

Common FAQs About Sleep Restriction

WHAT EXACTLY IS SLEEP RESTRICTION?

Sleep restriction is essentially reducing your time in bed. Most people with insomnia spend a lot of time awake in bed, unsuccessfully trying to get sleep. While there are some specific steps, reducing your time in bed to more closely match your actual sleep time reduces time awake, resulting in less “wasted” time, and also tends to temporarily reduce the amount of sleep you are getting. Over time, that amount of sleep gradually increases.

WHY ARE YOU ASKING ME TO DO SOMETHING THAT RESULTS IN LESS SLEEP? DON'T I WANT MORE SLEEP?

There are several ways sleep restriction works. First, if you are not sleeping when you are in bed, there is no point being in bed frustrated and awake. Second, because sleep restriction reduces sleep time at first it causes something known as the homeostatic sleep drive, essentially the need for sleep, to build. As this need builds night after night, sleep restriction results relatively quickly in a faster time to fall asleep, fewer awakenings, and a deeper sleep. This is a tradeoff—a focus on getting better sleep quality. People often agree they would prefer six hours of straight, deep sleep than six hours spread out sporadically through the night in short, light stretches.



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HOW IS SLEEP RESTRICTION LIKE MAKING PIZZA?

Whether you like thin crust or deep dish you probably like your pizza dough to be uniform and consistent over the whole pizza pan. Your ability to generate sleep is like pizza dough and your time spent in bed is like the pizza pan. People with insomnia often spend way more time in bed trying to sleep (too big a pizza pan) than they are able to generate (pizza dough). The result? A pizza that has holes in the middle or doesn't cover the whole pan (problems falling asleep or waking in the night). Sleep restriction helps you find the right amount of time in bed for your ability to sleep resulting in a better more consistent night sleep.

DOES SLEEP RESTRICTION WORK?

Yes. Sleep restriction as a stand alone strategy has been found to reduce time to fall asleep, time awake during the night, and sleep efficiency (Miller et al, 2014). The American Academy of Sleep Medicine describes sleep restriction as an “effective and recommended therapy in the treatment of chronic insomnia” (Morgenthaler et al, 2006). Sleep restriction is a key component of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia, which has decades of studies behind it (Morin et al, 2018, Trauer et al, 2015).

It is important to note that the benefits of sleep restriction are not immediate. That is, initially reducing time in bed is challenging and may even feel unpleasant. However, after a week to several weeks, sleep quality deepens and sleep becomes more consistent. In the long term, sleep quantity can be increased to find the amount that works best for you.



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