

Coping with sleep difficulties following road trauma



Following road trauma – whether you were directly involved in it, lost someone you cared about or witnessed a crash – your ability to enjoy a good night's sleep may be affected. This fact sheet provides some strategies to assist you to sleep better.

Common sleep problems following Road Trauma

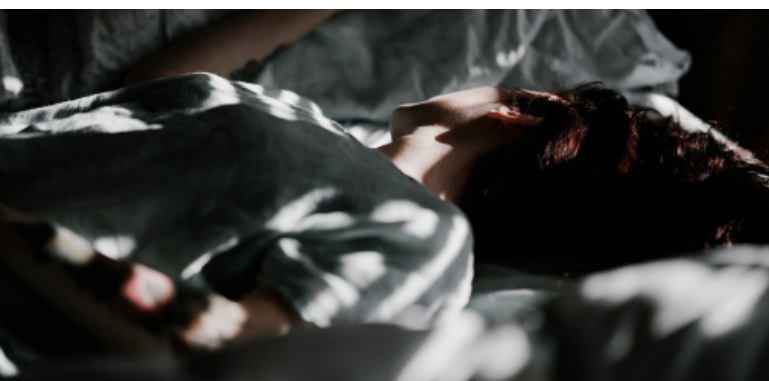
After Road Trauma, you might find that you lie awake for long periods unable to fall asleep, wake up a lot during the night or have nightmares and distressing dreams. It's common for distressing memories, feelings and thoughts to surface at night when you are trying to sleep.

You might be troubled by images of the crash, anxiety, anger, guilt, physical pain or worries about how you're going to cope. You may also start to develop unhelpful habits such as staying up late and avoiding going to bed, or using alcohol to relax.

What is Sleep Hygiene?

Research has shown it's good to learn and practice certain sleep habits, also called 'sleep hygiene'. Although it can take time and seem hard at first, practicing good sleep hygiene prevents longer term problems that can happen when we try to use other means to sleep, such as alcohol or prescription medications.

As well as trying to use sleep hygiene, you may also need to work through trauma-related symptoms such as nightmares with a mental health professional.



Research has shown it's good to learn and practice certain sleep habits, also called 'sleep hygiene'.



Sleep hygiene tips - before going to bed

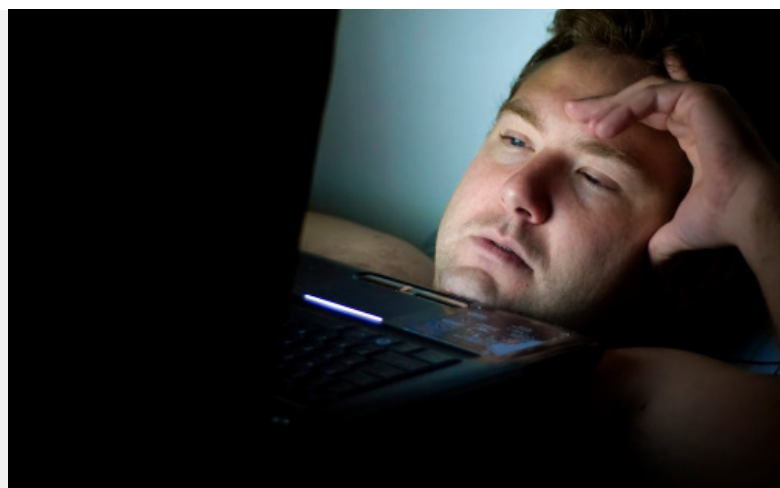
- Avoid alcohol as it causes you to sleep less deeply and to wake more frequently.
- Avoid smoking an hour or two before bed as it stimulates your nervous system.
- Avoid eating a heavy meal just before bed. However if you feel hungry have a small snack to stop your blood sugar levels from being too low (which in some people can stimulate stress hormones).
- Allow yourself time to unwind with a relaxing pre-bed routine (e.g. sit quietly with a cup of caffeine free tea, read some non-stimulating material, do some drawing or colouring-in or have a warm bath).
- Switch off TVs, computers and stop working or studying at least 30 minutes before your bedtime. If not, your mind may be over stimulated and not ready for sleep. (Although TV watching and internet 'surfing' may appear to be relaxing, in reality they are stimulating).
- Do some gentle stretches and/or breathing exercises before bed. For a simple exercise, place your hands on your diaphragm (just below your chest), practice breathing slowly into the diaphragm and really tune into the breath moving slowly into and out of your body.
- Write down any thoughts that are crowding your mind or make a to-do list for the next day. This way you can focus your attention on your present bedtime rituals, not on what's ahead of you tomorrow.

- Try to go to bed when you feel tired and aim for the same time each night to reset your body clock.
- Sleep comes in waves, so it's important to pay attention to your body cues and 'catch the wave' when you feel sleepy. Don't force yourself to stay up watching TV or doing more work as you may find that your sleep/wake cycle shifts and it then takes you longer to fall asleep.

At sleep time

- Try to reinforce the connection between bed and sleeping by using your bed only for sleep and intimacy, not for television watching, eating, internet surfing etc.
- Keep your bedroom quiet, dark and not too warm. Block out curtains or shutters are useful to block early morning light and earplugs may help with noise. Electric blankets may make you too warm and affect your ability to experience "deep sleep."
- Avoid turning on lights if you get up during the night. This will signal to your brain that it's time to wake up.
- If you're unable to sleep after 20 minutes or longer and are getting restless and anxious, it's usually recommended that you get out of bed. (For people who can lie in bed resting, even if they are not sleeping, there's no need to get up). Do something quiet and boring, keeping the light dim, until you feel sleepy again. Then try again. Repeat this process if necessary.

