

how to



cope with
sleep problems

Introduction

This booklet is for anyone experiencing sleep problems in relation to their mental health, and for their friends, family and carers. It explains what sleep problems are, describes the relationship between sleep and mental health and gives suggestions about what you can do to try to improve your sleep.

Note: This booklet does not cover solutions to physical sleep problems, such as sleep apnoea or snoring.

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What are sleep problems?

Everyone has problems sleeping at times. We all have nights where we find it hard to fall asleep, find ourselves waking up in the night or have dreams that disturb our sleep. This is perfectly normal. Often, these problems will resolve themselves after a short period of time.

However, if you have sleep problems that last weeks, months or years, this can start to have an impact on your day-to-day life. If you continue to sleep badly, this can affect your energy levels, moods and how much you are able to concentrate. It can also have an impact on your relationships and social life. It may also affect your ability to carry out usual day-to-day tasks, such as studying, going to work and carrying out daily chores.

If poor sleep is having a significant impact on your daily life, you will generally be considered to have a sleep problem. The most common sleep problems are listed below.

Insomnia

If you suffer from insomnia, this could mean that you have difficulty in falling asleep or getting back to sleep if you wake up in the night. It may mean that you find yourself waking up very early in the morning. You may also find that sleeping does not refresh you, and that you feel constantly tired. For example, you may experience disturbed or light sleep, or wake up and fall back to sleep several times in a night.

Oversleeping

Oversleeping is sleeping more than your body needs. While this may have less of an impact on your daily life than insomnia, some studies have linked chronic oversleeping with physical problems such as heart disease and diabetes.

Nightmares and night terrors

Nightmares are intense, frightening dreams that cause you to wake up, sometimes leaving you feeling very scared. They are often related to events or experiences in your life.

Night terrors are like nightmares, but they occur during deep sleep. Night terrors cause a deep sense of fear, an increase in your heart rate and sweating. You may also scream, shout or cry in your sleep. Often, people find it difficult to wake up from a night terror and afterwards have little or no memory of what has happened.

Nightmares and night terrors can affect the quality of your sleep, and cause general anxiety about falling asleep that may lead to insomnia.

Sleep paralysis

Sleep paralysis is when you wake up in the night and cannot move or speak because there are still sleep hormones in your muscles. It usually lasts between a couple of seconds and a few minutes. Although it can't harm you, sleep paralysis can be extremely scary, and may lead to anxiety about falling back to sleep.

Sleep walking

Sleep walking involves getting up in the night and walking or moving around. Sometimes you may carry out activities, such as tidying or washing up. Sleep walking is not usually a problem, unless you injure yourself by banging into things or tripping over. However, it can disrupt your sleep and affect how rested you feel the next day.

What causes sleep problems?

There are many reasons you may experience sleep problems. Common causes of sleep problems are:

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- **a poor sleep routine** – going to bed too early or too late, or not relaxing properly before bed
- **a poor sleep environment** – sleeping somewhere uncomfortable, or with too much light or noise
- **changes to sleep patterns** – working night shifts or sleeping in a new place can be a problem if your body doesn't adjust
- **unhelpful psychological associations** – developing anxieties or phobias about going to sleep after a period of poor sleep, or associating the bedroom with being active
- **physical illness** – being uncomfortable or in pain, having a physical sleep condition such as snoring or sleep apnoea (problems breathing while sleeping), or having a hormone or neurological disorder such as an overactive thyroid or Parkinson's disease
- **alcohol, street drugs and stimulants** – (including caffeine and nicotine)
- **medication** – having trouble sleeping as a side effect of certain medication, such as epilepsy and asthma drugs, or antidepressants
- **stress, worry and anxiety** – feeling nervous about a specific issue, such as work, money, family or relationships; or a specific event, such as an interview or appointment
- **trauma** – finding it hard to sleep after experiencing a traumatic event, such as an accident or a bereavement; experiencing long-term sleep problems as a result of long-term trauma or abuse, particularly if the trauma happened during childhood
- **mental health problems** (see below).

What is the relationship between sleep and mental health?

There is a close relationship between sleep and mental health. Many people who experience mental health problems also experience sleep problems.

