



TIPS FOR GETTING BETTER SLEEP IN INSECURE AND HIGH-STRESS ENVIRONMENTS

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KONTERRA
RESILIENCE

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Getting enough good quality sleep can be extremely challenging when you are very stressed or living in an insecure and high-threat environment like a conflict zone. And in a vicious cycle, not getting enough good-quality sleep can cause more stress and strain.

This resource explores tips for improving your sleep in insecure environments, including:

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WHY IS IT DIFFICULT TO SLEEP IN INSECURE AND HIGH-THREAT ENVIRONMENTS?

People frequently struggle to sleep well in high-stress or high-threat environments, such as war zones. This happens for a variety of reasons, including:

1. **Hypervigilance:** In dangerous settings, your brain and body prioritize survival over rest, and your brain remains on high alert to detect threats. This state of constant readiness can prevent the deep relaxation necessary for sleep.
2. **Anxiety and fear:** Persistent worry about personal safety or the safety of loved ones can lead to general anxiety, racing thoughts, and difficulty falling or staying asleep. If you then start to feel anxious about not getting enough sleep, this extra anxiety only exacerbates this dynamic.
3. **Disrupted routines:** Inconsistent schedules, frequent relocations, and irregular routines are common in high-stress environments. This inconsistency can disrupt the body's internal clock and regular sleep patterns.
4. **Environmental factors:** Noise, light, and other environmental disturbances (such as explosions or alarms) can interrupt sleep or make it difficult to fall asleep in the first place.
5. **Physical discomfort:** Limited access to comfortable sleeping arrangements and basic necessities can result in physical discomfort, further hindering sleep.
6. **Dreams and nightmares:** Constant anxiety and experiencing or witnessing traumatic events can lead to trauma-related nightmares and insomnia.

Experiencing disrupted sleep in insecure or high-threat environments is normal. In fact, it is a sign that your brain and body are working together to help you survive. By keeping you awake and alert, your nervous system is preparing you to respond quickly to threats.

This is an excellent and effective strategy if the threats are immediate short-lived. But what about when they're not? What happens when you must live and function in an environment that constantly feels dangerous or insecure?



This is when sleep disruptions can stop helping you cope with threats and start *causing* additional stress and strain. Getting to sleep and staying asleep can become extremely challenging. And in a vicious cycle, the results of poor sleep can cause more stress and anxiety and lead to irritability, difficulty concentrating and remembering things, and poor judgement.

Sleep is a critical foundation for wellbeing and resilience, so what can help you get more and better-quality sleep when the world around you feels insecure or dangerous?

GENERAL TIPS FOR IMPROVING SLEEP IN HIGH-THREAT ENVIRONMENTS

If you're living in an insecure environment you may not be able to control all the factors interfering with your sleep or follow all of these suggestions. For example, if you need to sleep in shifts you may not be able to adopt a consistent sleep schedule. However, you do not have to act on all of these suggestions to improve your sleep. Many people find that even small changes can make a big difference. Start by trying some of these strategies for a week and see if you notice any improvements.

1. Sleep in shifts with other adults

In an insecure environment your brain is wired to stay on high alert to help you detect and respond to threats. This type of hypervigilance can make it extremely difficult to wind down and fall asleep, and can mean you wake easily even after you get to sleep. If you are living with other adults, it may help to sleep in shifts. When you know that another trusted adult is awake and "on watch" it can make it much easier for you to relax and fall asleep.

2. Acknowledge and address your anxiety about not getting enough sleep

When you're not sleeping well, this can trigger additional unhelpful frustration and anxiety that simply causes further activation. It may help to acknowledge and address this dynamic directly.

Try telling yourself something like the following: *"Dear Brain and Body, thank you for doing such a good job of trying to protect me and keep me safe. We are safe right now, and what would really help me most now is rest. Please take a break now so you can be well-prepared to deal with whatever happens tomorrow."* Try saying this to yourself out loud, in a calm and kind tone. Talk to yourself the way you would talk to a frightened five-year-old. You will probably feel silly doing this. Do it anyway and see if it helps.