Don't force yourself to stay up watching TV or doing more work as you may find that your sleep/wake cycle shifts and it then takes you longer to fall asleep.





- Avoid checking the time if you can't sleep. It helps if you can refocus on relaxing even if you aren't asleep, rather than thinking unhelpfully about how much sleep you're not getting. Quality of sleep is more important than the actual amount. If you can get 4-5 hours of "deep sleep" (which usually occurs in the first five hours after falling asleep), you will get similar benefits as someone who sleeps for 8-10 hours. The key is to have 4-5 hours of uninterrupted sleep.
- Try some soothing imagery exercises (e.g. picture yourself sitting under a warm shower or waterfall and imagine your worries, problems or thoughts being washed away for the time being).

During the day

- Avoid caffeine (found in tea, coffee, soft drinks, chocolate) for at least 4-6 hours before going to bed.
- Try to do some exercise every day, but avoid strenuous exercise too close to bedtime.
- Don't have daytime naps or you may disrupt your sleep cycle further. If you can't cope without a rest, keep it to 20 minutes or less and before 3 pm and set a timer to remind you to wake up.
- Make a list of problems you might be worrying about during the night and take active steps to solve them; working out who can help you if required. It may be helpful to keep a diary where you write down your thoughts about sleep and discuss these with a counsellor or your doctor, because negative thinking can perpetuate stress and further sleep difficulty.
- Engage in some active relaxation technique such as progressive muscular relaxation (clenching then relaxing each muscle in the body from head to toes), having a massage, visualisation or meditation to reduce muscular tension and/or negative thoughts.

When you wake in the morning

- Try waking up the same time every day, even if you feel you haven't had enough sleep. Avoid sleeping in to make up for lost sleep.
- Try to get outside into the fresh air, expose your face to some sunlight, and if possible, begin the morning by doing some exercise.
- Try to stick to the routine that you had planned, even if you feel tired, rather than altering your routine because you haven't slept.
- As you start to recover from trauma, your sleep should improve. There are some medical conditions (e.g. sleep apnoea) that may interfere with your sleep and these may require medical assistance. Lack of sleep may also reduce your concentration and physical co-ordination, which could impair your driving ability. If you're worried about your sleep or experience ongoing problems, please take the time to see your doctor and/or speak to one of our counsellors.

Nightmares

Nightmares can occur immediately after experiencing or witnessing a road trauma, or they may begin several weeks later. It can be common to be woken from a distressing nightmare, feeling terrified and upset. It's thought that dreams serve the purpose of processing intense experiences so that we can make sense of them and allow our memory networks to "file" the event appropriately. Trauma disrupts this normal process and we can continue to experience the intrusive memories and nightmares.

If you find nightmares continue to be a problem for you 3-4 weeks after the road trauma, it's a good idea to speak to your doctor and/or see a counsellor. In the meantime, you could try some of the following:

- Prepare your bedroom for when you wake distressed. Try keeping a dim light on, so that when you wake, you can see where you are.
- Try having soothing objects near the bed (e.g. a photograph, a small soft toy, some lavender or other essential oil to smell).

- Practice what you will do to reduce distress. For example, sit up in bed immediately upon waking, go to the bathroom and splash your face with water, tell yourself something calming such as, "it's okay, I'm safe now").
- If you're in a relationship, advise your partner of the problem so they can be aware and comfort you, help you reorient yourself and remind you you're safe.
- During the day, try to think about your nightmare but create an alternative ending for it. Practice this in your imagination several times a day. You may want to try doing this in writing and reading it to yourself, adding notes each time you read it. If it feels natural, try drawing the nightmare and the new ending. Focus on changing the images or thoughts associated with the nightmare into themes of mastery and control (e.g. seeing yourself swerving in a controlled manner and avoiding the impact of the other vehicle).
- Tell trusted people about your dreams – this may help to desensitise the fear memories. Try to work out if there are any unresolved issues, thoughts or beliefs that could also be contributing to your nightmares.

- Don't be afraid to seek help. Many people fear they'll be labelled as 'crazy' if they admit to having trauma-related difficulties. Seeking help from experienced professionals can reassure you what you're experiencing is normal given the road trauma you've experienced or witnessed. Sometimes, specific trauma focussed treatment is required and with appropriate help you will find that your nightmares reduce or cease.

About us

Road Trauma Support WA is a state-wide service assisting anyone affected by road trauma, regardless of when the incident occurred or what level of involvement (direct or indirect) the person had.

FREE counselling sessions are available.

No referral required.

We provide:

- Information and support
- Education and training (costs may apply)
- Counselling

We are committed to being respectful of cultural and family values and provide our service in a safe, non-judgemental environment.

Road Trauma Support WA is delivered by Injury Matters with funding from the Road Trauma Trust Account and contract management through the Road Safety Commission.



Every year in WA, thousands of people are impacted by road trauma. Losing family and friends, dealing with injuries, caring for those injured, causing a crash or witnessing a serious crash can have a devastating and enduring impact.