Mental health problems that are often related to sleep problems include:

- mood disorders, such as depression and bipolar disorder
- anxiety disorders, such as anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and social anxiety
- psychotic disorders, such as schizophrenia.

How mental health problems can affect sleep

There are number of different ways that a mental health problem can have an impact on your sleep. For example:

- **Stress and anxiety** can cause you to have thoughts racing through your mind, making it difficult for you to sleep. If you are stressed or anxious you are also more likely to experience disturbed sleep, perhaps experiencing nightmares, sleep paralysis and sleep walking. If you have sleep problems over a long period of time, you may also develop anxiety or phobias about going to sleep which can then cause insomnia or make existing insomnia worse.
- **Depression** can mean that you find it very difficult to face your day-to-day responsibilities, and you may find yourself sleeping more in order to avoid them. This can lead to oversleeping – either sleeping late in the morning or a lot during the day. Oversleeping can cause fatigue and lethargy, and make it difficult to sleep well at night. If you experience difficult or troubling thoughts as part of depression, this can also cause insomnia. You may find it harder to fall asleep, or you may wake early and be unable to get back to sleep.

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- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** often causes nightmares and night terrors, forcing you to relive the situation that caused you trauma. This can cause disturbed sleep, and can lead you to feel anxious about falling asleep, which may then lead to insomnia.
- **Paranoia and psychosis** can be extremely frightening, and may make it difficult for you to sleep. You may worry that something is going to happen to you or your family if you go to sleep – for example, that someone is going to break into your house or hurt a member of your family. You may hear voices or see things that you find frightening. Paranoia and psychosis can also lead to racing or disturbing thoughts, which can make it hard to relax and prevent you from falling asleep.
- **Mania** often causes feelings of energy and elation. This may mean that you do not feel tired or do not want to sleep. Racing thoughts caused by mania can make it hard to fall asleep and may cause insomnia.
- **Psychiatric medications** can cause sleep problems. Certain medications, such as antidepressants, can cause side effects that include insomnia, disturbed sleep or oversleeping. You may also have sleep problems after you have stopped taking psychiatric drugs. Some drugs may make physical causes of sleep problems worse – for example, benzodiazepines (a type of sleeping pill) can make existing sleep apnoea worse.

How sleep problems can affect mental health

Over a long period of time, a severe sleep problem could lead to a mental health problem, or may make an existing mental health problem worse. Sleep problems can lead to any of the following:

- **Struggling to deal with everyday life** – tiredness reduces your ability to deal with difficult situations as well as the challenges of day-to-day life. This may lower your self-esteem, make it harder to cope and cause your mental health to deteriorate.

- **Feeling of loneliness** – fatigue can cause you to stop carrying out your usual social activities, leading you to become socially isolated. Social isolation can then lead to mental health problems such as depression or anxiety.
- **Low mood** – if you don't get enough sleep, or if your sleep is disturbed, this can affect your mood, energy levels and ability to cope with daily tasks. If this occurs over a long period of time, it can start to have an effect on your mental health, and lead to mental health problems, such as depression or anxiety.
- **Negative thoughts** – if you are tired, this can affect your ability to rationalise anxieties and irrational thoughts, which can feed into negative thinking patterns associated with mental health problems.
- **Psychotic episodes** – if you have a psychotic disorder, or bipolar disorder, a lack of sleep can trigger mania, psychosis and paranoia, or make existing symptoms worse.

What can I do to help myself?

The causes for sleep problems often depend on the individual, and will vary according to your personal circumstances. This means that different techniques work for different people. You may need to try several different things in order to find what works for you. Here are some suggestions that might help you improve your sleep yourself.

Establish a routine

Try to establish a regular sleeping pattern by going to bed and waking up at roughly the same time every day. This will mean that your body starts to associate times of the day with sleeping. You may need to do this for several weeks in order to establish a regular pattern.

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Go to bed only when you feel tired enough to sleep. If you usually take a long time to get to sleep, delay getting into bed until the point when you would normally fall asleep. Then get up at your usual time. This may mean you will spend less time actually in bed, but more of the time in bed asleep. Hopefully your sleep pattern will improve.

