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[Home](#) > Stimulus Control

Stimulus Control

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Stimulus control is a frequently used technique for the treatment of sleep disorders. Its core principle is associating bedtime and sleep with a specific stimulus.

In other words, this technique helps you condition, or prepare yourself mentally, for sleep. According to CBT, sleep problems are a conditioned response from your body to the stimuli (internal and external) that surround you. Because your organism is in a state of arousal caused by so many stimuli -like light, environment, cyclical thoughts and worries- it's very difficult to fall and stay asleep.

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What Is a Conditioned Response?

Basically, the term “conditioned response” refers to a learned reaction, both emotional and physical, to a stimulus that was previously perceived as neutral. All this means, is that over the course of time, as we live and gain experience, we learn to react to certain things.

For instance, someone who has been in a car crash may develop a fear or driving. This is also the case for many other phobias, as well as plenty of other reactions, such as drowsiness.

Sleep, Associated with Negativity

Usually, when someone has difficulty with sleep and suffers from sleep deprivation symptoms, it is entirely normal for them to associate bedtime with negative feelings and behaviors. People with sleep-related problem tend to feel anxious or irritated at night, and so they often procrastinate, by suddenly remembering that they still have something urgent to do.

In other words, some people who struggle with sleep disorders, tend to avoid bedtime, because it often triggers negative, uncomfortable experiences. Therefore, the primary objective of stimulus control is to get rid of such associations and to help you associate sleep with positivity.

Salivating Dogs and Sleepy Humans

You might have heard about the famous experiments, commonly known as Pavlov's dogs. The Russian experimental psychologist, is the forefather of what is now known as classical conditioning, and is often integrated into CBT, to help people cope with avoidance behaviors. What Pavlov did was ring a bell, and then immediately provide his dogs with food.

With repetition, the dogs learned to associate the sound of the bell with food. The result was that the dogs started salivating, upon hearing the bell. Therefore, the sound, which used to be a neutral stimulus, turned into a conditioned stimulus. Even though we are not dogs, the same principle can be applied to all mammals, including humans.

Therefore, it is also advantageous to sleep disorders. If you have learned to associate bedtime with negative experiences, then you would gradually condition yourself to avoid said bedtime, even if this is a subconscious process.

Instead, you could associate going to bed with sleepiness and the positive experience of getting a good rest.

Application of the Technique

A commonly applied and successful technique, used to deal with sleep disorders, and especially insomnia, is called sleep restriction. At first, it may sound counterproductive to restrict your sleep, when what you need is more of it, but the technique is based on both theory and years of successful practice, so you should certainly give it a try.

Only Go to Bed When Sleepy

You might need less sleep, compared to the time you spend in bed.

For instance, if a person needs 7 hours of sleep to feel refreshed, spending 8 hours in bed can only lead to frustration. This happens because of anxious thoughts, such as "Why can't I fall asleep again?", "How am I going to get through tomorrow, if I can't fall asleep now?", etc. In order to avoid associating your bed with all of this negativity, restrain yourself from going to bed, unless you actually feel sleepy.

Going to bed at one or two in the morning, as part of a sleep guide, may feel awkward at first, but it guarantees that you won't spend as much time tossing and turning. Gradually, as your start to sleep better, you can also start going to bed earlier, but the time for that is yet to come.

Can't Sleep? Get Up!

If you've gone to bed at least somewhat sleepy, and you are still wide awake after about 20 minutes, get up and go to another room. Meditate, read a book, or wind down in another way, until you start to feel sleepy again. It is essential not to watch TV, play video games, talk to people, or arouse yourself in any other way – the objective here is to feel drowsy, which is the polar opposite of excitement.

Remember that what you are trying to achieve is associating your bed with calm, deep sleep. Therefore, it would be counterproductive to stay in your bedroom, when feeling anxious and restless. Only go back to bed when you feel sleepy again.

Repeat

Repeat step 2 as many times as you need to. If you go out of bed, relax and feel sleepy again, only to go back to bed and become wide awake, the best solution is to wait another 20 minutes and get up again.

Fair warning: this technique can result in a hard couple of days, but it will make your body crave some sleep the following nights. People who commit and keep at it report great results.

Get Up at the Same Time, No Matter What

No matter how much you've slept, always wake up at the same time. Set an alarm for a certain hour in the morning, and make sure you get up at that time consistently, no matter how little sleep you might have gotten, even during weekends. Undoubtedly, this isn't easy to do, but make sure you keep your eyes on the prize. Reconditioning yourself to associate sleep with positive experiences, will only work to your benefit. Remember that this is a temporary "sacrifice" that'll get you long-lasting results.

Don't Misuse Your Bed

Use the bed only for sleep and sexual activity, as mentioned in "Habits to Help Yourself". Also, since this is all about controlling stimuli, figure out what else you can change about your usual sleep settings. Once you have decided on the changes, make sure you do your absolute best to stay consistent, or you may not reach the desired results.

Avoid Naps

As you've seen, this technique can people with insomnia, so avoiding daytime naps is strongly recommended. Don't try to compensate lost sleep by taking naps, or you risk not feeling sleepy at night and intensifying the severity of your sleep disorder.

Use this technique for a month. It may take some time for your body to readjust to its natural circadian rhythm, but once you have succeeded, you will reap the rewards of a rejuvenating sleep, along with a sense of accomplishment.