3. Create a sleep-friendly space (aim for dark, quiet, and cool)

Even in challenging conditions, try to make your sleeping area as comfortable as possible. Sleep quality improves when noise, light, and temperature are lower, so use earplugs and eye masks to block out noise and light if necessary.

4. Adopt a regular sleep schedule

When possible, go to bed and get up at the same time every day. Being consistent reinforces your body's sleep-wake cycle.

5. Get outside in the morning

Exposure to natural sunlight or bright light during the day improves both daytime energy and nighttime sleep quality. If it is safe, spend some time outside during the day.

Research suggests it is especially helpful to spend at least 10 minutes outside early in the day. This exposure to early-daylight helps set your circadian rhythm and make it easier to fall asleep that night.¹

6. Move your body during the day

Regular physical activity can reduce stress and improve sleep quality. Research suggests that 30 minutes of moderate exercise per day (such as walking) can alleviate anxiety and help you sleep better at night. It's even better if you can do this outside, exposed to natural daylight. However, some people find it harder to sleep if they exercise within two hours of attempting to go to sleep, so avoid vigorous exercise close to bedtime.

7. Do these things close to bedtime to help yourself calm down and relax

As you approach bedtime, create some space for your mind to start to relax at least an hour before you want to go to sleep. Here are some things that can help create that space and cue your nervous system that you are preparing to rest:

¹ Learn more about how exposure to daylight helps sleep here: <https://www.inc-aus.com/justin-bariso/andrew-huberman-how-to-focus-have-more-energy.html>

- **Stop absorbing distressing news:** Turn off the television or radio. Do not look at news websites on your phone. Stop scanning for situation updates or taking in news stories that will heighten your anxiety and distress.
- **Limit screens and dim lights:** Put your phone down and stay away from the computer. Blue light (which phones and computers emit in large amounts) interferes with your natural circadian rhythm. Dim the lights or use lamps in the evening. Dimming the lights helps cue your body that sleep time is approaching.
- **Stop working on mentally demanding tasks:** Create a buffer between the end of work and bedtime that allows your thoughts to slow and your brain to wind down.
- **Manage worries or feelings of pressure:** Acknowledge and try to “park” or resolve any worries or concerns before bedtime. Making lists can help with this—try creating to-do lists for the next day, or list your top three worries and concerns each night before bed. If you feel overwhelmed, remind yourself of the necessity of rest even when work or other demands feel urgent.
- **Create a relaxing bedtime transition ritual:** Try to approach bedtime in the same way every night. Do something that cues your body and mind that you are transitioning to rest time (such as drinking a cup of chamomile tea or warm water, or listening to soothing music). This routine can help gradually cue your body that bedtime has come. Making this transition gradual rather than abrupt will make it easier to fall asleep.

8. Avoid doing these things

The list above discusses some things you *can* do to help yourself relax and prepare for sleep. Here are some things you should *avoid* doing:

- **Don't consume caffeine or nicotine too close to bedtime:** Nicotine and caffeine can make it difficult to fall asleep. If you don't want to cut them out altogether, avoid them within eight hours of bedtime.
- **Don't eat a big meal too close to bedtime:** Don't go to bed either hungry or very full. In particular, avoid heavy or large meals within a couple of hours of bedtime.
- **Avoid alcohol altogether:** Alcohol may help you fall asleep more quickly, but it tends to disrupt and reduce sleep quality later in the night in ways that are likely to leave you tired and distractible the next day. The more alcohol you drink, the more pronounced this effect will be.
- **Limit or avoid naps:** Limit daytime naps to 45 minutes or less, or don't nap at all.²

² Limiting of avoiding naps is good advice when people have some reasonable expectation of safe and uninterrupted nights in which to sleep. In war zones or other high-threat environments, however, any sleep is often better than none. If sleep is regularly interrupted by conflict activity, you may be better served by sleeping when you can rather than avoiding naps.

TIPS FOR FALLING ASLEEP (OR GETTING BACK TO SLEEP)

When you are really struggling to get to sleep,³ or you wake up in the middle of the night, it's often tempting to check email, read news, or scroll through social media. Don't do it! Try one of these suggestions instead.

