

CHAPTER NINE

Improving Sleep

AGENDA

- Welcome and reflections on previous session
- Homework discussion
- Exercise
- Break
- Topic: Improving Sleep
 - Introduction
 - Types of Sleep Problems
 - Factors That Contribute to Sleep Problems
 - Improving the Quality of Sleep
 - Tips for Dealing With Specific Sleep Problems
- Homework
 - Reread the chapter.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 9.1, Sleep Record.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 9.2, Making Your Bedroom a Pleasant Place for Sleep.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 9.3, Developing a Sleep Kit.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 9.4, Developing a Bedtime Routine.

Introduction

People with complex dissociative disorders almost always suffer from periods of disturbed sleep for a variety of reasons. Some of these may be physiological; others are related to the activity of various dissociative parts. They may even have an underlying sleep disorder. Thus, it is important to discuss your sleep problems with your primary care doctor. The less you sleep, the more tired you

are. This increases your chance of struggling in daily life because you have less energy and are more prone to become emotionally vulnerable and to have difficulties with thinking. In this chapter we will discuss types of sleep problems and how to improve your sleep, including how to cope with nighttime flashbacks and nightmares, and with parts of yourself that may be disruptive during the night.

Types of Sleep Problems

It is important for you, your therapist, and your doctor to know what types of sleep problems you experience in the present, and what you have struggled with in the past. Of course, sleep problems may vary over time and even have different causes over time. Following is a list of common sleep problems in people with dissociative disorders. Check the ones that are currently a problem for you.

- Difficulty falling asleep
- Difficulty staying asleep
- Frequent waking
- Very early morning waking
- Excessive sleepiness (for instance, falling asleep during the day)
- Disturbed sleep–wake patterns (for instance, sleeping in the day and being awake at night)
- Nightmares
- Night terrors
- Sleepwalking
- Teeth grinding
- Bedwetting
- Restless legs
- Panic during the night
- Sleep apnea (short episodes of not breathing during sleep; often associated with obesity)
- Feeling that you have not slept deeply or well, and subsequently feeling tired
- Activity of dissociative parts during the night
- Postponing bedtime due to being afraid of going to sleep or getting in bed

- Flashbacks as you fall asleep or awaken
- Illusions and hallucinations as you fall asleep or awaken
- Severe difficulty waking up or being roused by someone else
- Narcolepsy (sudden, uncontrollable episodes of deep sleep during waking hours). Narcolepsy should be distinguished from episodes of collapse, as described previously in the manual, and must be diagnosed with a sleep study.

Factors That Contribute to Sleep Problems

There are numerous causes of or contributing factors to sleep problems in those with dissociative disorders. Often more than one factor is involved, making it important to receive a comprehensive assessment for serious sleep difficulties.

Traumatization

It is harder to sleep well when you are traumatized. When it gets dark and quiet, your mind sometimes starts to work overtime. If you tend to avoid traumatic memories, you are more vulnerable to having them emerge once you are no longer preoccupied with work or other activities. Because some traumatizing events may have occurred at night, in the dark, or in bed, many people are afraid of the dark or dread going to bed. These fears may be prominent in parts that live in trauma-time. You, or certain parts of you, may also feel more alone, vulnerable, or unprotected in the dark or when you are sleeping. You, or parts of you, can become more jumpy, fearful, and hyperalert; therefore, you may sleep more lightly and awaken often during the night.

People with a dissociative disorder often suffer from trauma-related nightmares, night terrors, flashbacks, or nighttime panic attacks. Thus, they tend to avoid going to bed or only sleep once it is light outside. Sleepwalking, crying, moaning, shouting, or fighting while asleep are not uncommon. A few may have bedwetting on occasion. Although this may be embarrassing, it is important to understand that some dissociative parts of the self may experience themselves as very young and terrified. Such parts may be too afraid to get out of bed to go to the bathroom, or they may be so terrified that you urinate involuntarily. If this happens, do not be hard on yourself. Just change your bed linens and continue to work on grounding, inner empathy, and reassurance about present-day

safety for those parts of yourself. The more you can reassure and comfort all parts of yourself, the fewer problems you will have at night.

Struggle for Time Among Dissociative Parts

People with a complex dissociative disorder, especially DID, may have an internal struggle for control among parts of themselves. Parts may want or demand specific time for themselves, feeling that they do not have enough time for their own activities. This may become a major problem, interrupting not only daytime activities but also sleep. Sometimes dissociative parts may be more active at night, when the main part of the personality is more fatigued and less “on guard.” Some dissociative parts may only be active during the night. The following morning you may feel exhausted and not understand why. You may find evidence of activities that you have done, such as using the computer, eating, cleaning, or drawing. Sometimes parts stay busy because they dread going to sleep or are afraid to close their eyes. They may fear losing control or having nightmares.

