake a bit longer.<sup>4</sup>

## 8. Label your emotions: 'Name to tame'

When you have negative thoughts about sleep try to label those thoughts. For example:

- Thought → 'I will not function properly tomorrow' → Label = 'Cope'
- Thought → 'I will become ill' → Label = 'Ill health'

By labelling negative emotions we immediately distance ourselves from them as we don't have to react.<sup>5</sup> We don't need to fight these thoughts anymore or try to get rid of them. As a result, our anxiety immediately reduces. Try to describe and label thoughts about sleep both during the day and at night. Once you have mastered labelling, the next step is to accept these thoughts and welcome them as they pop up. Symbolically you are saying: 'I know you are here 'cope' so welcome!'

For more advice on labelling emotions you can read this resource <https://www.mindful.org/labels-help-tame-reactive-emotions-naming/> and watch this video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdeA-FKDLLc>

## To summarise

Our negative thoughts can cause sleep difficulties if we start catastrophising. Therefore, it is important that you adjust your beliefs about your sleep to improve your quality of life

## What should I read next?

If you have tried the strategies for changing your beliefs and thoughts about sleep described in this information sheet and are still struggling, you should read the information sheets titled; 'How to cope with insomnia'<sup>6</sup> and 'How to seek professional support to improve chronic sleep difficulties.'<sup>7</sup> . If you continue experiencing sleep difficulties despite following the tips above, you may need to seek expert advice.

## **About the author**

### **Cristina Ruscitto**

Senior Researcher

Dr Cristina Ruscitto is a Senior Researcher at Clockwork Research. She specialises in the psycho-behavioural predictors of jet lag and fatigue in the aviation sector. Her role involves fatigue management training, the development of fatigue surveys and survey analysis, the scientific study of roster patterns to quantify fatigue risk as well as writing evidence-based recommendations to improve sleep in different operational settings. Cristina is a Chartered member of the British Psychological Society and an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

## **About the reviewers**

### **Dr Alexandra Holmes**

*Research Director*

Dr Alexandra Holmes is Research Director at Clockwork Research, specialising in scientific safety cases and the implementation of Fatigue Risk Management Systems (FRMS) in aviation. With a PhD exploring the health effects of sleep loss and shift work, Alex is a current member of the ICAO Helicopter Fatigue Management Task Force and assists the UK CAA and Irish CAA to evaluate FRMS applications and safety cases.

### **Sarah Booth**

*Research Manager*

Sarah Booth is a Research Manager at Clockwork Research. A specialist in human performance in the aviation and aerospace environments, Sarah has worked with aviation operators to develop and implement Fatigue Risk Management Systems (FRMS) across multiple regulatory environments. A regular speaker at both academic and industry conferences, Sarah is also a trainer, delivering to operators in the implementation of Fatigue Risk Management, as well as courses in the use of biomathematical modelling.

## **About Clockwork Research:**

Clockwork Research is a London-based company established to help organisations to manage the risks associated with fatigue and workload. Clockwork specialises in delivering fatigue risk management solutions for companies whose employees are involved in safety critical work, such as aviation, the petrochemical industry, road transport and the emergency services. Our work provides organisations with the evidence needed to ensure that the business is operating within an acceptable risk threshold.

**For further information on our Fatigue Risk Management Research, Training and Consultancy services contact + 44 (0) 203 805 7792, [info@clockworkresearch.com](mailto:info@clockworkresearch.com).**

**[www.clockworkresearch.com](http://www.clockworkresearch.com)**

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