If you are in a different time zone after a flight, do what you can to adjust to the new time. However tired you feel, go to bed close to the local bedtime, then get up reasonably early the next morning. Your body should then adjust to the new pattern quickly.

Make sure where you sleep is comfortable

Before you go to bed, make sure that where you sleep is comfortable, and that the temperature, light and noises levels are right for you. People have different ideas of what is comfortable, so you may need to experiment to work out what works best for you. On the whole, dark, quiet and cool environments generally make it easier to sleep.

If there is anything particular that is disturbing your sleep in the night, for example if you have a partner that snores, or a loud clock that keeps you awake, try to find a solution. You may want to sleep in a different room from your partner for a few nights or use earplugs to block out any noise. Using blackout blinds or curtains may be helpful if light is stopping you from sleeping.

Relax before you go to bed

It's important to relax and switch off from daily worries before you try to go to sleep. Stop any stimulating activities, such as working or doing exercise, and avoid looking at screens, like your phone, a computer, the TV or a tablet, an hour before you go to bed. (See also 'Regulate light exposure' on p.13.)

It may also help to do something calming before you go to bed, such as listening to relaxing music, doing something creative or having a bath.

(See Mind's leaflet *Mind tips for better mental health: relaxation* for more information.)

If you still struggle to go to sleep, you may find you need a more structured relaxation routine. There are several things you can try:

- **Breathing exercises** – in a comfortable position, breathe in deeply, then breathe out slowly – making your out-breath longer than your in-breath. Repeat until you feel relaxed.
- **Muscle relaxation** – consciously tense and relax your muscles, one after the other, starting with your toes and working up your body until you reach the top of your head.
- **Visualisation** – picture a scene or landscape that has pleasant memories for you.
- **Meditation** – you can learn meditation techniques at a class or by using self-help materials. Many people also find learning mindfulness techniques helpful. (See Be Mindful in 'Useful contacts' on p.22 for more information and details of classes in your area.)

Avoid doing stimulating activities in the bedroom

If you carry out stimulating activities in your bedroom, you may start to associate your bedroom with being active. This could mean you find it hard to relax and go to sleep. Avoid doing stressful activities in your bedroom, such as studying, working or doing exercise. Even doing supposedly relaxing activities like watching TV or using a laptop in bed can stimulate your mind and make it hard to fall asleep.

Don't force yourself to sleep if you can't

Don't try to force sleep – this will only make you feel more anxious. If you're finding it difficult to sleep, get up, go to another room and try to relax there. Do something soothing, such as listening to music, until you're

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tired enough to go back to bed. If you are awake for long periods, repeat this process as many times as you need to.

If you're lying in bed and are unable to sleep, try keeping your eyes open. As they start to close, tell yourself to resist. Often the more you try to stay awake, the sleepier you become.

If you can't fall asleep because of unwanted thoughts, you may find it useful to use a distraction technique. For example, you may find that visualising a pleasant place or occasion, or repeatedly saying a few words or a phrase, can help. Doing breathing exercises or focusing on your breathing can also distract you from unwanted thoughts that are keeping you awake.

If you wake up during the night, go through your relaxation routine again before trying to go back to sleep.

Catch up on missed sleep

If you have missed out on a lot of sleep, or you are not sleeping at all, you may find you need to catch up. For example, you may want to sleep an hour or two more at weekends, or have short naps during the day.

However, it's important to try not to sleep too much during the day as this may change your sleep routine and affect how well you sleep at night. Try to nap only when it's essential – for example, if you are very sleep deprived and it would be impossible or dangerous to carry on with your usual daily tasks. Try not to sleep for too long, and nap at a regular time each day. Generally, 30–40 minutes in the early afternoon works well for most people.

Diet and physical activity

What you eat and drink can affect how well you sleep. Be careful about using stimulants like alcohol, caffeine and nicotine, particularly in the evening. Large meals late in the evening should also be avoided. It's also

a good idea to avoid drinking too much liquid before you go to bed, so you don't need to get up to use the toilet in the night.

