

# 13

## Cognitive Therapy

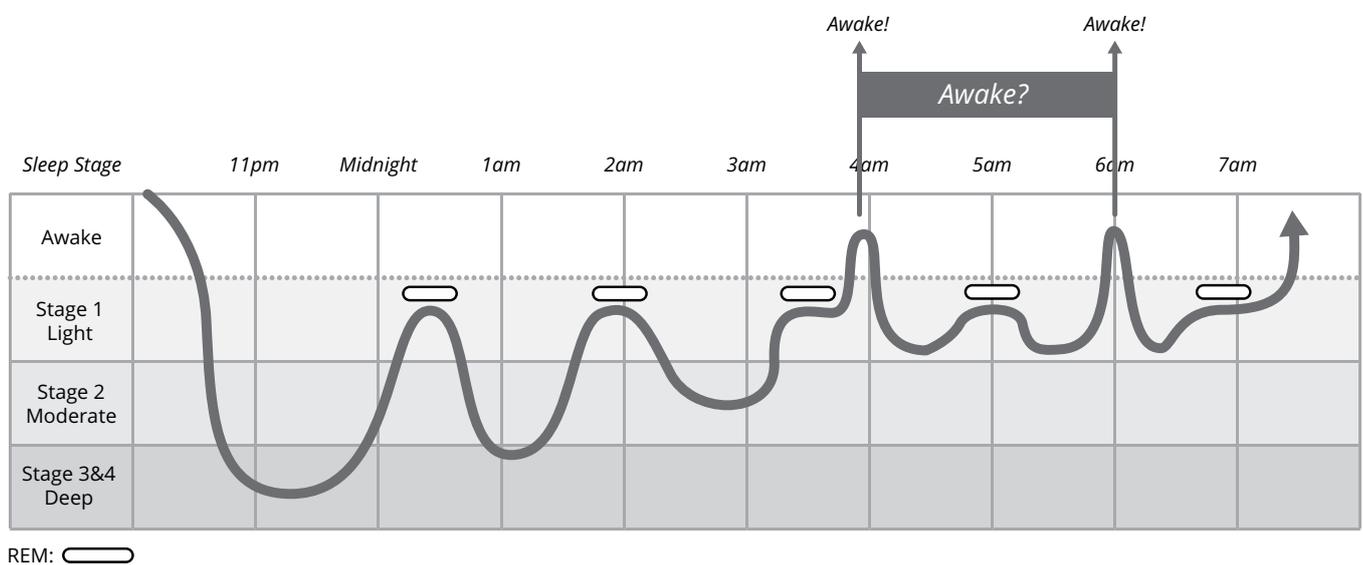
Cognitive just means thoughts. Cognitive therapy aims to change your thoughts and beliefs about your sleep that will, in turn, help you feel more confident and less anxious and sleep better.

### *Correct your Understanding of Sleep*

- ▶ Just being aware of what is a normal sleep pattern for your age can help.
- ▶ The first thing to understand is that awakenings are a normal part of the sleep period. They repeat about every 90 minutes. Some people become frustrated and anxious about these awakenings. It is unrealistic and unnecessary to get rid of them in order to feel fine during the day. The aim is not to get rid of them but to be able to get back to sleep within a few minutes.
- ▶ As we age we need less sleep in total and less deep sleep. It is normal to experience more and longer awakenings as we age.
- ▶ Another way to think about those brief awakenings is that if you had remained asleep instead, it would only have been very light sleep and of not more benefit than being awake.
- ▶ It is likely that the 90 minute sleep cycles with light sleep and awakenings occurring regularly across our night time sleep period acted as “sentries” in our sleeping environment and, thus, played an adaptive role to ensure the survival of our ancestors and thus our own existence. Therefore, we should feel more kindly and less annoyed at these awakenings.
- ▶ Sleep bounces back after sleep loss. Many people with insomnia feel their sleep is very fragile. Some also say they think they have forgotten how to sleep as if it is something that requires learning to do it. We saw that negative learning (conditioned insomnia) can interfere with the normal sleep mechanism. But rest assured, the sleep mechanism is robust and cannot be ‘forgotten’. Can you forget to be hungry if you go without food? Sleep is a biological process that just gets stronger the longer it is deprived. Remember the sleep pressure ‘water bucket’ analogy in Chapter 4? Several research studies have shown that the ‘bounce back’ of recovery sleep after sleep loss works as well for people with insomnia as it does for people without sleeping difficulties. The therapies in Chapters 10 & 11 rely on that fact.

