

Rest for the Whole You

PTSD and Sleep: An Educational Guide and Worksheet for Veterans and Service Members

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Let us begin with a simple question: when did you last wake up rested?

If you had to think about it, you are not alone. More than one in three adults in this country do not get enough sleep, and for veterans and service members living with post-traumatic stress, restless nights can feel endless. You lie down tired, your body is heavy, and your mind is still on watch. The answer to poor sleep is rarely found in one pill, one tea, or one tip. It is found in looking at the whole person.

Your Whole-Person Check

Sleep is shaped by every area of your life. Picture six slices of one pie: relational, financial, emotional, nutritional, physical, and spiritual. When one slice is out of order, the others feel it, and your sleep usually tells on it first.



Rate how much each area is weighing on your sleep right now, from 0 (not at all) to 10 (a great deal). Then write one small change you can make. Try a few strategies at a time, watch what changes, and adjust before adding more.

Area	Weight on my sleep (0–10)	One change I can make
Relational		
Financial		
Emotional		
Nutritional		
Physical		
Spiritual		

When the Body Is Still on Duty

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is best understood as a recovery that stalled. After a traumatic event, most people experience symptoms that ease over a few months. With PTSD, something got in the way of that natural recovery. Combat, loss, accidents, and military sexual trauma are a few of the experiences that can lead to it. Symptoms can improve, and that includes sleeping through the night.

PTSD tends to show up in four ways:

- **Reliving:** unwanted memories, nightmares, flashbacks, and strong body reactions to reminders. Memories often arrive right as you are falling asleep or when the house finally gets quiet.
- **Avoiding:** pushing away thoughts, feelings, people, or places, staying busy so you never have to sit still, or numbing out.
- **Changes in thoughts and mood:** blame, guilt, shame, and feeling cut off, as if you are watching life from behind glass.
- **Feeling on edge:** on guard, jumpy, irritable, unable to focus, and unable to fall or stay asleep.

Complex PTSD adds trouble managing emotions, a harsh view of yourself, and strain in relationships.

Imagine how many service members were trained, drilled, and rewarded for staying alert, reacting fast, and expecting the worst. That training served a purpose. The problem is that no one issues the off switch when you come home. A sound, a smell, or a certain hour of the night can set off the alarm before your thinking mind has a chance to weigh in. Avoiding those reminders keeps the alarm ringing, because your body never gets the chance to learn they are

safe. Short sleep feeds irritability, and anger can land on the people you love. Alcohol and drugs can hold nightmares down for a while, and those nightmares can return when you stop. That is expected, and it is treatable.

Understand this as well: painful memories alone are not PTSD, and poor sleep alone is not PTSD. Sleep trouble has many causes, which is exactly why we look at all of them.

Why Sleep Matters

Your brain cycles through stages during the night that restore energy and build memory, and broken sleep shortchanges them. Too little sleep raises the risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, depression, and car crashes.

Once insomnia settles in, cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) is the recommended treatment. Sleeping pills are meant for short-term use with medical guidance, and ongoing use can bring dependence and rebound insomnia. Alcohol may knock you out, but it breaks up your sleep later in the night.

Here is how much sleep most people need, according to the [CDC](#):

Stage of life	Hours most people need
Teens (13–17)	8 to 10 hours
Young adults (18–25)	7 to 9 hours
Middle adults (26–64)	7 to 9 hours
Older adults (65 and up)	7 to 8 hours. Older adults still need their sleep; it simply gets lighter and breaks more easily.

If you drag through the day after plenty of time in bed, get it checked.

The Six Areas

Relational

Trauma can shake your trust in others and in yourself, and trust was never all-or-nothing. Some people respond by pulling away, and isolation makes everything heavier. Tension at home late in the day keeps the body on alert long after the conversation ends, so settle a conflict, or set it down, earlier in the evening rather than carrying it to bed. Healthy power looks like helping others, speaking up, setting limits, and being honest; ultimatums and aggression are the unhealthy kind. Ask the people you live with to support your sleep habits, and practice giving and receiving compliments.

