SLEEP TIGHT, DON'T LET THE BED BUGS BITE

We all know the cycle, you crawl into bed, but then your mind starts thinking of the things you forgot to do today, what you need to do tomorrow, ideas for that meeting, or something you are concerned about, you watch the clock and then start thinking about how long until you have to wake up, you get restless, can't get comfortable, check the clock again, toss and turn, check the clock again, wonder how you will cope the next day, get even more frustration and the cycle continues. If you do get to sleep it's often restless and you wake up feeling like you have been hit by a truck. Or you are totally exhausted at the end of the day and barely awake as you stumble into bed but then at 2 or 3am you are wide awake checking the clock and finally get back to sleep not long before the alarm goes off. It's a vicious cycle. We all have restless night's sleep on occasions due to many things like stress, sickness, excitement or being too hot or cold, but when it's an ongoing problem it can lead to poor functioning, irritability and fatigue.

There are a few simple but effective strategies you can use that can help to reset your body clock if you have experienced insomnia for a period of time. Use reverse psychology on yourself "lying here relaxing is helping reenergise my body." You are more likely to fall off to sleep when you are relaxed than when your agitated and even if you don't 4 hours laying in bed reading a book will impact less on you the next day than 4 hours tossing and turning.

Routine is so important if you have experienced insomnia for a long period of time. Set the alarm and get out of bed at the same time every day and avoid sleeping in or afternoon naps so you can reset your body clock. Have a routine before bed of a shower/bath that helps you relax and tells you body it's time to slow down and turn off.

We often think, I'll go to bed early tonight to catch up, but if you are not actually tired you just set yourself up for the clock staring cycle, so don't go to bed when you are not tired, you will only set yourself up to fail as if your mind isn't tired it will start the clock staring cycle. Watch out for signs that you are tired, yawning, or you start zoning out from TV or conversations and go to bed then. Don't wait till the next ad, to finish the chapter or just put on the dishwasher as you will miss that window of tiredness become more stimulated and it takes longer to wind down again.

It takes on average 15 minutes to fall asleep or wake up. If you haven't fallen asleep in half an hour, get up, read a book or magazine, or another relaxing activity as a distraction from the thoughts and to help relax you enough to fall asleep. Try to keep to bed as purely for sleeping, to break the associations between being in bed and being awake. Go back to bed only when you feel tired

Deal with stress during the day not at night. It is natural when we are lying in bed with no distractions for our mind to replay our day and plan for the future, but if there is stress that has not been dealt with; this will only lead to agitation. If needed set aside some time to look at how to manage any problems you are facing so that you don't spend all night trying to solve them

Hints for getting more Zzzzzzzzz's

1. Cut out Alcohol. Alcohol might help you get to sleep, but it results in shallow and disturbed sleep, abnormal dream periods, and frequent early morning awakening. Try camomile tea or a relaxing tea blend before bed instead

2. Cut our caffeine in the afternoon. Caffeine can stay in your system for up to 12 hours, so maybe even re-think that mid morning latte. Hot chocolate, cola, and chocolate also contain caffeine so avoid these later in the day. Chocolate also contains an amino acid called tyrosine which activates the brain.

3. Ditch refined sugars. Sugar raises the blood sugar level which may not impact on getting to sleep, but can wake you up when blood sugar levels fall.

4. Our mum's were right- try a glass of warm milk. Milk contains an essential amino acid, tryptophan, which stimulates the brain chemical serotonin, which is believed to be crucial in enhancing sleep. Bananas, turkey and whole grains are also high in tryptophan.

5. Medications are not a long term solution due to their addictive nature, so should be taken for only very short period of times. Alternate medication use with non medication nights and herbal options such as Valerian. Ensure you speak with your doctor of pharmacist about any interactions with medication you may be taking.

6. If you find that you mind kicks into gear just as you get into bed, keep a notepad on the bedside table and write a short message of that 'to do list' and then tell yourself you can deal with it tomorrow.

7. Nothing is valid at 3am! The 'what if's" often crawl inside our head in the middle of the night and magnify problems. Get up and start journaling about these concerns, often the next day that problem is only half the size. If you find you regularly wake up in the middle of the night, then put on a relaxation or mindfulness CD as soon as you wake.

8. Regular exercise helps improve sleep and is even more important when you have had a bad night's sleep. Our body tells us to opt for a nap or to skip the gym when we are tired, so press through that feeling and go anyway as the exercise will release feel good chemicals that help you feel and sleep better

9. Try to eat at least 3 hours before bedtime. This way your body is resting, not digesting, as you sleep. Large meals before bed can lead to indigestion and a restless sleep

10. Use a relaxation, visualisation or mindfulness track as soon as you get into bed to help you to relax.

11. The melatonin that gets activated from the sun helps to set the body clock, so leave the curtains open a little and try to get into the morning sun for at least 15 minutes. A 20-30 minute walk first thing gets the blood pumping, the digestive system flowing and is a great way to start the day.

12. Turn the TV, Laptop or PC off at least 30 minutes before you go to bed, this reduces mental stimulation and helps you to wind down.

Dear 3 am,
We have got to stop meeting this way.
I'd much rather sleep with you.