



# MINDFULNESS AND SLEEP

- **Mindfulness can help to create the mental space needed to allow sleep to follow**
- **Mindfulness is not relaxation, positive thinking, a trance, a mantra or forcing yourself to sleep**
- **Principles include non-judgement, patience, non-striving, letting go, acceptance and trust**
- **Each of the nine Mindfulness principles can apply to sleep**
- **Mindfulness meditation is best learnt through regular practice**
- **Mindfulness can help change your relationship to your sleeping problem**
- **It will help you to become more accepting and less distressed about your sleeping issues**

Note: All words that are underlined relate to topics in the Sleep Health Foundation Information Library at [www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au](http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au)

## 1. Is Mindfulness a treatment for Insomnia?

The practice of Mindfulness, designed with a focus on sleep, provides an opportunity to create the mental space needed to allow sleep to come back.

Mindfulness meditation may be effectively combined with other strategies to change behaviours that might be causing your ongoing poor sleep. Examples of behaviours that work against good sleep include spending too long in bed, napping, caffeine intake, making your bed into an office, and using the TV to fall asleep (see [Good Sleep Habits](#)). Mindfulness meditation combines well with other good sleep habits to help prevent insomnia (see [Insomnia](#)).

## 2. What is Mindfulness meditation NOT?

It is not another relaxation technique, although you may feel more relaxed after engaging with it. It is not about positive thinking. It is not about going into a trance or trying to clear the mind of all thoughts. It is not about concentrating on a particular word or mantra. It is definitely not about trying to fall asleep.

## 3. What IS Mindfulness?

A broad, formal definition is 'an intentional act of present-moment awareness without attachment to an outcome'. It includes elements of awareness, circumspection (being watchful about your thoughts) and self-compassion. Some key qualities, or principles, in practicing Mindfulness include non-judgement, patience, non-striving, letting go, acceptance (but not giving up) and trusting yourself (see below).

You may be anxious about your sleep or catastrophising about the consequences of poor sleep. Try to develop thoughts consistent with the following Mindfulness principles instead of focussing on negative aspects of your sleep.

## 4. What are the nine Mindfulness principles and how are they related to sleep?

### Beginner's Mind

- Approach each bedtime with thoughts that are unrelated to past bad nights.
- Do not allow yourself to believe that how you slept last night will influence how you will sleep tonight.



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- Do not allow yourself to expect that every night will be a bad night of sleep.
- Approach the sleep process with no expectations about how your sleep will be.

### Non-striving

- You can't force yourself to sleep. Falling asleep is NOT a result of effort.
- Think of the process of falling asleep as like digesting food – it just happens.
- Non-striving means striking a balance between your desire for sleep and simply allowing sleep to unfold.

### Letting go

- Let go of your attachment to the idea that sleep is a problem that needs to be fixed.
- This can also be described as 'letting be' – allow whatever is happening (like not falling asleep) to occur without automatically trying to fix it.
- Avoid labelling yourself as an 'insomniac' and tell others not to ask about how you slept last night.

### Non-judging

- Don't automatically think of being in bed and awake as negative. This negative energy will work against falling asleep.
- When you are awake in bed tell yourself you are 'resting' and observe it without judgement.
- Don't think of your sleep as a 'performance' with success or failure.

### Acceptance, or Acknowledgement

- Choose to accept that you cannot directly control your sleep.
- Efforts to make sleep happen don't generally work.
- Acknowledge that sometimes you will sleep and sometimes you won't.
- This is not the same as 'giving up', which is a value-laden negative concept.

### Trust

- Trust that your mind and body have the capacity to self-regulate sleep, given the right conditions.
- Be confident that your 'brain isn't broken'.
- Some knowledge about the physical (behavioural) and mental/emotional (cognitive) aspects of good and poor sleep can help you develop this trust (see [Understanding and Helping Poor Sleep](#)).

### Patience

- Results rarely happen immediately so you need to develop patience.
- It is like getting fit at the gym – it takes time.
- Avoid being focussed on the outcome (good sleep) and develop patience in the process itself.

### Gratitude

- When stressed or sleep deprived it's easy to only think about problems.
- Let your mind redirect its focus away from your sleep and other problems and allow a feeling of gratitude towards some of the good things in your life.

### Generosity

- Try to give time to friends and colleagues and not be too consumed with your own problems.
- Talking to friends, family and colleagues about their lives can be a meaningful gift to them and a welcome distraction for you and your own worries.

## 5. What is the next step?

Once you are familiar with the principles of Mindfulness in relation to sleep it is time to begin practicing some Mindfulness meditation. You may wish to start with some Mindfulness Youtube or App resources and

practice a regular activity mindfully like breathing or eating something slowly. This will help make the Mindfulness principles clearer, and in particular, provide practice in bringing your awareness to the present moment.

If you wish to start your Mindfulness meditation practice in the context of sleep, a good option is to download the free **Smiling Mind** app ([www.smilingmind.com.au](http://www.smilingmind.com.au)) and choose the 'Sleep' options that are presented. Experts suggest doing a 20 or 30 minute Mindfulness meditation six times a week to develop your skills. But even 10 minutes a day can make a difference. As with any new skill, you need to give yourself time to learn to apply the principles. The aim is to make your mind ready to create the mental space needed to allow sleep to happen.

### Key Resource

Jason C Ong (2017) **Mindfulness-based Therapy for Insomnia**, Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

## 6. Where can I find out more?

[www.nosleeplessnights.com/mindfulness-exercises](http://www.nosleeplessnights.com/mindfulness-exercises)

This US website gives further information on Mindfulness principles in relation to sleep, provides some meditation exercises and a summary of further resources.

<https://mindfulnessworksaustralia.com.au>

This is a commercial Australian website that provides online and onsite general Mindfulness courses around Australia at a cost. (This link is provided for information only and is not an endorsement of their products and services.)

For information on over 70 different sleep related topics, written by professionals, visit the Sleep Health Foundation Information Library at [www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au](http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au). The underlined topics in this article are covered in detail there.



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