Financial

Money worries have a way of showing up at bedtime, and they never come alone. Rather than letting them run through your mind at midnight, give them a time and place during the day. Well before bed, set aside 15 to 30 minutes to write a worry list: each concern, followed by one next step you can take tomorrow. You can worry about it tomorrow, just not right now. Pay bills in the daytime and outside the bedroom. Your bed was not made to be a home office.

Emotional

When the noise of the day falls away, the mind often replays what it has been carrying. Natural emotions match what happened, and they fade when you allow them to run their course. Manufactured emotions are kept alive by what we keep telling ourselves. Guilt can feel like proof that you did something wrong, but a feeling is not a fact, and hindsight gives you information you did not have in the moment. When you catch yourself saying, “I feel like I’m a bad person,” recognize that you are describing a thought.

Watch for thinking traps: expecting the worst, mind reading, all-or-nothing thinking, “must” and “should,” and treating a feeling as proof. When one shows up, run a thought check:

- What is the evidence against this thought?
- What is the evidence for it, facts only?
- Which thinking trap is it?
- What would I tell a friend who had this thought?
- What is another way to see it?

When your mind gets loud, bring your body back into the room. Breathe slowly into your belly through your nose and out through pursed lips for five to ten minutes, and practice when you are calm, too. Run cool water over your hands. Name the things you can touch. Keep something small in your pocket, like a smooth stone or a little peppermint oil, to remind you where you are.

Avoiding brings quick relief, and it also keeps symptoms alive. List what you avoid, rate each item from 0 to 10, and face them from easiest to hardest. Make room for hard feelings instead of fighting them, and treat your thoughts as passengers on the bus while you keep driving. Thinking shifts before feeling does, so practice on small things first. Food, alcohol, spending, or sex used for comfort will numb feelings for a while, then add problems of their own.

Working through the trauma itself with a mental health professional may be warranted.

Nutritional

Eating fills you up. Nourishing fuels you. A person can eat all day and still be malnourished, and a malnourished body does not rest well.

Hydration comes first. Every cell in your body depends on clean water, and most people do not drink enough of it, especially in the winter. When the body runs dry, it shows up as a shorter temper, a foggier head, a heavier mood, and poorer sleep. Drink water throughout the day and ease off in the evening, so a full bladder does not become your alarm clock.

Watch your timing. Caffeine can take up to eight hours to wear off, so keep it before noon. Alcohol breaks up your sleep later in the night, so leave it out of your evenings. Finish a light dinner about three hours before bed, because a sugary or carb-heavy meal late in the day can spike your blood sugar and wake you. Marjoram is great in soups and makes an excellent dinner for a restful night, without feeling hung over the next day.

Magnesium supports calm nerves, a steady mood, and quality sleep. You will find it in collards, spinach, kale, beans, black pepper, and real cocoa. Magnesium glycinate in the daytime may ease body tension, and magnesium L-threonate 30 to 60 minutes before bed may support the brain and sleep.

Real cocoa is much gentler than coffee or soda, with roughly 10 to 12 milligrams of caffeine in a cup compared to 95 to 165 in drip coffee. Its main stimulant, theobromine, gives a calm body energy rather than a racing mind. Choose raw cacao or natural cocoa that is as unprocessed as you can find, with little to no sugar, and enjoy it 30 to 90 minutes before bed.

For more on nourishing your body, see my book [Dollars and Nutri-Sense: Polymaths, Recipes, and Adventures](#).

Herbs With a Long History of Use

Each herb below is listed with its scientific name and other names to help you find it. Try one herb at a time so you can tell what it is doing for you.

Herb	Also known as	Traditional use and caution
Chamomile	<i>Matricaria chamomilla</i> (German chamomile); <i>Chamaemelum nobile</i> (Roman chamomile)	Calming; eases anxiety and an upset stomach; supports sleep. Caution: rare allergies.
Marjoram	<i>Origanum majorana</i> (sweet marjoram)	Aids sleep. Best in an evening soup.
Vervain	<i>Verbena officinalis</i> (common vervain, verbena); related: blue vervain, <i>Verbena hastata</i>	Calms the nervous system, steadies mood, eases anxiety, and improves sleep.
Tart cherry	<i>Prunus cerasus</i> (sour cherry, Montmorency cherry)	Supports sleep and calms inflammation.

