



# SLEEP AND PARENTAL MENTAL HEALTH

## **Three of Dr. Satin's top five strategies to manage your own sleep difficulties:**

Sometimes parents have trouble sleeping even when their children are sleeping through the night. This can be incredibly frustrating for exhausted parents. You may experience difficulty falling asleep (initial insomnia), difficulty falling back asleep (middle insomnia), waking up too early (early morning awakening), or a combination of the three. Especially for parents of children who wake throughout the night, not being able to fall back asleep can make matters much worse.

If you are experiencing significant sleep difficulties, I recommend talking with a health care provider to determine the best approach for treatment. You may find it helpful to work with a cognitive-behavioural therapist or to read a Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy self-help book for insomnia. A great choice is "Quiet your mind and get to sleep" (2009) by Colleene Carney and Rachel Manber.

### **Sleep strategy #1: Build a strong association between your bed and sleep**

You may have noticed that tips for improving baby's sleep often involve building consistent routines and sleep cues that lull baby to sleep. As adults, we benefit from this as well. Try to create a wind-down period that is similar each night. Try your best to associate your bed and bedroom with comfort, calm, and rest. Borrowing from what we have learned about baby's sleep preferences, consider white noise and black-out blinds for you! If you have shared your room with your baby and made some of these adjustments, you may have already noticed what is helpful for you. I recommend that you sleep only in your bed (as opposed to a couch, for example). Reserve your bed only for sleep or sex (let's include cuddling too). Although it is counter-intuitive, try getting out of bed if you cannot sleep for 20-30 minutes. Go do something relaxing or dull and return to bed when you are sleepier. Repeat as necessary. You do not want to foster the association between struggling to sleep and bed.

## **Sleep strategy #2: Eliminate your own screen time**

Screens affect adults, too. Consider limiting your own screen time before bed, even leaving your devices outside of your bedroom if they are tempting. Apps and settings are available to adjust the light on your smartphone, so they won't affect your sleep as much, like iPhone's Night Shift.

Some parents may entertain themselves on their phones during long nighttime nursing or feeding sessions. That might even be what you're doing right now. If it works for you, enjoy it, but if you find it hard to go back to sleep, consider breaking the habit and leave the phone out of reach. If you watch television to unwind before bed, I recommend doing so outside the bedroom. Some people fall asleep while watching television out of habit but breaking this association could help you sleep better. If you find yourself having nightmares or feeling afraid at bedtime, avoid crime shows or other shows that are violent or scary. This may seem obvious, but I have seen multiple clients benefit from this small tweak.

## **Sleep strategy #3: Designate who's on call**

After months of responding to your baby's stirring and cries at night, you may feel a sense of being on guard or on high alert, even when it's time to rest. If you have a partner, you may have even noticed that he or she could sleep through your baby's night-waking though you are instantly jolted awake. Hypervigilance is the term for when we are overly sensitive to detect activity or danger. While it is lovely to be so tuned in to your baby, it can be exhausting and difficult to turn off. If you have a partner (or another support person who is willing), you may find it a relief to designate them as being 'on call' for the night or for a specified amount of time as you are working on improving your sleep. You may choose to put on white noise or wear ear plugs, knowing that someone else will respond. Some parents will hire a night nurse or doula if they need a break, and in that case, it will be extra important to give up the job of being 'on call' and trust that the other person is responsible during the night. Whether the job is to give a bottle, check the monitor, or just be designated as overall responsible, you may benefit from the sense of being fully 'off-duty'. Even if you are nursing at night, you could still benefit from having someone else designated to do everything except nursing, and that especially includes being on alert for wakeups.

**More coming soon...**