



Sleep After Trauma

Many survivors of trauma often experience problems falling asleep or staying asleep. This can be a result of hyperarousal symptoms, meaning a state of being in which your body is responding to the traumatic event as though it is still happening.

Sleep Hygiene



- Monitor your caffeine intake throughout the day as well as drugs, alcohol, and medications. Be mindful of how those things can affect your sleep.
- Be mindful of eating habits, don't go to bed hungry, but don't eat a large meal either.
- Avoid rigorous exercise an hour before wanting to go to sleep.
- Complete a routine about 30 minutes prior to the time you want to fall asleep. This could include activities such as taking a warm bath or reading or doing relaxing exercises, such as progressive muscle relaxation or mindfulness.
- If after going to bed you are still awake after 15 minutes, do something calming, such as journaling, reading, listening to soothing music, etc. When you notice physical sensations that you may fall asleep, return to bed. If after 15 minutes you cannot fall asleep, try repeating those same actions again. Doing so, might be frustrating, but it is helpful in breaking the cycle of associating your bed with a place to toss and turn, rather than sleep.

Managing Nightmares

- It can be helpful to view nightmares as part of your healing. Your brain is trying to recall images and sensations it feels like it needs to process. Remind yourself that nightmares are not real, they are very distressing, but they are a memory of what happened and are not currently happening.
- When you wake from a nightmare try grounding yourself. Notice things about your environment to remind you of the present moment, perhaps having a specific object to focus on. Engage all of your senses in this process.
- Try journaling when you have nightmares to see if there are any current patterns. For example, do your nightmares have the same images or content? Try to identify the emotions you may have been experiencing when the trauma happened. Did you perhaps experience similar emotions at some point recently that were triggering? Sometimes writing down the nightmare, but creating a more positive ending can also be helpful in eventually changing the content of negative dreams.



Resources

Davis, Laura (1990). *The Courage to Heal Workbook: For Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*.

Pallesen, Nordhus, Havik, & Nielsen (2001). Clinical Assessment and Treatment of Insomnia. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 32(2), 115-124