PSYCHOLOGY Perspective

SLEEP, WITHOUT IT, LIFE IS TORTUROUS...

Enough good-quality sleep is not a “nice to have;” it’s a necessity for physical and mental wellbeing. It’s the key to unlocking productivity and maximising your quality of life. Establishing sustainable, healthy bedtime routines means they become automatic, just like bad habits can become engrained, even with negative consequences. Improving your sleep hygiene has little cost and virtually no risk, making it absolutely worth your time and effort.

Signs of poor sleep ... Do you have trouble falling asleep? Do you deliberately avoid going to sleep because falling asleep is hard? Do you wake up several times a night? Do you have trouble getting back to sleep when you wake up through the night? Do you wake much earlier than you need to and before you’ve had enough sleep? Do you have daytime sleepiness and a lack of consistency in sleep quantity or quality?

Four steps to improve sleep hygiene are to focus on your sleep schedule, develop a bedtime ritual, cultivate healthy daytime habits and optimise your bedroom for sleep.

FOLLOW A NIGHTLY ROUTINE

It’s not just bedtime habits that influence sleep; daytime activities can work with your circadian rhythm to encourage good sleep.

DEVELOP A 30-MINUTE BEDTIME RITUAL Following the same steps each night, including putting on your pyjamas, brushing your teeth, unpacking the dishwasher, setting out clothes for the next day, and taking a shower, can remind your brain it’s bedtime. Include things that calm you, like music, light stretching, reading, and/or relaxation exercises.

DIM YOUR LIGHTS Try to avoid bright lights because they can interfere with your melatonin production, the hormone your body produces to encourage sleep.

MAKE GRADUAL ADJUSTMENTS A 30-60-minute pre-bed buffer time includes mobiles, tablets, laptops and the TV. Try to avoid mental stimulation, or it’s harder to gear down.

EXPLORE DIFFERENT TYPES OF RELAXATION EXERCISES Don’t make falling asleep your goal; it’s easier to focus on relaxation. Meditation, mindfulness, and paced breathing can put you in the right mindset for bed.

DON’T TOSS AND TURN It helps to associate being in bed with sleeping. If you haven’t fallen asleep after 20 minutes, get up and stretch, read, or do something else calming in low light before heading back to bed again.

SET YOUR SLEEP SCHEDULE

AIM FOR A SET TIME TO WAKE UP Whether it’s a weekday or weekend, try to wake up at the same time. Irregular waking times prevent getting into a rhythm of consistent sleep.

PRIORITISE SLEEP Tempting as it is to delay sleep to study, socialise, exercise, or even work, sleep needs to be a priority. Calculate a target bedtime based on your fixed wake-up time and do your best to be ready for bed around that time each night.

MAKE GRADUAL ADJUSTMENTS If you want to shift your sleep times, don’t try to do it all in a single change, that can throw your schedule entirely. Instead, make small, incremental adjustments of up to 30 minutes so that you can adjust to a new schedule.

AVOID NAPPING While naps can be a handy way to recharge during the day, they can also make getting to sleep at night challenging. If you nap, keep naps relatively short and earlier in the day.

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CULTIVATE HEALTHY DAILY HABITS

It's not just bedtime habits that influence sleep; daytime activities can work with your circadian rhythm to encourage good sleep.

GET DAYLIGHT EXPOSURE Light, especially sunlight, supports circadian rhythms and facilitates quality sleep.

BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE Regular exercise can make sleep easier at night and make you feel better during the day by giving you an endorphin hit.

DON'T SMOKE Nicotine stimulates the body in ways that disrupt sleep.

REDUCE ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION Alcohol may make it easier to fall asleep, but as the effect wears off, it disrupts sleep later in the night. Try to avoid it later in the evening.

CUT DOWN ON CAFFEINE IN THE AFTERNOON AND EVENING Caffeine is a stimulant that keeps you wired even when you want to rest, so try to avoid it later in the day. Also, be mindful of falling into the trap of consuming caffeine to stay awake because of a lack of sleep; It's a vicious cycle.

EAT EARLIER RATHER THAN LATER AT NIGHT Eating late, especially a heavy or spicy meal, can mean you're still digesting when it's time for bed. Aim for lighter food or snacks before bed.

RESTRICT IN-BED ACTIVITY To strengthen the association between sleep and being in bed, it's best to only use your bed for sleep or sex only. Anything else, try to get up out of bed to watch TV, read etc.

OPTIMISE YOUR BEDROOM

To fall asleep more easily, your bedroom needs to be a calm space, free of disruptions.

A COMFORTABLE MATTRESS AND PILLOW ARE KEY Choose your mattress and pillow thoughtfully.

SET YOUR AIR CONDITIONER TO A COOLER SETTING Err on the cooler side for optimal sleep.

BLOCK OUT LIGHT If you can, use heavy curtains or an eye mask to prevent light from interrupting your sleep.

LIMIT NOISE Ear plugs can limit noise that might keep you awake. if you don't find them comfortable, try a white noise machine or even a fan to drown out bothersome sounds.

TRY CALMING SCENTS

Light smells, such as lavender, or any smell that you have positive associations with, can foster a calmer state of mind and sleep.

Improving sleep hygiene won't always resolve sleeping problems, but using an APP to optimise your sleep is a good option if you've tried the strategies above. The Black Dog Institute has a free APP called Sleep Ninja, you might like to try that.

If you have long-lasting or severe sleeping problems or daytime sleepiness, it's best to talk to your GP, who can recommend the most appropriate course of action. Consider taking an anonymous online sleep assessment and sharing the results with your GP or therapist.

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