

Countdown to a better night's sleep

Many of us have trouble sleeping from time to time. At particularly stressful or exciting times in our lives – maybe the night before an interview or a family holiday – it can seem impossible to get a good night's rest.

It can be the same after crime.

We can feel like there's more to cope with and that everything running through our minds stops us sleeping well. It's draining and can have a knock-on effect in our daily lives.

We've put together these tips to help you get a better night's sleep.

There's lots of information in this workbook, so please feel free to take things at your own pace.

www.victimsupport.org.uk

Leave your worries at the bedroom door

It's much easier said than done. In fact, often as soon as our heads hit the pillow, that's when our minds start working overtime, making it difficult to switch off and fall asleep.

The stress that often follows crime can make this worse.

Try these techniques for putting to bed the thoughts keeping you awake. Don't worry if things don't improve straight away. It may take practice.



Plan ahead

If you've got a lot on your mind, set aside some time to make an action plan for the next few days. Before you start to wind down for bed, take ten minutes to think about what's worrying you and how you could fix the problem.

This helps you take control, making it less likely for those worries to creep into your head once you've settled down for bed. If they do, remind yourself that you've made a plan which can wait till morning.

TOP TIP: Don't write your plan in the bedroom. This will help your brain associate your bedroom with a place reserved for relaxation and sleep.

If you think you'd find this technique helpful, this template could help get you started.

What am I worried about?	What am I going to do?	When would I like to do it by?	Who could support me?

The worry tree

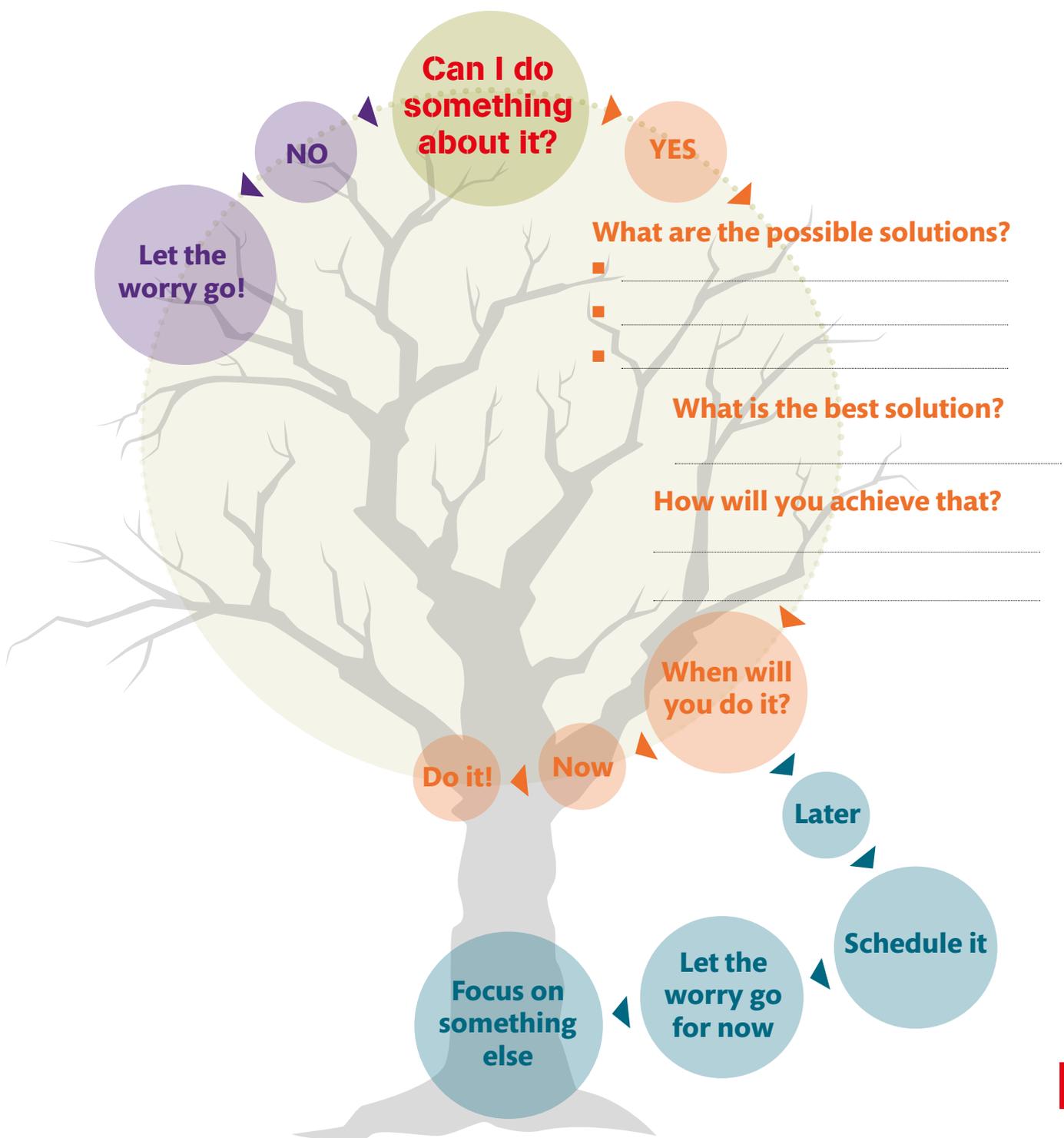
Another way to combat disturbed sleep is to challenge the thoughts keeping you awake.