Herb	Also known as	Traditional use and caution
Wild cherry bark	<i>Prunus serotina</i> (black cherry bark)	Used to relax muscles and settle sleep disturbance. Caution: the bark contains compounds that form cyanide. Do not eat the green berries.
Angelica	<i>Angelica archangelica</i> (garden angelica); <i>Angelica sinensis</i> (dong quai)	Used for anxiety, insomnia, and regulating menstruation. Caution: can start menstruation or cause miscarriage; not for pregnancy.
Black cohosh	<i>Actaea racemosa</i> (black snakeroot)	A go-to for menopause, easing night sweats, irritability, and sleep disturbance. Caution: not for pregnancy or nursing; rare liver toxicity.
Burdock root	<i>Arctium lappa</i> (gobo)	Detoxifies and supports blood sugar balance and estrogen, easing night sweats and sleep disturbance. Caution: lowers blood sugar.
Real cocoa	<i>Theobroma cacao</i> (cacao)	Rich in magnesium.

Taking medication? Check with your prescriber or pharmacist before starting herbs. Calming herbs can add to sleep medicine, and burdock can add to diabetes medicine.

If you want to study herbs more deeply, my book [Herbalism: The Foundation for Cellular Wellness](#) is a good place to start.

Detox

Your body needs regular maintenance, much like a car that is driven every day. Water, food, and our surroundings expose us daily to pathogens or microbes such as parasites and harmful bacteria. A full detox should be done with a trained integrated health provider, and you can begin with the basics:

- Drink clean water throughout the day.
- Drink kefir regularly. If you are lactose intolerant, ask your provider about other options.
- Use the herbs discussed above.
- Keep your mineral levels where they need to be, magnesium for example. Magnesium also helps with constipation, and a backed-up body is an unsettled body.

Physical

Follow nature's clock, not the daylight saving clock. In the beginning, the greater light was made to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night (Genesis 1:16). I share this for the principle, not to preach: day and night were set long before the alarm clock was invented. By 10 or 11 at night, nature is already asleep. Sunset is your cue to begin winding down, and sunrise is your cue to wake. If the sun sets at 7, start slowing down at 7, and your body may naturally drift off around 9. If the sun rises at 5:30, that is when your body wants to begin its day, right along with the birds and the roosters.

There is no one-size-fits-all, only types and templates. Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, weekends included, and spend two to four weeks noticing when you feel sharpest and when you drag, without caffeine, nicotine, or alcohol. Daylight saving shifts and short winter days can throw off your rhythm, hormones, mood, and digestion.

Your body makes its own melatonin when darkness falls. Melatonin pills are often overused and can impair sleep when they are not used as indicated. Support your body's own supply by getting outside for at least 30 minutes a day, mornings especially, even when it is cloudy. Dim the lights after sunset and put away screens an hour before bed.

Habits that set up sleep:

- Keep your bed for sleep and intimacy. Go to bed when you are sleepy, and turn the clock away.
- If you are still awake after 20 minutes, get up, do something boring in dim light, like reading an owner's manual or answering a journal prompt in a sentence or two, and return to bed when you are sleepy.
- Give yourself a wind-down hour: stretching, slow breathing, calm music, or prayer. Step away from the TV, electronics, and anything overly stimulating. A warm bath one to two hours before bed helps, because the cool-down afterward brings sleepiness.
- Keep your bedroom cool (65 to 68°F), dark, and quiet. Use an eye mask, earplugs, or white noise if needed, and keep pets and devices out.
- Exercise daily and finish at least two hours before bed. Keep naps to 30 minutes or less, before 3 p.m. Skip nicotine in the evening.
- Keep your plans after a rough night. Avoiding your day because you are tired feeds insomnia.
- Learn how sleep works. Wrong beliefs about sleep feed worry about sleep.

Get an annual checkup with a full blood panel, including magnesium (Mg), iron (Fe), vitamin D, B12, B6, selenium, calcium, and zinc, so you know there are no essential deficiencies.