Doing regular physical activity can also help you sleep, as it makes you more physically tired – particularly if you exercise outdoors. This doesn't have to be strenuous exercise. Any activity, for example housework, gardening or going for a walk, can help. However, avoid doing exercise late in the evening as the brain chemicals it releases give you energy, which can affect your ability to sleep. (See Mind's leaflet *Mind tips for better mental health: physical activity* for more information.)

Regulate light exposure

Light has an important impact on how well you sleep. Generally, you will sleep better at night if you have spent time in natural daylight during the day. If you spend most of the day inside, try and build in short breaks where you can go outside.

If you can't go outside, you may find it helpful to use a light box to regulate your light exposure during the day. Light boxes are extremely bright lights – they have at least 10 times the intensity of household lights. They are designed to replicate natural daylight. You can find out more about light boxes, including advice on how to use them, in Mind's booklet *Understanding SAD*.

Avoid bright lights at night, as these can disturb your sleep. Turn off backlit electronic devices such as smartphones, tablets or laptops, and dim the lights in the room where you are going to sleep. If you wake up in the night and need to use the toilet, avoid switching on a main light as you may find it harder to fall asleep again afterwards.

Keep a sleep diary

If you have experienced sleep problems for a long time, you might find it difficult to work out what is affecting your sleep. In this case, you may find it useful to keep a sleep diary. A sleep diary involves recording

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information about your sleep habits. This can help you identify the factors that are affecting your sleep. It may also be helpful for any professionals you are working with.

A sleep diary could include information about:

- what time you go to bed and what time you get up
- total hours of sleep
- overall quality of sleep, ranked 1–5
- how many times you wake up in the night, how long you are awake and what you do while you are awake
- whether you have nightmares, night terrors or sleep paralysis, or have sleepwalked during the night
- whether you sleep during the day and for how long
- any medication you are taking, including dose and what time you take it
- the amount of caffeine, alcohol or nicotine you have
- the amount of physical activity you do
- what you eat and drink
- your general feelings and moods, including any anxious and repetitive thoughts.

You could create your own sleep diary, or you may want to use a template. There are many sleep diary templates available online, for example on the NHS Choices Live Well website (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22). You may need to try a few before finding one that suits you.

Try to resolve stresses and worries

Try to identify anything in your life that is causing you stress or worry that might be affecting your sleep. For example, you may be worried about relationship problems or your financial situation. Or, you may be sleeping badly because you have a stressful job or take on too many responsibilities.

Once you have identified what is causing your sleep problem, there may be practical measures you can take to address the problem, such as

visiting a financial advisor or talking to your employer about reducing your workload.

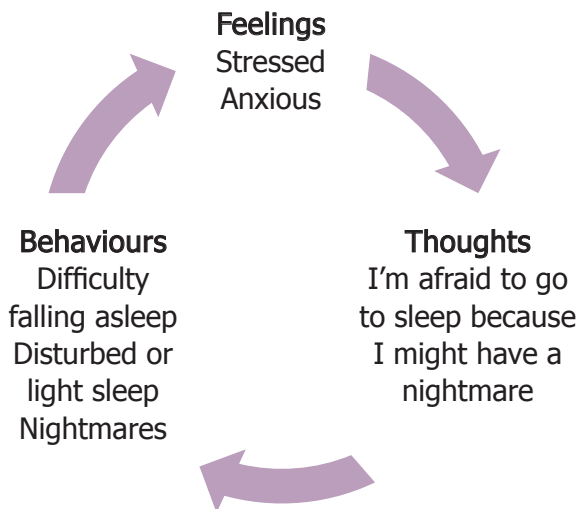
Some people also find it useful to write a list of what is worrying them early in the evening, to help get rid of anxieties before sleep.

Try a herbal remedy

You may find that herbal sleep remedies, such as hop or lavender pillows, or a few drops of lavender oil in the bath or on your pillow, help you relax. There is also some evidence to suggest that valerian, passion flower and lemon balm help to promote sleep. Check with your doctor or a pharmacist before taking a herbal remedy to make sure it is safe, particularly if you are taking any other medication.