In the dead of night – particularly if we're tired – it's easy to let our thoughts run away with us and imagine worst case scenarios. This is sometimes called catastrophising.

A worry tree can help us take a step back, examine the things that are worrying us and decide whether they are things we should act upon or let go.

Why not have a go? Try to be as specific and as honest with yourself as you can.

What am I worried about?



When 'letting it go' isn't that simple...

Sometimes, when we try to plan and rationalise things, our brains have other ideas. Just because we tell ourselves to let a worry go, it doesn't mean it's that easy. Could some of these techniques help?

Relaxation exercises

When we're anxious or worried, our breathing tends to become quicker and shallower, which makes relaxation difficult.

Taking some controlled, deep breaths can be surprisingly effective in helping us feel calmer.

Deep breathing

Breathe in through your nose and notice your stomach expand. Hold the breath for a couple of seconds, before releasing it slowly through your mouth, noticing your stomach gradually deflate. Take a little longer over your out-breath than your in-breath. Keep going for as long as you need to.

Muscular relaxation exercises can help reduce tension that has built up in your body, helping you relax and, hopefully, fall asleep. Why not give it a try?



Muscular relaxation exercise

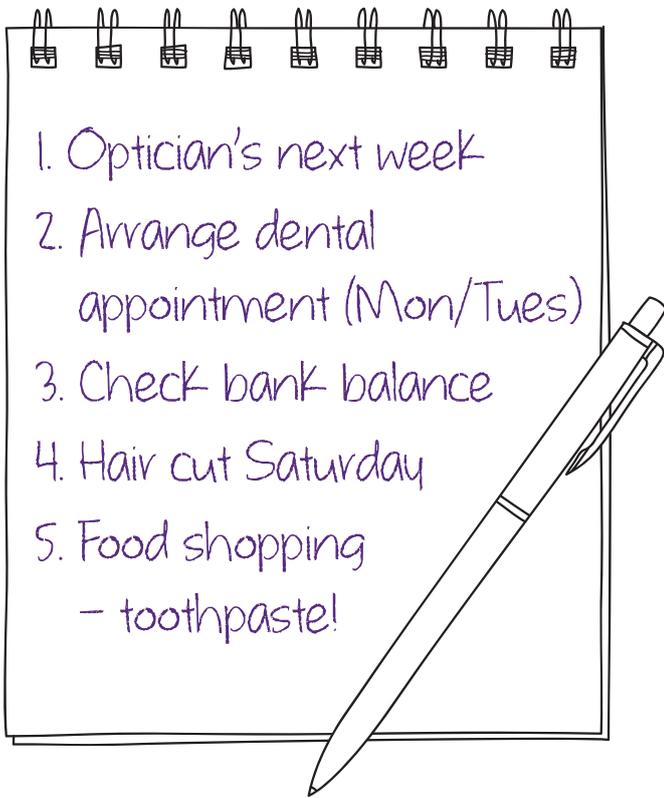
First, get comfy and take a couple of minutes to focus on your breathing, keeping it steady and controlled.

Once you feel settled, work your way through your body, tensing each muscle group and then relaxing it.

Start with your feet. Flex your toes and tense the muscles in your feet – not too tightly, just so you can feel some tension. After around ten seconds, release that tension. Notice how it feels as you relax the muscles.

Gradually work your way up your body, tensing your legs, then your stomach muscles, clenching your fists, shrugging your shoulders, scrunching up your face, noticing the tension leave your body muscle by muscle.

If your mind wanders throughout the exercise, try to refocus on the slow rhythm of your breathing.



Put pen to paper

Some people like to keep a notepad and pen to hand as a last resort. If you start to feel your head filling up with worries once you've gone to bed, you can jot down everything that's playing on your mind.

You could make yourself a to-do list, do a sketch, or just write about how you're feeling. Don't worry about your spelling or grammar. It doesn't even have to make sense. It's for your eyes only.

But once everything's out of your head and on paper, put the notepad – and your worries – to one side until the morning. You're then free to relax and get the rest you need.

TOP TIP: Try to keep the lights dim if you do this during the night. Too much bright light could trick your body into waking up.

Distract yourself

When you find yourself trapped in a vicious cycle of negative thoughts, try distracting yourself.

