



# WELLELDER

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*A community trust providing specialist counselling for older people from Wellington through to Kāpiti*

## Sleep

Research is clear that older people frequently experience increased problems with sleeping. WellElder counsellors often hear comments such as “Older people don’t need much sleep” or “At my age, I can’t expect to sleep well.” But research also shows that older people continue to need at least the same amount of sleep as they have had in the past, in order to feel good and function well.

We all know the slightly spaced-out feeling we have after a poor night’s sleep, with our concentration affected and our well-being and energy-level impacted. So, if our sleep pattern continues to be disrupted, and we begin to dread the night hours, what can we do?

The starting point is a health check with your doctor. It is important that any underlying health problems which may be contributing, are first addressed. Sometimes medications taken for chronic illnesses, for instance, have a stimulating effect, and there may be a less arousing alternative.

The use of “sleep hygiene” – a series of measures designed to promote good sleep – is the next step. The basic concept of sleep hygiene is that sleep is affected by what happens during the day and evening. Key areas to consider are food and drink, light exposure, exercise, regular sleep routines and the sleep environment.



### *Food and Drink*

It is recommended that people go to bed feeling neither hungry nor over-full – heavy, spicy meals just prior to bedtime are to be avoided.

Cutting down of caffeine consumption can also be helpful. In addition to coffee, caffeine is present in tea, chocolate, cocoa and many soft-drinks. Limiting caffeine to the mornings and substituting caffeinated drinks with decaffeinated coffee and herbal teas in the afternoons, can be helpful.

Alcohol is often regarded as a sedative, but the soporific effect is only at the beginning of the sleep period. As the night progresses, alcohol can be disruptive to sleep. Consider having just one drink in the evening, and no alcohol within three hours of bedtime.

## *WellElder provides low cost counselling for older people*

*In 2017 we held 989 individual counselling sessions and ran 36 group sessions for 290 clients.*

- *We ask clients to contribute towards the cost of counselling as they can, from \$10.*
- *We rely on a DHB contract to help fund our counselling services.*
- *Donations and additional funding are necessary to cover the full cost.*

## *So, if our sleep pattern continues to be disrupted, and we begin to dread the night hours, what can we do?*

Sleep

### *Light Exposure*

Light exposure, particularly in the mornings, is extremely important in regulating the sleep-wake cycle. Getting outside into full spectrum light (without sunglasses) in the mornings is ideal. If this is not possible, open the curtains wide and turn on the lights.

### *Exercise*

Regular exercise and good sleep are co-related. 150 minutes of exercise per week is proven to be beneficial for health generally – regularity in this, as in other sleep-related behaviours, is the key. Late afternoon is an ideal time for exercise. Any regular pattern of exercise is likely to be helpful, with walking, aqua-jogging, and cycling on a stationary bike, all possibilities. Yoga and tai chi are gentler forms of exercise, and the social opportunities of a group are beneficial.

### *Regular sleep routines*

How we schedule sleep also has an impact on its quality and quantity. Older people tend to go to bed and get up earlier. Finding stimulating activities to do in the early evening is often key to not dozing off. Watching TV with low lighting is a sure recipe for evening dozing, and this takes away from the need to sleep at night. Turning on bright lights, moving around during advertisement breaks, and sitting upright, all help us stay alert until bedtime.

Having a regular bedtime routine of pleasant relaxing activities, such as doing gentle relaxation exercises, or reading, act as a learned stimulus for sleep, and make for a transition from wakefulness. The idea is to re-establish sleep time as enjoyable.

### *Sleep environment*

The environment is important. Beds should be a cue for sleep, not conflicting wake-inducing activities. The bedroom temperature should be dark and quiet and the temperature comfortable and not too hot. We need to feel safe in bed, and clocks should not be visible.

### *And what if we wake during the night?*

The idea is not to try too hard to get back to sleep, just to allow it to come rolling in.

Worrying in the night is a sure way of not getting back to sleep – everything feels worse in the dark. Worrying about not sleeping compounds the problem! Instead, get out of bed and do something quiet and non-stimulating until you are sleepy again. If worries keep intruding, note them down, and undertake to look at them in the morning. Practising some breathing and relaxation exercises can be helpful to slow down your mind and induce sleep.

And if you would like support in addressing sleep difficulties or troubling thoughts and feelings, WellElder counsellors are available to give a hand.

Information Sheet # 07

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## **Become part of the WellElder community in Wellington....**

Signup for information and invitations to events to support WellElder

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Donate to us at 94 Riddiford Street Newtown, or by direct debit to bank account 06-0574-0223422-00 (ANZ Kilbirnie)

*We are a registered charity (CC31682) – Your donations are tax deductible*

