

## Coping With Sleep Problems and Nightmares

As a survivor of sexual violence and abuse you could find that coping with the many and varied emotions trauma causes is impacting your sleep. You might be having difficulties falling asleep, or you might wake up and be unable to get back to sleep. You could also be experiencing nightmares, reliving what you have been through in your sleep, leaving you exhausted and traumatised when you wake up. What you're experiencing is not unusual and is shared by many survivors. There are steps you can take to help you get a good night's sleep.

**Establish a routine** Try to keep regular times for going to bed and getting up. That way your body will associate those times with sleeping. You may need to do this for a few weeks before you settle into a regular pattern.

**Go to bed when you're tired.** It may sound strange but try to avoid going to bed just because of the time or because your partner is ready for sleep. Go to bed when you feel tired and get up in the morning at your regular time. You'll spend less time in bed but the time you do spend will be sleeping.

**Make sure where you sleep is comfortable.** Before you go to bed check that your bedroom isn't too hot or too cold. Check your sleeping arrangements and think about what brings you comfort. Take a comforting teddy bear, blanket or photograph to bed and have it close to you in case you need it.

Also, make sure the light and noise levels are right for you. Usually dark, quiet and cool rooms make it easier to sleep. If something is stopping you from sleeping work out what it is; it could be a clock ticking, your partner snoring, a lack of light or alternatively too much light coming into your room. Try to find a solution to help you sleep better e.g. wear earplugs to block out any unwanted noise, use blackout curtains to block out any light or have a night light on.

**Relax and de-stress before you go to bed.** Listen to some calming music, practice relaxation techniques or mindfulness exercises, do gentle exercise like yoga, or have a warm bath. Try not to study, work or do vigorous exercise, and avoid looking at the bright screens on your phone, TV or computer, these can all stimulate your mind and make it harder to fall asleep.

RSVP services: 0121 643 0301 Helpline: 0121 643 4136 Email: [info@rsvporg.co.uk](mailto:info@rsvporg.co.uk)



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**Don't force yourself to sleep.** You might feel more anxious if you do. Try keeping your eyes open; once they start to close open them again. The more you do this the sleepier you'll become. You could go into another room and relax there until you're tired enough to go back to bed, repeating this for as long as you need to.

**Be mindful about what you eat and drink.** Try not to eat a big meal just before going to bed; if you are hungry eat a light snack instead. Drinks containing caffeine or sugar, such as tea, coffee, hot chocolate, soft drinks, etc. should be avoided a few hours before you go to bed as they can act as stimulants and may keep you awake. Although alcohol can make you sleepy, try to avoid it as it can disrupt your sleep later in the night.

**Keep your bedroom for sleeping.** Try to avoid watching television, listening to the radio, studying, working, using your computer/laptop/phone, exercising, or eating in your bedroom. All these activities could stimulate your mind and make it harder for you to sleep. See your bedroom as a place of relaxation, rest and nurture for yourself.

**Exercise regularly.** Exercise, even mild activity, can help improve your sleep. Try to do this a few hours before you go to bed, otherwise it may make you feel more awake and make it more difficult to get to sleep.

**Talk to someone.** You may not be able to resolve the things that are stopping you sleeping. If you're still having difficulties getting to sleep you may find talking to a counsellor or loved one helps you.

**Coping with nightmares.** It's essential to discover ways to reduce the traumatising impact of nightmares. Remind yourself that nightmares, despite them being extremely distressing, are actually healthy ways your mind is trying to cope with, and process, what has happened. On waking from a nightmare help yourself return to the present moment by noticing your surroundings and practising grounding. Keep a diary or speak to someone to spot patterns and common triggers, this can be useful in helping you gain some control.

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### Useful links:

**Rape Crisis Scotland** have this very useful booklet for survivors of sexual violence on nightmares and sleep problems:

<https://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/resources/RCS-supportresources-nightmares.pdf>

**Living Well** has information on dealing with nightmares for male survivors after sexual assault and child sexual abuse: <https://www.livingwell.org.au/managing-difficulties/dealing-with-nightmares/>

**You don't need to deal with the effects of sexual violence, sexual assault or sexual abuse alone. RSVP are here to offer support to survivors, to enable you to live a life with hope and confidence which is free from abuse.**

### We offer:

- Specialist counselling for survivors and their supporters
- Independent sexual violence advocates (ISVAS) to assist you through criminal or civil proceedings, or in crisis, whether you have reported or not
- Social groups and coffee mornings focusing on self-help
- Emotional support on the telephone helpline 0121 643 4136

These are some of our services. For more ways we can support you contact:-

☎ 0121 643 0301

@ info@rsvporg.co.uk

@ isva@rsvporg.co.uk

@ www.rsvporg.co.uk/services

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"RSVP are remarkable. I was given support and strategies on how to cope with my feelings."

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