## Difficulty in perceiving sleep

- ▶ Another important point is that it is very difficult to correctly recognise an awakening from sleep, particularly towards the morning when it is common to wake up from light sleep. Research, including some of our own, has shown that good sleepers assume they have been awake already when awoken out of sleep on about 30% of awakenings. However, people with insomnia perceive over 70% of awakenings as simply a continuation of being awake. That is, two separate brief awakenings can be seen as one long awakening with the conclusion that you were awake a long time across the night. For example, in the Roller Coaster Sleep diagram below there are two brief awakenings, one at about 4 a.m. and one at 6:00 a.m. If you did not recognise the awakening at 6:00 a.m. as an awakening from sleep, you might think that you had been awake since the previous awakening at 4 a.m. In other words, you'd perceive being awake for over two hours rather than two brief awakenings. This is a very common mistake that people make.



This may worry you and lead to anxiety about the loss of sleep and the anticipated detrimental effects the next day. If this occurs frequently, it can lead to insomnia. Therefore, correctly perceiving an awakening from sleep can help protect against insomnia.

- ▶ A good test of whether you just woke up or had been lying there awake for some time is to try to remember what you had been thinking about. If you cannot remember much, you can tell yourself that you just woke up and had not been awake for very long.
- ▶ If what you remember was just a snippet of more mundane mental activity, it was the mental activity of non-REM sleep almost always present during your sleep. However, if what you remember was a somewhat bizarre story-like experience it was a dream, indicating that you just woke from REM sleep.

## *Worrisome thoughts*

- ▶ Some people, during the day or even on waking first thing in the morning, have already started to worry about whether they will be able to fall asleep the next night.
- ▶ Negative or worrisome thoughts about sleep itself can lead to feelings of anxiety, tension and helplessness. These thoughts and feelings can lead to behaviours that, in fact, increase sleeping difficulties. For example, you may be watching TV in the evening thinking “I MUST get enough sleep tonight as I have so much to do tomorrow”. You will start to feel anxious and tense.
- ▶ These worrisome thoughts interfere directly with sleep because they trigger the ‘fight-or-flight’ mechanism that temporarily increases alertness.
- ▶ Furthermore, the frequent triggering of this ‘fight-or-flight’ mechanism will lead to daytime exhaustion and fatigue. Worry triggers the ‘fight or flight’ hormones. Frequently triggering these hormones depletes our body’s capacity to respond and leaves you with no reserve energy. It feels like your emergency ‘fuel tank’ is running on empty.
- ▶ You may also go to bed earlier that night or stay in bed longer in the morning in an attempt to get more sleep. However, this will lead to more time awake in bed that will result in more anxiety. And so the cycle continues to exacerbate the insomnia.
- ▶ To stop worrying about sleep is difficult for the person with long-term insomnia. But it will help to remember the following:
  - ▶ The natural sleep pattern is like a roller coaster with 90-minute cycles in and out of deep and light sleep with several brief awakenings spaced across the normal sleep period.
  - ▶ Sleep naturally gets shorter and lighter with age with no harmful consequences.
  - ▶ Individual sleep needs are different for different people. They also vary over time, depending on circumstances (deadlines, etc.) with no negative consequences.
  - ▶ You can function quite well with less sleep on occasions. Tell yourself that the worse that can happen if you sleep less than normal is that, although you will be sleepier the next day, you’ll still be able to do the things you need to do. And you’ll most likely recover some of this missed sleep on the next night. Sleep bounces back after loss.
  - ▶ Don’t cancel appointments or planned activities after a lighter night’s sleep – go about your normal daytime routine. You may surprise yourself at how well you manage. Cancelling appointments as a ‘back-up’ for every ‘bad’ sleep can become a habit and more disruptive to your life than any impact that your sleep may have.
  - ▶ Cancelling appointments also confirms the belief that good sleep is absolutely critical to

your life and well-being. This belief makes you susceptible to worry when you are lying awake in bed. So you can see how these beliefs can play a role in perpetuating insomnia and, therefore, working to reduce these beliefs can be therapeutic.