Other Emotional Problems

Sleep disturbances are common in those who experience moderate to severe anxiety or depression. Many traumatized individuals experience both. This additional biological contribution to sleep problems can best be addressed with a combination of medication, therapy, and healthy lifestyle changes.

Excessive Stimulation

Drinking too much caffeine or alcohol, or using drugs or tobacco can have an adverse effect on your sleep. Heavy exercise or eating, reading stimulating books, or watching exciting or disturbing movies before bed can also affect your sleep. Some people may not be aware that other parts are engaging in these behaviors. If you lose time in the present and suspect this possibility, please discuss it with your therapist.

Lack of Stimulation

On the other hand, sleeping or resting too much during the day, being too sedentary, and inadequate exercise can also lead to poor sleep.

Improving the Quality of Sleep

With a few adjustments in lifestyle and some inner empathy, communication, and cooperation, you can improve your sleep.

Making Your Bedroom a Pleasant Place for Sleep

Make your bedroom, or the place where you sleep, a safe and comfortable place for all parts of yourself. Set an agreeable temperature in your bedroom: A bit cooler is usually preferable. Make sure you have sufficient light to be able to get your bearings if you wake up during the night, for instance, a night light or dim lamp. It is helpful for your bedroom to be relatively uncluttered and for your bed linens to be fresh. If you wish, spray a nice fragrance in your room before sleep. Use the anchors you developed in the exercise from [chapters 1 and 2](#) and have them in full view in your bedroom, to remind you of being in the present. Ensure that all parts of yourself have anchors that are helpful to them. Also create a “sleep kit” for yourself (see Homework Sheet 9.3). Remove items from your bedroom that may be triggering. These could be objects or colors that remind you of the past, but they could also be certain sounds or smells. Some people find it helpful to take out everything from their room that would be a distraction from sleep, including televisions, radios, and video games. Others find it helpful to have background noise, such as soft music or the TV, in order to sleep. However, if you need noise, a steady, droning “white” noise is preferable for sleeping, such as a fan.

If you, or parts of you, feel afraid during the night, make sure your home is as secure as possible, for instance, lock the doors and install a security system if you feel the need. Some people feel safer with a pet in the house. Have your local emergency phone number preprogrammed into your phone, and keep your phone by your bed. These are common-sense precautions, but they may also provide an extra feeling of security for parts of you.

Preparing All Parts of Yourself for Sleep

Take the time to communicate with all parts of yourself so that you have maximum awareness of your concerns and needs about sleeping. It is essential that internal agreement is made about a regular time for you (all parts of you) to sleep each night. Some parts may be active during the night because they perceive it as

“their time,” when you are not burdened by the responsibilities of daily life. This activity is a sign that you are not giving yourself sufficient personal time during the day. If you can communicate and negotiate with these parts and allow for some regular personal time during the day, you may see a drastic decrease in activity during the night.

Some parts may have preferences about sleeping that other parts do not share. Please be respectful of all parts of yourself, and pay attention to everything that comes to your mind about improving your sleep. For example, you may have a strong desire to keep a stuffed animal on the bed, but as an adult, this makes you uncomfortable. If there are parts of you who experience themselves as younger, you may need to address their needs compassionately and find compromises that are acceptable for all parts. Remember that parts can be stuck in the past and experience themselves as young, and your job as an adult is to help those parts of you feel secure and safe in the present.

Establishing Sleep Routines

Everyone finds it helpful to have a regular time to go to bed and to get up. Set a time that is reasonable for going to sleep and aim to go to bed around that time every night. It can be helpful to engage in restful and relaxing activities before bed, activities that are not too stimulating. For example, read a nice book, watch a funny TV program, listen to your favorite music, take a relaxing bath or shower, or have a caffeine-free drink and small healthy snack. Make a regular routine of activities that slowly wind you down toward sleep.

Some people like to imagine younger parts of themselves gathering around for a story, or imagine tucking them in to bed. One person liked to hug a pillow as though she were hugging a child, as she talked to her young self inside: “Don’t forget that I am taking care of you and that you are safe.” Make sure that you, in your own way, communicate with all parts of yourself to remind yourself that you are safe and it is OK to go to sleep.

