



Stimulus Control for Better Sleep

Mayo Clinic Center for Sleep Medicine

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Sleep is important to your physical, emotional and mental health. Most people experience trouble sleeping at some point in their lives. How much sleep is needed is different for each person. Usually, an adult needs 7 to 8 hours of sleep a night. When difficulty falling asleep or remaining asleep becomes a constant or chronic problem, it is called insomnia.

If you experience insomnia, you usually do not feel refreshed when you wake up. This affects your ability to function during the day. It can affect not only your energy level and mood, but also your health, work performance, and quality of life.

When sleep is disrupted for a period of time there is opportunity for negative associations to develop. These negative associations can happen in one or all of the following:

- Nightly habits (rituals) to prepare for bed
- The sleep environment in your bedroom
- Falling asleep

So, it is possible by the negative conditioning that the way you prepare for bed or approach bed may increase your alertness and make it very difficult to fall asleep.

One way to help you sleep better is by stimulus control therapy. The purpose of stimulus control therapy is to break the conditioned responses (negative associations) that happen when you have repeatedly tried to sleep without success.

Stimulus control therapy can help you reestablish the bed as the place where sleep happens, rather than the site of sleeplessness. You do this by limiting the time you spend awake in bed and by associating your bed only with sleep and sex.

The following key components are essential for you to follow in order for stimulus control therapy to work:

- Only go to bed when you are sleepy.
- Get out of bed if you are unable to fall asleep or if you wake up and can't fall back to sleep.
- Read a boring book or magazine.
- Go to bed at the same time every night.
- Get up at the same time every day.
- Do not take naps.
- Do not read or watch television in the bedroom.
- Try not to sleep longer than 8 hours.
- Remove pets from the bedroom.

During sleep stimulus control therapy expect to:

- Leave the bedroom several times.
- Only use your bed and your bedroom for sleep or sex.
- Sit upright in a chair and read something boring until you can return to bed and fall asleep. Do this until you are very, very sleepy, then return to bed. Repeat as needed.
- Not be able to fall asleep in your bed right away, or even after a few times of trying your sleep stimulus program.
- Do repetitive, non-stimulating activities nightly.
- Repeat your nightly routine for 4 to 6 weeks or longer.

Stimulus control worksheet

1. What are you currently doing when you are unable to fall asleep?

2. Is there something about your bedroom that causes you not to sleep? Describe your bedroom's environment.

3. What activities do you do in the bedroom?

My stimulus control therapy action plan

Now that you understand the stimuli that may affect your ability to fall asleep, you can focus on implementing strategies to help control the stimuli around you and help you sleep better. Sometimes changing only one element, such as removing a blinking alarm clock, may help you achieve better sleep. The goal of stimulus control is to make your brain think the bed is only for sleep and sex and not for anything else. This change in thought should help you sleep better.

1. Changes I can make to my bedroom environment to help me sleep:

2. Alternative activities I can do when I have trouble falling asleep:

3. Things I can do to make sure I sleep no longer than 8 hours:
