

# **Enabling people with persistent pain to sleep well**

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### **Background**

Estimates suggest that between 50 and 90% of people with persistent pain experience significant sleep problems.

While numerous studies have demonstrated the interdependent relationship between pain and sleep, (disturbance of sleep can increase pain and pain can worsen sleep) evidence suggests the impact of poor sleep on pain is the more significant of the two.

Despite the evidence, many Pain Management Services do not routinely offer formal sleep assistance to patients.

Traditional methods to address sleep problems include Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), but recent evidence has demonstrated the significant effect of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) on sleep quality.

### **Project Aims**

To use Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) as an intervention to address sleep issues for patients within our Pain Management Service.

To develop an ACT-based, online intervention to help people to learn to be good sleepers again. To our knowledge, this will be the first of its type in Wales.

*"What does a good sleeper do to get to sleep? Nothing!  
Good sleepers just go to bed and fall asleep.  
Yet when people's sleep goes awry they try to DO all manner of things  
to make it right again.  
They try medications, routines, relaxation techniques and so on.  
When one thing doesn't work they try something else.  
All with the aim of trying to make themselves sleep.  
If they see a health professional about it, they are usually given more things to DO.  
We can't MAKE ourselves sleep. We all know that deep down.  
The best thing any of this can achieve is improve the conditions for sleep to happen,  
which can be enough to do the trick for some people. For many it isn't.  
Falling asleep is an allowing, a trusting of the body, a letting go.  
To become a good sleeper again this is what we need to relearn.  
The best existing framework for that learning is  
Acceptance and Commitment Training or ACT."*

## **Figure 1**

"What does a good sleeper do to get to sleep? Nothing! Good sleepers just go to bed and fall asleep. Yet when people's deep sleep goes awry, they try to DO all manner of things to make it right again. They try medications, routines, relaxation techniques and so on. When one thing doesn't work, they try something else. All with the aim of trying to make themselves sleep. If they see a health professional about it, they are usually given more things to DO. We can't MAKE ourselves sleep. We all know that deep down. The best thing any of us can achieve is improve the conditions for sleep to happen, which can be enough to do the trick for some people. For many it isn't. Falling asleep is an allowing, a trusting of the body, a letting go. To become a good sleeper again this is what to need to relearn. Acceptance and Commitment Training or ACT.

End of description

## **Challenges**

The Covid-19 pandemic put paid to our original intention to run a patient group for the intervention. We responded by working to recreate the course in an online format. To do this, while

keeping the content interesting and engaging, has been a learning curve – not least in terms of developing our filming and acting skills

## **Key Outcomes**

The first run of the intervention will be with a focus group of patients who attended our Pain Management Programme and who assisted us in developing the content of the sleep course. We will get feedback from them using a semi-structured interview.

We will also use more formal outcome measures with the focus group, and subsequent users. Chief of these is the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index, a well-validated questionnaire that measures aspect of sleep across seven domains and distinguishes between good and poor sleepers when scored.

Dr Guy Meadows is a sleep physiologist focusing on the use of ACT in treating insomnia. Given that our intervention has as its basis the ACT principles of accepting and making space for difficult experiences rather than trying to control or get rid of them, we also plan to use Guy Meadows sleep questionnaire. This is not a validated measure but it provides a good idea of how well patients have been able to take an ACT perspective on dealing with their sleep difficulties.

## **Next Steps**

We need to finish filming and creating the content and then get it online for patients to start using.

We would then like to offer it either on its own, for self-directed learning, or with the addition of live clinician input for patients requiring a more intensive guidance.

Finally, when circumstances allow, we would also like to be able to offer the option of a face-to-face group version.

## **Our Exemplar Experience**

Being a Bevan Exemplar has really galvanised us into making this project happen, even with the great challenges of 2020.

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