Most people prefer to wear something when they are sleeping—pajamas might provide a feeling of safety and protection. Avoid sleeping in your daytime clothing, because it may not be comfortable, and changing into pajamas is a nice ritual that reminds you it is now bedtime.

If you have a TV in your bedroom and you need the sound to help you sleep, make sure you do not watch programs that might be upsetting to you or to parts of yourself. The point is to determine what helps you get to sleep and stay asleep on a regular basis. Some people prefer music, as long as it is relaxing and soothing. Others enjoy recorded nature sounds, such as the ocean or the wind in the trees. If you like to read and it helps you go to sleep, do so quietly in bed for a while, but make sure what you are reading is pleasant and not overly stimulating. If you read to avoid going to sleep, then try not to take a book to bed with you. Try a short relaxation or meditation exercise before going to sleep. One nice meditation is to reflect on three or four things for which you are especially grateful in your life.

Tips for Dealing With Specific Sleep Problems

If You Cannot Slow Down Your Thoughts

- Check with all parts inside. Ask whether some part of you needs to communicate inside. If so, ask that part whether it can wait until the next day. It is important to be able to temporarily delay worry and thoughts that interfere with much needed sleep. Find out whether parts of you need something to be different in order to get to sleep. Be attentive to and respectful of all parts of yourself.
- Distract yourself.
 - Count sheep (or your favorite animal), or count backward slowly from 100 and stay focused on that mental activity, as silly as it may sound. It keeps your mind from straying into problem areas that would keep you awake. Each time you lose track of the count, bring yourself back and start at the beginning.
 - Imagine a big STOP sign each time you start thinking about something. After you see the stop sign, refocus your attention on breathing slowly in and out. Breathe in to the count of three, hold for a count of three, and breathe out to a count of three. Repeat several times, just focusing on your breathing.
 - When you cannot get your mind off your problems when

you lie down, imagine your thoughts flowing past you in a stream, and one by one, they flow past you, and down the stream. You know they are there, but you have no need to do anything other than observe them flow through your mind.

- Some people find it helpful to get up and write down what is bothering them, with an internal promise that they will deal with it the next day.
- Imagine putting your problems in a safe container (computer file, bank vault, box, etc.) for the night. You can return to them at the right time the following day.
- Imagine one of the following:
 - A warm, white light that envelops you such that you feel utterly relaxed and safe
 - A beautiful balloon that you inflate. As you blow air into the balloon, imagine blowing all your tension and problems into the balloon. When you feel more relaxed, tie the balloon and allow it to float up into the sky. If you wish, you may keep it on a string.
 - Leaning back against a very safe and caring person
 - Use one of the additional relaxing imagery exercises in [chapter 11](#).

If You Cannot Sleep After a Reasonable Amount of Time

- Turn the clock away so you cannot keep checking the time. You will only become obsessed with the time if you cannot get to sleep, which will make the problem worse.
- Remind yourself that there will be times when you cannot sleep. You have always been able to function the next day. If you cannot sleep tonight, then you may take something to help you sleep the following night. Your body will eventually sleep.
- Stop trying to make yourself go to sleep. Get up and go to another room (or another part of the bedroom), do something quiet to distract yourself (for instance, read a book or watch a TV program that is not too exciting, listen to peaceful music, do some stretching exercises), and go back to bed when you feel sleepy. Do this as often as necessary during the night.

If You Wake Up After a Nightmare

- If you wake up at night after a disturbing dream or nightmare, or feel anxious and panicky, it is important to be able to calm down and comfort yourself and other parts that are anxious. Work with yourself and your therapist to develop various ways to help yourself.
- The first step is always to get your bearings in the present. Use all the anchors to the present you have put in your bedroom. Talk to yourself quietly and tell yourself out loud where you are.
- Turn on the light and get out of bed. Perhaps have something to drink and find something to distract you.
- Splash cool or cold water on your face, hands, and the back of your neck. This will help you get more present and awake.
- Consciously slow your breathing. Try some breathing exercises.
- Do some gentle stretching exercises to help your body reorient to the present.
- If you have a pet, spend a little time petting or cuddling with him or her.
- If you have physical symptoms, such as a bad taste in your mouth, or pain or discomfort, be mindful in talking to yourself inwardly as you do things to soothe yourself (for instance, brush your teeth, have a noncaffeinated drink, suck on a mint or hard candy, massage painful muscles): “I am in the present now. Whatever happened to me is over. I am safe. My mouth, my legs, my body, etc., are in the present. I am doing all I can to help all parts of myself.” Try to be aware of any internal sense of what might help.
- Some people find that it helps if they write down a distressing dream or image and then put it away, tear it up, or bring it to therapy. The idea is not to go further into the experience, but to contain it by putting it on paper and leaving it until a more appropriate time.
- You might try “changing” your nightmare. Add a supportive or strong person to the dream, invent a way out of the situation, or give yourself special powers to overcome any sense of powerlessness or fear in the dream. Your therapist may be able to help you with this kind of technique.

