

# Can't Sleep? / Sleep Tips for Trauma Victims

## Sleep Tips for Trauma Victims

The following sleep tips and information were created by Witness Justice, in partnership with the National Sleep Foundation, Dr. Barry Krakow of The Sleep and Human Health Institute and Dr. Gregory Belenky of the physician and a leading sleep researcher of the Walter Reed Institute of Research.

### Common Sleep Problems Following a Trauma

- Flashbacks and troubling thoughts can make falling asleep difficult.
- The victim might feel the need to maintain a high level of vigilance, which can make sleep difficult.
- For those who experience violent situations, night time and darkness can, in and of themselves, bring about added anxiety and restlessness.
- Taking naps during the day might be helpful, but, if overdone, can also interfere with your efforts to sleep through the night.
- Once asleep, nightmares can frighten a survivor back to consciousness, and getting back to sleep can be very difficult.
- Many survivors use alcohol or other drugs to numb the emotional and physical pain following trauma. These substances can not only impact the healing process, they can also exacerbate sleep problems.

### Trauma-Informed Sleep Tips to Consider

- **Sleep in a location where you will feel most rested and safe.** While the bedroom is optimal, it may not be possible to rest there soon after the trauma if you experienced violence in that room.
- **Create an environment in which you can sleep well.** It should be safe, quiet, cool and comfortable. While it often helps to sleep in a dark room, if keeping a nightlight on helps bring about a more safe feeling, then consider keeping the room dimly lit. It may also help to have a friend or family member stay in the room, or perhaps in a nearby room, while you are sleeping.
- **Engage in a relaxing, non-alerting activity at bedtime** such as reading or listening to music. For some people, soaking in a warm bath or hot tub can be helpful. Avoid activities that are mentally or physically stimulating, including discussion about your violent experience, right before bedtime.
- **Do not eat or drink too much before bedtime** and recognize the negative role that alcohol can have on your sleep.
- **Rest when you need to rest.** It is common to feel exhausted after a violent trauma, so you may need more rest or to rest differently during this time. Relaxing and resting for brief times throughout the day and taking short naps (15-45 minutes) may help.
- **Go to bed when you feel ready to sleep.** Try not to force sleep, which can add to the pressure of wanting to get to sleep. Developing the harmful habit of lying in bed awake for long periods when you want to sleep is counter-productive.

### During the day:

- **Consume less or no caffeine**, unless it helps you drive safely.
- **Avoid alcohol and nicotine**, especially close to bedtime.
- **Exercise**, but not within three (3) hours before bedtime.