Recognise and challenge unhelpful thought patterns about sleep

If you have long-term sleep problems, it may be that you have developed unhelpful thoughts or associations about sleep which are making the problems worse. For example, your thought pattern may go something like this:



If this is the case, you may need to learn to recognise and challenge your thoughts about sleep. Self-help materials may help you do this. Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) helps people change negative patterns of thinking or behaviour. Self-help materials based on CBT techniques have been shown to be effective in treating sleep problems. There are many CBT-based self-help materials, for example worksheets and exercises, available in books and online. (See Mind's booklet *Making sense of cognitive behaviour therapy*.)

However, it may be difficult to change the way you think and you might find that you need help from a therapist, particularly if your sleep problems started a long time ago or in childhood. (See 'What treatments are available?' below.)

What treatments are available?

You can't always resolve the things that are affecting your sleep yourself. If you can't find solutions to the problem on your own, you may find that you need additional help.

Visit your GP

Your GP should be able to discuss and treat any potential physical causes of your sleep problems, such as chronic pain or sleep apnoea. They can also give you advice about treatment options if your sleeping problems are caused by a mental health problem, such as depression or bipolar disorder. Your doctor should discuss all your treatment options with you, and your views and preferences should always be taken into account when making decisions about your treatment.

If you think your sleep problems are caused by medication you are taking, it's important to discuss this with your doctor. They may be able to prescribe you an alternative treatment, change your dose, or advise you how to take your medication in order to minimise the impact it has on your sleep.

Talking treatments

Several talking treatments have been developed for treating sleep problems, and have been shown to be effective. Talking treatments offered for sleep problems include:

- **cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)** – helps you recognise and change unhelpful thought patterns and habits around sleep
- **stimulus control therapy** – aims to challenge unhelpful psychological associations about sleep and help you develop more positive ones
- **relaxation therapy** – teaches you relaxation techniques to help improve your sleep
- **sleep restriction therapy** – reprogrammes your sleep routine by limiting the amount of sleep you have each night, before building up to a normal amount.

If your sleeping problems are caused by a mental health problem, such as depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a talking treatment may help you address the underlying cause. (See Mind's booklet *Making sense of talking treatments* for more information.)

You are entitled to receive free talking treatments on the NHS, and your GP should be able to refer you to a local practitioner. However, waiting times for psychological treatments on the NHS can be long, so you may decide to see a private therapist. Private therapists should be appropriately trained and accredited. Accredited therapists can be found through the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) or the British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP). (See 'Useful contacts' on p.22.)

Medication

If other techniques for improving sleep are unsuccessful, your GP may offer you sleeping pills. Sleeping pills can be helpful in dealing with short periods of severe insomnia, as they can help you break a cycle of not sleeping and return to a more regular sleep pattern. However, they should only be used as a last resort and on a short-term basis, as they are highly addictive and become less effective when taken every night. (See Mind's online booklet *Making sense of sleeping pills and minor tranquillisers*.)

Sleeping pills available on prescription include benzodiazepine tranquillisers (such as nitrazepam) and the 'Z drugs' – zaleplon, zolpidem and zopiclone. You should not take benzodiazepines if you have sleep apnoea, as they can make it worse. It is therefore important that your doctor makes sure that your sleep problems are not caused by sleep apnoea before you are prescribed a benzodiazepine.

Melatonin, the natural hormone which regulates your body's response to the day/night cycle, has also been developed as a prescription sleeping pill for people aged 55 and over.

Some antihistamines are marketed as sleeping pills because they have the side effect of making you sleepy. You can buy this type of sleeping pill in a pharmacy, and without a prescription. However, as with prescription sleeping pills, they should not be taken for more than a night or two and may also have other side effects.

If you have insomnia and depression, you may be offered a tricyclic antidepressant, because some of these have the side effect of making you sleepy. Other drugs that may be prescribed to promote sleep are some of the newer antipsychotics, such as olanzapine, which also cause drowsiness as a side effect.

Sleep clinics

Sleep clinics are used to assess sleep problems. Taking part in a sleep clinic involves being monitored by a polygraph machine while you sleep. Often you will need to attend the sleep centre to do this, but some studies can be done in your own home. You will need a referral from your GP to access a sleep clinic on the NHS.