The 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 grounding exercise is a simple and easy-to-remember way of bringing yourself back to the here and now. If you begin to feel anxious or wake up from a nightmare, it can help remind you where you are and that you're safe. Here's how:

- Describe five things you can see
- Name four things you can feel (maybe the bedsheets between your fingers?)
- Name three things you can hear (traffic outside?)
- Name two things you can smell (or two smells you like if you can't smell anything right now)
- Name one thing you can taste (perhaps the toothpaste from brushing your teeth before bed?)



Break the vicious cycle

Do you find yourself lying in bed, watching the clock, thinking “I’ll never get to sleep”? The way we think can impact how we sleep. We can fall into a vicious cycle where our anxiety about not sleeping actually makes the problem worse. So, first thing’s first...

Avoid watching the clock

Obsessing over the time will only heighten your anxiety about how many hours you have left before the alarm goes off and how tired you’re going to be when it does.

Checking the time on your phone can be even worse, because the blue light emitted by its screen represses the hormone melatonin, which helps regulate your body clock.

To avoid temptation, turn your clock (or phone) around so you can’t see it, or move it to the other side of the room.



Getting up

A lot of good advice about sleep will tell you that when all else fails, it’s sometimes better to get up, rather than stay in bed tossing and turning.

But what you do once you’re up is just as important:

- ✗ Don’t automatically switch on the lights – this could actually wake you up!
- ✗ Don’t drink any tea or coffee – they contain caffeine, which will make you more alert
- ✗ Don’t watch television or use your mobile phone.

The aim is to relax and make yourself sleepy before you go back to bed, so...

- ✓ Do find a warm, dimly-lit comfortable spot to relax, preferably outside of the bedroom
- ✓ Do drink something soothing, such as camomile tea
- ✓ Do something relaxing, such as reading your favourite book
- ✓ Do only go back to bed when you’re feeling sleepy.



How are your sleeping habits?

We may not always realise it, but our daily habits can make a big difference to how well we sleep. Take a look at the examples below. Are there any changes you could make?

If your problems sleeping persist after a few weeks, particularly if you have tried to make changes, it may be worth speaking to your GP for some advice.

Create a peaceful environment

Make your bedroom a peaceful and comfortable space. If you can avoid working, eating and watching TV in your bedroom, you're more likely to fall asleep faster, as your brain will associate the bedroom with sleep.

Establish a regular sleeping pattern

This is one of the most effective ways to improve your chances of good quality sleep. Set yourself a bed time and a time to get up and, where possible, stick to it.

Fight the temptation to have a lie-in if you've had a particularly bad night. Try to be strict with yourself and, ultimately, you may spend less time in bed, but more of that time should be time spent asleep.

Cut down on caffeine

Avoid tea, coffee, cola and energy drinks for a few hours before bed. Try switching to herbal tea or a warm, milky drink.

Find some wind-down time

It can feel like there aren't enough hours in the day, but try to set aside an hour or two before bed to relax. You could read, or have a warm bath – you'll know what works for you.

Maintain a healthy lifestyle

Try to eat a balanced diet and exercise regularly. If you can, exercise earlier in the day. You may think it tires you out, but strenuous exercise right before bed can keep you awake. A morning walk could help wake you up and reset your body clock.

Try a technology detox

Avoid looking at screens before bed. Not only does the bright light keep you alert, but checking emails and social media, playing games and watching videos tends to be quite stimulating – not ideal for getting to sleep. Could you do with some tech-free time?

TOP TIP: Some devices have a 'night-shift' mode, which can make the light less blinding.

What could be your wind-down routine?

Could your bedroom be more sleep-friendly?

How much sleep do you think you need?

(Most adults need 7–8 hours a night, but this can vary)

What would be your ideal routine?

Bedtime:

Get-up time:

Establishing a new routine can take time. Try changing it by half an hour every day until it feels right for you.





Moving forward

Having come to the end of this workbook, you may like to reflect on what could help improve your sleep.

Take a few minutes to jot down any of the tips and techniques that you think you'll find useful and how you might introduce them into your daily routine.

Come back to this in a couple of weeks and reflect on...

What has been most helpful?

Did anything not work for you? Is there anything you'd like to change moving forward?

Remember, different things work for different people. Things may not change overnight and you may need to try a combination of techniques to find out what works for you.

But if problems persist for a few weeks, it may be a good idea to see your GP for some advice.

There are different treatment options available and your GP will work with you to figure out what is most suitable for you. You can read more here:

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Insomnia/Pages/Treatment.aspx

Remember, if you feel you'd like any additional support or advice, our door is always open.
Please do not hesitate to get in touch with us.

My local Victim Support contact:

We are an independent charity offering free, confidential support to people affected by crime and traumatic incidents.

For information and support, contact us by:

- calling: Supportline **08 08 16 89 111**
- using Next Generation Text (add **18001** before any of our phone numbers)
- Online: **victimsupport.org.uk**

To find out how you can help us, visit **victimsupport.org.uk/get-involved**

With thanks to the following sources:

www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/sleepproblems.asp
www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Insomnia/Pages/Prevention.aspx
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www.getselfhelp.co.uk/write.htm
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