Then rule out what else your body may be trying to tell you. Poor sleep can come from blood sugar spikes, diabetes, kidney problems, an underactive or overactive thyroid, dehydration, sleep jerks (myoclonus), sleep apnea, restless legs, pain, depression, anxiety, or the timing of a medication. A jerk while dozing off is normal; jerks all through the night are worth checking. See a doctor if, most nights, you take more than 30 minutes to fall asleep, wake often, snore loudly or gasp, or feel crawling in your legs.

Hormones play a part as well. In the days before a period, sleep and mood can shift, and cramps can wake you. When the reproductive system slows down, women can face hot flashes, night sweats, and broken sleep, and men can feel lower testosterone as low energy, mood changes, and poorer sleep. Zinc and magnesium support both women's and men's reproductive health, and black cohosh, angelica, and burdock root are traditional helpers for women.

Spiritual

Trauma can shake your faith and your sense of meaning. Many people ask, “Why me?” That question grows out of the belief that good people are protected from bad things. Doing right lowers your risk, but it never came with a guarantee. Before you wrestle with forgiveness, ask yourself whether there is truly anything to forgive. Let your values guide your choices, and make prayer, meditation, or gratitude part of your evening wind-down. Self-care is not weakness or laziness. Do one thing each day that does you good.

Nightmares

Nightmares often replay the trauma, and they can make going to bed feel like walking back into it. They can also wake a bed partner.

The NHS recommends grounding when you wake from a nightmare. Remind yourself how now is different from then. Move in ways you could not at the time: stand up, stretch, and look around the room. Then say it out loud: “It happened in the past. I'm safe now. This will pass.”

The VA recommends cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I), which reduces how often nightmares come and how upsetting they are. It is recommended over medication, usually takes about six sessions, and is available in person, by video, online, and through the CBT-I Coach app. You can learn more from the [VA National Center for PTSD](#).

And if a new nightmare shows up after you have made progress, it does not mean you are back at the beginning.

Reduce Your Time in Bed

Lying awake in bed teaches your body to be awake in bed. Matching your time in bed to the sleep you actually get builds sleep pressure, and your sleep comes back deeper. You can do this on your own, and a therapist can add support and expertise if you want it.

Step	What to do
1. Find your number	Keep the sleep journal below for one week. Your average hours actually asleep become your time in bed, never less than 5.5 hours.
2. Anchor your wake time	Set your wake time at sunrise and keep it every day. Count backward to find your bedtime. As your sleep strengthens, your bedtime moves earlier, closer to nature's clock.
3. Check each week	Divide hours asleep by hours in bed and multiply by 100. At 85 percent or more, add 15 to 30 minutes. Under 80 percent, cut 15 to 30 minutes. Between 80 and 84 percent, hold steady.
4. Know what to expect	You will feel sleepier for the first week or two. Skip naps and avoid dozing before bedtime. If you become drowsy behind the wheel, pull over in a safe, secure place, lock your doors, and take a 15 to 20 minute nap.

Your Sleep Journal

Write down what stressed you during the day, especially on the nights your sleep breaks up. Patterns will show themselves.

Day	Lights out	Up	Hours asleep	Hours in bed	Caffeine, alcohol, naps	What stressed me today	Rested (1-5)
Mon							
Tue							
Wed							
Thu							
Fri							
Sat							
Sun							

This week: asleep _____ ÷ in bed _____ × 100 = _____% Next week: bed _____ wake _____

For informational and educational purposes only. This is not medical advice. Seek the support of a professional with expertise in your specific concern.

Moving Forward

Do not try to change everything at once. Try a few strategies at a time, watch what changes, and adjust before you add more. When you pile everything on at once, you never learn what actually helped.

Over a few weeks, your pie chart and journal will begin to show you patterns. You may notice that your restless nights follow difficult conversations, or that your best nights come after days you spent outside. Every small change you keep is progress worth counting. Relationship, money, and spiritual stress are all things you can bring to a mental health professional.

Knowledge that is not applied is useless information. You can keep reading about sleep, or you can start tonight.

If you are in crisis or thinking of harming yourself, contact the [Veterans Crisis Line](#): dial 988 then press 1, or text 838255. In an emergency, call 911.