Complementary and alternative therapies

Some people have reported that alternative therapies such as acupuncture, acupressure, reflexology and hypnosis have been useful in helping them relax and improve sleep.

What can friends and family do to help?

This section is for friends and family who want to support someone they know with a sleep problem.

If your friend or family member is sleeping badly, this can have a significant impact on mood and energy levels. They may become irritable or withdrawn. This can be difficult for friends and family and have an impact on your relationship with the person.

There are no right or wrong ways to deal with this, but there are some things you could try to help:

- **Help to create a relaxing sleep environment** – if you sleep in the same bedroom or house, avoid making noise or turning on the light at night, and try to keep the bedroom calm and tidy.
- **Think about whether you may be contributing to the problem** – if you snore, or if you wake and go to bed at different times each day, this may have an impact on others. Try to resolve any issues that you

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might be causing. This may mean seeking help for a snoring problem, or getting ready for work in another room if you work shifts.

- **Offer practical support** – for example, you might offer to help with household chores to relieve stress, or sleep in a different room for a few nights to allow them to catch up on sleep.
- **Try to be patient and understanding** – if someone is irritable because of a lack of sleep, this can cause misunderstandings and disagreements, so you may need to be more tolerant than usual.
- **Encourage them to identify and deal with the cause of the problem** – talk to your friend or family member about what might be causing the sleep problem and encourage them to work out positive strategies to deal with it.
- **Support them in making positive changes** – for example, being encouraging and supportive if they are trying a new exercise programme, or allowing them some quiet time to carry out a relaxation routine before bed.
- **Encourage them to seek help** – if poor sleep is affecting your friend or family member's mental health or starting to have a significant impact on their daily life, encourage them to seek appropriate help, such as going to see a GP or therapist.

Sleep checklist

Use this checklist to help you identify how you might be able to improve your sleep.

Tick box

- I have a regular sleep routine.
- The place where I sleep is comfortable.
- I relax properly before trying to sleep.
- I have tried doing other things to relax if I can't sleep at night.
- I avoid doing stressful activities in the bedroom.
- I catch up on missed sleep in an appropriate way.
- I have a healthy and balanced diet.
- I do some physical activity.
- I get some natural light during the day and sleep in a dark place at night.
- I keep a sleep diary.
- I have tried to resolve any stresses or worries that are affecting my sleep.
- I have tried self-help techniques to recognise and challenge unhelpful thought patterns about sleep.
- I have tried complementary therapies.
- I have talked to my GP to eliminate a physical cause.
- I have tried a talking treatment.
- I have tried medication.
- I have asked for a referral to a sleep clinic.

Useful contacts

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)
email: info@mind.org.uk
web: mind.org.uk
Details of local Minds and other local services, and Mind's Legal Advice Line. Language Line is available for talking in a language other than English.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

tel: 0161 705 4304
web: babcp.com
Can provide details of accredited therapists.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

tel: 01455 883 300
web: itsgoodtotalk.org.uk
For practitioners in your area.

Be Mindful

web: bemindful.co.uk
Website that explains the principles behind mindfulness, and gives details of local courses and therapists.

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC)

tel: 020 3178 2199
web: cnhc.org.uk
Maintains a register of complementary healthcare practitioners.

Insomniacs

web: insomniacs.co.uk
Advice on coping with insomnia.

Mental Health Foundation

web: mentalhealth.org.uk
Provides information about mental health problems, including sleep problems.

NHS Choices

web: nhs.uk/livewell
Includes tips and tools to help you improve your sleep, including a template sleep diary.

Sleep Matters Insomnia Helpline

tel: 020 8994 9874 (6pm to 8pm)
web: medicaladvisoryservice.org.uk
Insomnia helpline run by the Medical Advisory Service.

Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit mind.org.uk or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at info@mind.org.uk

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit mind.org.uk/shop or phone 0844 448 4448 or email publications@mind.org.uk

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Mind
(National Association for Mental Health)
15-19 Broadway
London E15 4BQ
tel: 020 8519 2122
fax: 020 8522 1725
web: mind.org.uk

Mind

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