Tips for Getting a Good Night's Sleep With Bipolar

by KIKI WOODHAM

How to Sleep Better With Bipolar

We've all heard it from our health care providers, repeated ad nauseam since we were first diagnosed with bipolar : sleep is one of the most important components to staying healthy and stable. But what should we do (and what shouldn't we do) when that crucial sleep just won't come?

I've been struggling with that question for as long as I can remember, and have learned a few things over the years that can really make a difference.

Natural Sleep Aids

Natural products like valerian, California poppy and melatonin can be great sleep aids. While they won't necessarily work every time for every person, they can often help bring much-needed sleep with fewer side effects than some medications.

These can interact with medication you already take, though, so check with your doctor or pharmacist first. For those who have trouble staying asleep, time-released melatonin tablets can help keep you down for the night.

Herbal teas such as chamomile or lemon balm (sometimes called lemon Melissa or Melissa tea) can help the mind and body relax, but on their own are not very effective against more stubborn sleep problems. Combined with other healthy nighttime practices, however, a relaxing herbal tea can form an important part of a good bedtime routine.

Alcohol

Contrary to popular belief, alcohol does not actually help you sleep — in fact, it does the exact opposite. While alcohol can make it easier to fall asleep, drinking in the hours before bedtime will actually work to disrupt your normal sleep pattern, causing you to sleep more restlessly and wake up frequently.

The more you drink, the more apparent this becomes, even if you don't remember it the next day. While one drink may not prove detrimental for you, it's best to avoid it altogether after dinner time for a healthy night's sleep.

Screen Time

Digital screens like computers, TVs (LCD or LED flat screens, not so much old-school tube TVs), tablets and phones are some of the most nefarious destroyers of sleep in our world today.

Energy-saving light bulbs are also known culprits. The light they emit falls mostly under the blue spectrum (I know, it doesn't look that blue) which actually suppresses our natural melatonin levels.

Speaking from personal experience, I know even a few minutes with my phone or tablet before bed is enough to keep me awake an extra half hour. If I sit in front of my computer for a while, I can stay awake most of the night and still feel wired at 3 a.m.

The solution? Turn off all screens a couple of hours before you want to go to bed. Keep your indoor lights dim after sunset as well, and try to use light bulbs that are coated to produce a warmer color light.

Avoid using night lights as well. Don't use your phone before bedtime for more than the minute it takes to set your alarm, and don't check Facebook or your texts one last time before you go to sleep. Those emails will wait until morning. Now is the time for rest.

Writing Things Down

If you often lie down at night only to be kept awake by racing thoughts, a notebook and pen on your bedside table can really help calm you and prepare you for sleep (don't use a tablet or phone to take notes; that blue light will get you every time).

Writing down the thoughts keeping you awake can help empty your head. Sometimes the worry that you'll forget something by morning is enough to keep your mind going in the hopes you'll be able to hold on to it. If you write it down, you're able to let it go and get that much-needed rest.

Medication

Medication to help you sleep can mean specific sleep meds, but can also include antipsychotics, anxiolytics (anti-anxiety medications) and antidepressants. That's a lot of anti-everything, but it really just boils down to anti-awake.

For many of us, sleep medication is looked at as a last resort, and often with good reason. Potential side effects are myriad and can leave you feeling hungover or groggy (or worse) the next day.

Certain medications can be completely ineffective for some people, leaving you with all the adverse effects and no benefits. Unfortunately, there's a lot of trial and error involved in finding the right medication or combination of meds.

Not all sleep aids are inherently bad, though, and some can prove extremely helpful. For example, I spent most of my life struggling to fall asleep, often lying awake for hours every night, until my psychiatrist prescribed an antipsychotic.

The medication itself does not induce sleep; instead, it puts an end to the racing thoughts I experience when I lay down at night, allowing me to fall asleep quickly and easily without my mind working against me and keeping me awake.

There is no magic formula that works for everyone, though — a friend of mine takes a much higher dose of the same medication and still can't sleep. Talk to your healthcare practitioner about your options, including the less conventional ones.

Medication can't do everything on its own, though, so continue to do your part by dimming lights and creating a relaxing evening environment for yourself.

The Bottom Line

Falling asleep can be tricky, but not it's impossible even for the most stubborn sleep problems. Healthy sleep practices like dimming the lights, enjoying a cup of herbal tea, and turning off electronic devices before bedtime may already be enough to help you close your eyes at night.

The right medication can also be helpful where more natural methods fail, but remember to also continue your healthy bedtime routine if you’re taking a sleep aid.