



Improving Sleep

Many of the practices we are told to follow on the outside to improve sleep are impossible to follow in prison. So face it from the starting line — getting a good night's sleep in prison may be difficult.

That said, there are things you can do that will **IMPROVE** your chances of a restful night, and things you can avoid that would rob you of rest.

If You Nap:

Don't nap after 2 p.m., and try not to nap for more than 15-20 minutes.

Trouble Falling Asleep? Try these approaches.

Consistency:

As much as you can, keep consistent sleep/wake times.

Pay attention to when your body and brain seem to **WANT** to go to sleep at night. Do you often have a sleepy spell around 10:00? 9:00? Not until midnight?

Most people have a natural rhythm their bodies would prefer to follow, if possible. See what you can learn by paying attention to your sleepy spells in the evening, and try an experiment where you set that time as your target bedtime each night for a week.

Plan for Sleep:

Create a "Ready for Bed" routine that prepares your brain to quiet down and let you rest. Set a target bedtime (see above), and then think backwards from that hour.

- Don't exercise within 3 hours of bedtime.
- Don't eat anything greasy, sugary, or spicy within 2 hours of bedtime.
- 30 min. or so before bedtime, turn off the t.v. and grab some paper to make notes about anything you want to remember to do tomorrow, anything that's worrying you, or anything that is likely to race through your mind as you try to fall asleep or stay asleep. Practice saying to yourself, "It's in my **notes for tomorrow.**"
- After you have written your notes for tomorrow, ask your brain to turn in a grateful direction, and write down a couple of **things you are thankful for**. There are no rules - these things can be as big as the moon and as small as a smile from a friend.
- 15 minutes before bedtime, complete whatever toilet routines you like to perform (brushing teeth, washing face, etc.). Follow up with some simple **stretches**, basic yoga poses like child's pose or low cobra, and slow, deep breathing.
- When getting into your bunk, fold a blanket to put under your hips or shoulder blades for better support from a poor mattress. Use earplugs or a sleep mask if you have one. **Ground yourself**, by noticing each point where your body touches the mattress. Take note of 4 things you can see from where you are lying in your bunk, three things you hear, and two things you smell.
- Imagine a safe space and/or a happy place where you would prefer to be sleeping. Close your eyes and **visualize** it as you breathe slowly and deeply for 10 breaths.
- Count backwards from 300 by 3's on each exhale as you **slow your breathing**, moving the air down into your belly with each inhale.

- If you can't fall asleep after 20 minutes, **don't try to force it**. Read, practice some more deep breathing, practice gratitude in your thoughts, get up and do some gentle stretches and yoga poses if your muscles feel tight. Try again in 20 minutes or so.

Trouble Staying Asleep? Consider these ideas.

Waking up randomly?

Note the time. Some bodies simply cycle into a waking period at the same time every night. Knowing that, "Oh, it's just 2:30," can help you stay relaxed and fall back to sleep.

Did a noise wake you up?

Imagine a new source for the noise. If it's your cellie snoring, imagine that sound is really the sound of waves crashing on the beach. If it's the sound of doors being popped, or gates opened/closed, imagine a conveyor belt coming out of a factory that creates amazing candies you love to eat.

Yes, it sounds stupid. And yes, it takes lots of practice. But you really CAN train your brain to filter out sounds that it has learned not consider threatening to your sleep, even if it's by playing an imaginary game.

Waking up anxious?

Go back to your reminder from bedtime, "It's in my notes for tomorrow." You can reassure yourself that you have notes to keep you moving forward on the things that are distressing you. Oftentimes, that's all it takes to fall back to sleep.

Waking up panicky? Just like during the day, your "upstairs brain" can take control of your "downstairs brain," and manage the panic. Remember — you are not failing when you experience panic. It is NOT stupid. It is bio-chemical, and your body will do what it does in the face of threat. But if your "upstairs brain" (your complex thinking abilities) is awake now and realizes that there is no genuine threat at the moment, it can reassure your "downstairs brain" (basic survival skills of fight, flight, freeze) until it stops calling for adrenaline and cortisol to be released. Breathe deeply into your belly. Breathe slowly, counting backwards from 300 by 3's. Ground yourself again — notice all the points at which your body touches the mattress. Look around and take note of 4 things you can see from where you are in your bunk. Notice 3 things you can hear. Notice 2 things that you can smell.

Nightmares waking you up?

Nightmares need to be dissected in the light of day. Nightmares are often tied to unresolved trauma, either the brain reliving moments of danger in the hopes of a better outcome "this time," or unresolved emotions surrounding a traumatic event — a more general type of nightmare where the circumstances change, but the feeling is always one of helplessness, or betrayal, or confusion, pointing more subtly back to a time of pain in your life. If nightmares plague you regularly, find someone you can trust to talk it out, or write in a journal. Look for the common threads in the nightmares, think about what they seem to be reminding you of in your life story, and pursue some healing practices to deal with these painful moments in your past. (Try some of the exercises in other PrisonCare, Inc. Mental Wellness Resources.)

Think BIG PICTURE

Anything you do that improves your mental wellness overall will ALSO improve your sleep. While you are awake each day, work on building healthy self-esteem, setting goals, improving communication skills, practicing mindfulness, or anything else that is good for you - mind, body, emotions, and relationships. It will pay off (gradually) at bedtime.