

Coping with Sleep Problems During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Objective

To develop a habit of focusing on feelings during the day to improve your sleep.

You Should Know

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, you might be experiencing disrupted or poor sleep. You might lie awake, unable to fall asleep. You might wake up in the middle of the night and your mind begins to race. Or, you may wake up very early in the morning and lie awake for a long time. Maybe your sleep patterns have been thrown off – you are awake when you should be sleeping, and you want to sleep when you need to be awake!

What is it about the pandemic that is making it so challenging to get a good night's sleep? Researchers have identified five common pandemic-related causes of sleep problems:

- 1. Loss of structure you had in your pre-pandemic life.** If you are working remotely, quarantined, or furloughed, you probably no longer need to get up as early, commute, or juggle multiple deadlines or demands. When you have demands placed on you from the outside (employer, children's school schedules, and so forth), you are forced to follow a regular routine. If you have lost some of those external demands, your routine is disrupted. You might feel uprooted and out of control. Along with the disruption in routine, regular healthy habits – such as eating nourishing meals, showering each day, and exercising – begin to slip. Healthy habits support you in managing and coping with stress related to the loss of structure and routine.
- 2. Anxiety and fear of the unknown.** The pandemic has created stress, anxiety, and/or fear in everyone. You might ask yourself, “Will someone I love get sick? Will I get sick and maybe even die? Will the economy recover? Will I ever return to work? Will my family survive financially?” Depending on where you live, you may still be in lockdown or transitioning in “phases.” The lack of answers and uncertainty about the future makes it difficult to slow your mind. You might toss and turn at night, ruminating and obsessing about the “what-ifs.”
- 3. Loss.** What have you lost? You might have lost your job, income, or social plans. Projects might have been delayed or canceled. You might be grieving if you have lost friends or family members to illness. Your usual social connections and activities might feel very distant. You might long for when things were “normal.”
- 4. Reduced stimulation.** Pre-pandemic you might have had a busy life – socializing with friends and family, working hard, shopping, attending concerts or other events, or going to the gym. All of these activities stimulated you, allowing you to burn energy. Now you might be using far less energy, causing you to feel restless, antsy, or jittery.
- 5. Lack of connection.** Feelings of disconnection and loneliness are a real consequence of the pandemic. If you feel alone, you are not alone!

You might believe overthinking is keeping you up at night, but it is actually your feelings. Feelings are messages from your body, and they are closely connected to the problems and challenges you face every day. Feelings are supposed to be helpful, guiding you to

take action or focus on finding solutions. Feelings can inform, empower, and motivate you to do what is required to be happy and healthy. If you ignore feelings, they will get stronger. Yes, feelings might be keeping you awake at night – but they are incredible messengers. When you are lying in bed, there is nothing external stimulating you. Feelings you have been ignoring or suppressing will take the opportunity to surface so your brain can acknowledge and process them.

This worksheet will help you acknowledge and process your feelings so you can experience better sleep.

What to Do

The way to sleep better during this stressful time is to acknowledge and process your feelings. But not at night – during the day. You can make a conscious effort to process them during the day, freeing your mind and body to get much-needed sleep.

For the next two weeks, spend a few minutes every day sitting quietly and focusing your attention inward to process your feelings. Close your eyes and tune into the sensations in your body, focusing on how and what you are feeling. Sit with your feelings instead of escaping or ignoring them. Complete the chart on the next page for two weeks, then answer the questions that follow.

Date	Amount of Time	Feelings That Came Up	Notes

Reflections on This Exercise

Describe the problems you had with sleep before starting this exercise.

Have your sleep problems gotten worse since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic? Explain.

After completing the exercise for at least two weeks, describe the most common feelings you experienced. You might ask yourself why you are having those feelings, what do they mean, and what is your body trying to tell you. Be specific.

What can you do to address your feelings? Perhaps you need to set up a daily routine, make the effort to connect with people, exercise, talk to a friend, or allow yourself to grieve. Brainstorm ideas:

If you feel nothing during this exercise, your feelings might be suppressed, which is sometimes the result of Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN). You can still get in touch with and process feelings that are disrupting your sleep. A counselor or psychotherapist can help you with this.

Since you have completed the exercise, how is your sleep? The same, better, or worse? Explain.

What are some other things you can do to improve your sleep?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
