

## Safety Behaviors and Sleep

### What is a Safety Behavior?

- A safety behavior is a habit that people develop to help them cope with anxiety. Safety behaviors typically alleviate anxiety in the moment but can actually maintain insomnia in the long term. Safety behaviors might include:
  - Getting out of bed to check the perimeter of your home
  - Checking locks and doors several times a night
  - Leaving lights on at night
  - Getting up to check out noises while trying to sleep
  - Checking on family members several times a night

### How do safety behaviors affect sleep and anxiety at night?

- Safety behaviors may interfere with the treatment techniques that you are working on in Cognitive Behavioral Treatment for Insomnia.
  - For example, if you are lying in bed and thinking about how you and your family could be harmed, it will be difficult to relax enough to go to sleep.
- It may seem that going to check out every noise that you hear while you're lying in bed would help you cope with these fears, but this sort of checking behavior can actually interfere with your sleep and maintain your symptoms.

### Why don't safety behaviors count as a relaxing activity? My safety behaviors calm me down. Why would I want to get rid of them?

- Remember that safety behaviors may decrease anxiety in the short term, but in the long term, they maintain stress and hypervigilance.
  - For example, if you hear a noise and you feel nervous, then get out of bed to check and see that nothing is wrong, you feel better immediately.
  - However, you will keep checking on every noise you hear while you are in bed (which will interfere with your sleep) because you are sending a message to your brain that unless you get out of bed to check on the noise, you and your family are not safe.
  - Until you start to resist checking, you won't get to see that you would be safe even if you don't get out of bed. Over time, the urge to check will decrease if you don't check every noise.

### So, what should I do when safety-related thoughts come into my head or when I have a strong urge to check while I'm going to sleep?

- It is fine to check your doors and windows once before going to sleep.
- Identify a space in your home where you will go to relax if you wake up.
  - Choose a place that does not include anything you can check (e.g. windows, doors), and gather anything you will need for relaxation (book, music, etc.).

- If you wake up, practice a relaxation strategy such as deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation, and try to go back to sleep. If you are unable to fall asleep after 15 minutes, follow your normal routine to get out of bed and encourage yourself not to check.
  - Although you may really want to, remind yourself that it is better in the long run not to check.
  - Examine the evidence for and against your thought. What is the evidence that something is wrong? What is the evidence that nothing is wrong? Use the answers to these questions to develop a more balanced and perhaps more accurate thought. Then, do a relaxing activity such as reading, deep breathing, listening to calming music, or prayer.
- Remember, this is not a life sentence, so commit to not using safety behaviors when trying to sleep while you are in this program. Eventually, the urge to check will decrease.