- Some people wake up from a nightmare and find they are unable to move. Although this is extremely uncomfortable and even frightening, it will not last for very long. It is simply the state of being paralyzed by fear. If this happens to you, make sure you have some anchors to the present visible from every angle from the bed: on your left, your right, even on the ceiling. Even though you cannot yet move, you can begin to see the anchor and gradually perceive you are in the present. This perception will help your body shift out of that paralysis mode. Try starting with a tiny movement, for instance, blinking your eyes, and just barely twitching your toe or little finger. When you can do this, then move the opposite toe or finger. Then make a slight movement with your hand or foot, then your arms or legs. Continue slowly and patiently until your entire body has become more able to move.

Using Sleep Medication Appropriately

If you have persistent sleep difficulties in spite of trying these solutions, make sure you are checked by your physician. There may be medical reasons for your sleep issues. Sleep disorders often accompany trauma-related disorders. Ask your doctor about whether you may need a sleep medication. Check with your doctor before you take any nonprescription medications or herbs, because they may interfere with your prescribed medications. Many sleep medications are addictive; thus, they should be taken only as prescribed. They cannot be mixed with other types of sedatives or with alcohol or drugs. Often, it is sufficient to use medication for a couple of nights to get yourself in a routine and then stop taking them until the next time you have trouble.

Homework Sheet 9.1 Sleep Record

Use the record below to record your sleep difficulties during the following week.

	What time did you go to bed?	What time did you wake up?	What difficulties, if any, did you have with your sleep during the night?	How did you try to help yourself if you had trouble sleeping?	What is the total number of hours you slept?
Monday					
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					

	What time did you go to bed?	What time did you wake up?	What difficulties, if any, did you have with your sleep during the night?	How did you try to help yourself if you had trouble sleeping?	What is the total number of hours you slept?
Saturday					
Sunday					

Homework Sheet 9.2

Making Your Bedroom a Pleasant Place for Sleep

1. Check to make sure your bedroom feels comfortable for all parts of you. Describe your thoughts, emotions, and sensations when you look around the room.

2. List anything you can and want to change in your bedroom to make it more comfortable. What would you or parts of you like to change?

3. Describe any inner conflict about your bedroom.

4. Notice any items that might trigger you. Remove or change them if you are able. If it is not possible to remove or change them, post a little note that says something like, “All is well here and now,” to remind you of the present. Also, intentionally notice the difference in the context for the item in the present. For example, “This bed reminds me of my bed as a child, but it is in my room, with my linens, on my floor. It is just a bed, and beds cannot hurt or scare. It is just a thing.”

Homework Sheet 9.3

Developing a Sleep Kit

Develop a “sleep kit,” a real or imagined box full of items that can help to reassure and calm you and all parts of you and bring you back to the here and now. You can use your sleep kit before you go to bed or if you awaken during the night feeling anxious or triggered. Your kit might include relaxing and soothing music or sounds, anchoring items, a special pillow or blanket, a night light, a favorite piece of clothing, a doll or stuffed animal, a wonderful book, photographs of people who care for you, or of safe and relaxing places, a list of people you can call if needed during an emergency, a list of pleasant experiences, or even a pet that helps you feel safe. Remember that it is important to take into account the needs and preferences of all parts in developing your sleep kit. List your sleep kit items below.

Homework Sheet 9.4

Developing a Bedtime Routine

1. Describe what helps you and all parts of yourself to unwind and prepare for bed.

2. List activities you know you should avoid before bedtime.

3. Describe a routine that you have or would like to establish once you get in bed (for instance, a short meditation, breathing exercises, imagery, reading a nice story).

4. Describe the best way for you to check in with all parts of yourself at bedtime, and remind yourself that you are safe and it is now time to sleep safely and comfortably (for example, talking inwardly, asking inside, imagining all parts in a circle or curled up in nice beds).

5. Are you willing and able to go to bed and get up at approximately the same time every day? List your approximate bedtime and wake time. If you are not willing or able, please describe the reasons below. Obstacles to a regular sleep routine are important to address.