- ▶ Changing unrealistic thoughts and expectations about sleep will reduce your anxiety about sleep that in turn will help you fall asleep quicker.
- ▶ With most challenges in life, the harder you try to meet that challenge, the more likely you will be successful. However, this strategy is not effective when trying to sleep - the harder you try to do it, and the more anxious you become about it, the more elusive it becomes. 'Trying hard' increases your level of activation and alertness, and therefore, inhibits sleep. Many people with insomnia try too hard to control their sleep. Failure to get good sleep with these attempts also has the detrimental effect of creating feelings of helplessness and mild depression. Sleep is a basic biological mechanism that will operate best if we stop trying to force it.
- ▶ Also, keep in mind that, just as you should allow a gradual transition into sleep at night by engaging in quiet, relaxing activities before bed, allow yourself a gradual transition out of sleep in the mornings.
- ▶ Don't prejudge the rest of your day or the quality of your sleep based on how you feel in those first 15-30 minutes after awakening. Often, when people look back at the end of their day, they find it has been productive and satisfying, despite feeling very tired in the first half hour after awakening. Your grogginess might have been no more than the natural sleep inertia experienced upon awakening from sleep. Awakening from deeper sleep produces a stronger feeling of sleep inertia. Therefore, if you experience this early morning grogginess of sleep inertia you can tell yourself you were probably having some deeper sleep that will be beneficial to you throughout that next day.

Some people may find it useful to think about or to actually write down some of their sleep-related anxiety producing thoughts. These thoughts are sometimes called 'automatic thoughts' – they are thoughts that just come into our mind, even when we are doing something else, like watching TV.

For example:

<i>Situation</i>	<i>Automatic Thought</i>	<i>Feeling</i>
Sitting watching TV in the evening	"I must get enough sleep tonight as I have so much to do tomorrow"	Anxious, tense

These thoughts can make you feel anxious, helpless or annoyed. However, if you can change these thoughts to more positive thoughts, you will feel less anxious and more confident about your sleep.

For example:

<i>Alternative Thought</i>	<i>Feeling</i>
"I have a full day tomorrow and I am really looking forward to it"	More in control, confident, relaxed

For more examples, see the 'Automatic Thought Record' sheet on the next page. Further thought record sheets are at the end of the book. You may like to write down some of your negative thoughts and then practice coming up with an alternative, more positive thought.

It is not easy changing the automatic thoughts since they happen without your intentions. However, if you recognise them as soon as they occur, changing your thoughts to be more positive can avoid most of the worry and physiological 'fight-or-flight' reaction.

## *Automatic thought record example*

<i>Situation</i>	<i>Automatic Thought</i>	<i>Feeling</i>	<i>Alternative Thought</i>	<i>Feeling</i>
Sitting watching TV in the evening	"I must get enough sleep tonight as I have so much to do tomorrow"	Anxious, tense	"I have a full day tomorrow and I am really looking forward to it"	More in control
Awake in bed in the middle of the night	"I won't be able to function tomorrow if I can't fall back to sleep"	Anxious, helpless	"I can still function after a poor night's sleep." "I may be a little tired but I will be OK"	Less Anxious
Difficulty carrying out a task during the day	"I knew this would happen after my poor sleep last night"	Irritable, annoyed	"Instead of blaming my sleep, I will just concentrate on working out how to do this"	Calmer

**i** See the end of this book for your *Automatic Thought Record worksheet*.