1. Listen to “Weightless” by Marconi Union

Research suggests that listening to calming music can help you fall asleep. The song “Weightless” (by Marconi Union) was created in collaboration with sound therapists. The carefully arranged harmonies, rhythms, and bass lines help slow a listener's heart rate, reduce blood pressure, and lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Listening to it can help reduce anxiety and promote a sense of calm. Find “Weightless” (and other sleep-related playlists) online.⁴

2. Try the military sleep method

The military sleep method is a technique designed to help people fall asleep quickly. It was reportedly developed to help soldiers in the US Military during World War II get rest in various conditions, even in combat zones. It essentially promotes sleep using proven relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, biofeedback, and visualization. Focusing on your body and distracting yourself from thinking about other things is an effective way to promote sleep.

Here is a step-by-step guide to the method:

1. **Relax your face:** Close your eyes and relax all the muscles in your face, including your tongue, jaw, and the muscles around your eyes. Let your face go completely slack.
2. **Drop your shoulders:** Allow your shoulders to drop as low as possible. Then, relax your upper and lower arms, one side at a time.

³ Contact your doctor if you often have trouble sleeping. If there are any underlying causes for sleep problems, it is important to identify and treat them. If you have access to a doctor, discuss any sleep challenges with them. Speaking with a mental health professional may also help.

⁴ Find a 10-hour version of “Weightless” here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYnA9wWFHLI&t=9s>

3. **Relax your chest:** Breathe out and relax your chest. Let the tension release as you exhale.
4. **Relax your legs:** Start with your thighs and let them go completely limp. Then, relax your calves, ankles, and feet.
5. **Clear your mind:** Spend 10 seconds clearing your mind before thinking of one of the following mental images:
 - a. Imagine you're lying in a canoe on a calm lake with nothing but a clear blue sky above you.
 - b. Picture yourself lying in a black velvet hammock in a pitch-black room.
 - c. Alternatively, you can repeat the words "don't think" over and over to help clear your mind.

The entire process should take about 120 seconds. Many who practice it consistently for six weeks claim that it helps them fall asleep in as little as two minutes.⁵

3. Do a guided relaxation process or visualization

It can sometimes be easier to relax when we're focusing on following instructions. Try one of the guided processes in the resources section at the end of this document.

4. Meditate or pray

Meditating, praying, or listening to guided meditations can help you feel calmer and more relaxed. Apps such as CALM, Abide (guided mindfulness for Christians), and Mindful Muslim or Sabr (guided meditation apps for Muslims) can help.

5. Play Sudoku

Sudoku is a numbers puzzle, and focusing on numbers can be a good way to quiet your thoughts and provide a pleasing sense of control. Print off some puzzles or buy a Sudoku book so you're not doing this on your phone.

6. Listen to a sleep story podcast

Sleep story podcasts such as *Sleep with Me* will tell you a lulling, droning, boring bedtime story to distract your racing mind and help you drift off.

⁵ Read more about the military sleep method here: <https://www.verywellmind.com/military-sleep-method-7111161>

SUMMARY HANDOUT

Tips for improving sleep in insecure and high-threat environments

1. Sleep in shifts with other adults
2. Acknowledge and address your anxiety about not getting enough sleep
3. Create a sleep-friendly space (aim for dark, quiet, and cool)
4. Adopt a regular sleep schedule (go to bed and get up at about the same time every day)
5. Spend at least 10 minutes outside in daylight in the morning
6. Get 30 minutes or more of moderate exercise during the day
7. At least an hour before bed, do these things to help yourself relax:
 - a. Turn off news and situation updates
 - b. Stop working on mentally demanding tasks
 - c. Stay away from screens
 - d. Dim the lights
 - e. Do things that help you manage worries, anxiety, and feelings of pressure
 - f. Create a relaxing bedtime transition ritual
8. Don't do the following:
 - a. In safer environments, limit or avoid naps during the day (In high-threat environments with frequent nighttime interruptions, it can be better to "sleep when you can.")
 - b. Don't consume caffeine or nicotine within 8 hours of bedtime
 - c. Don't drink alcohol
 - d. Don't eat a big meal just before bedtime

Tips for falling asleep (or getting back to sleep)

1. Listen to "Weightless" by Marconi Union (or other sleep-inducing soundtracks)
2. Try the Military Sleep Method (that combines deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, biofeedback, and visualization)
3. Listen to a guided visualization or relaxation soundtrack
4. Meditate or pray
5. Play Sudoku
6. Listen to a sleep story

WHERE TO LEARN MORE

If you'd like to learn more about sleep, start by exploring the following:

Online resources

The Huberman Lab [Sleep Hygiene resource section](#) (especially [The toolkit for sleep](#)).

The Huberman Lab podcast episodes:

- [Master Your Sleep & Be More Alert When Awake](#)
- [The Science and Practice of Perfecting Your Sleep \(with Dr. Matt Walker\)](#)

Apps

InsightTimer: An app for sleep, anxiety, and stress (free version available)

The CALM App: A research supported app for sleep, meditation, and relaxation

The Reveri App: A research supported self-hypnosis app.

Headspace: Sleep meditations, sleep music, and more

Sleepiest: Bedtime stories, sleep sounds, and meditations

Spotify: Search up "sleep" or guided meditations sleep" to find multiple resources

Guided visualizations or relaxation exercises online

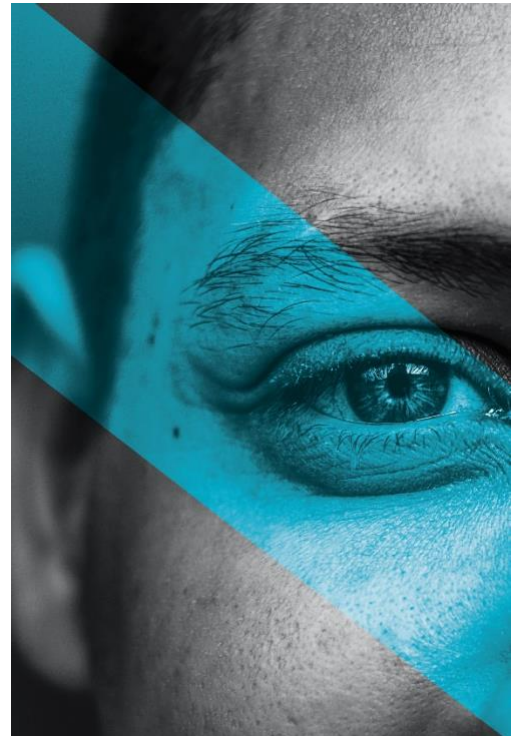
- [Free Deep Sleep Meditation by InsightTimer](#)
- [Sleep meditations for children and other videos by New Horizon](#)
- [Meditation for Endless Thoughts](#) and other [Soul Sistas Sleep Meditations](#) on Apple Podcasts
- [Hypnosis for Deep Sleep](#) and other videos by [Michael Sealey](#)
- [Guided Breathing Meditation for Sleep & Deep Relaxation](#) and other videos by [The Honest Guys](#)
- [Peaceful Dreamy Sleep Guided Meditation](#) or other videos by [Relax for a while](#)
- This [10-minute Non-Sleep Deep Rest Protocol](#) by Dr Andrew Huberman

ABOUT KONTERRA

At KonTerra, we specialize in supporting clients that operate in complex and high-stress environments where organizations and their staff face difficult challenges.

When staff work in high-pressure roles or locations with elevated exposure to threat, suffering, graphic content, or conflict, they are at risk of experiencing overload, attrition, and stress reactions such as burnout. The KonTerra Group works directly with individuals, leaders, and teams to equip them with tools to better understand and manage the challenges they face.

Providing support in a meaningful way is only possible with the right people. The experience and sensitivity of our counselors, trainers, and coaches allows us to work with clients in a way that is unique. Our specialists all share two attributes which equip them to deliver excellent support: all are veteran mental health clinicians (master's or doctoral-level); and experienced supporting staff in high-stress and high-stakes environments and roles.



Services delivered by our uniquely positioned professionals include:

- Individual Counseling and Coaching
- Virtual and Onsite Training and Educational Events
- Staff Wellbeing Assessments
- Manager Support and Consultations for Organizations and Leaders
- Critical Incident Response Services

If you are interested in learning more about any of the above services, please contact your KonTerra Account Manager or email: info@konterragroup.net.