



Lack of sleep leads to feeling constantly tired. Tiredness makes coping with stress, regulating emotions, thinking clearly, getting things done, and making decisions much more difficult. In conjunction with a change in mood or increased anxiety, a change in sleeping habits is often considered one of the first symptoms that mental health may be declining. Consequently, getting sleep back on track is usually one of the first targets in mental health treatment. Below are some helpful tips for developing better sleep habits and routine.

Get a routine

A bedtime routine is the best way for signalling to our body and brain that it is time to go to sleep. This involves developing a set of behaviours that you do each day before you go to sleep. It does not matter what you do, but generally what works best are behaviours and activities that promote calmness and relaxation.

Set your body clock

Generally, our brain controls our body clock with the hormone melatonin to be asleep when it is dark and awake when it is light. We can help our body reset the clock by going to bed and getting up at about the same time each day (including weekends!).

Your bedroom, your sanctuary

The right environment is important and helps us to get a good night's sleep. A quiet, comfortable, dark uncluttered space can make a difference. Cooler rooms with enough blankets to keep warm is ideal. If you can, invest in a decent mattress that is neither too hard nor too soft for you (and your partner).

Catch the Sleep Waves

Sleep is a cycle that comes in waves and starts with feeling tired and drowsy. Don't ignore tiredness, it is a signal that our body is ready and it is time to go to bed. Equally, don't go to bed when you are not tired, it reinforces the habit of lying awake and can increase worries about not being able to sleep. If we ignore the signals of tiredness we may have to wait to catch the next sleep wave. If you have tried to go to sleep and you find yourself awake, don't lie in bed, get up and start your routine again.

Your bedroom is not a second lounge room

It is important to develop the association of your bedroom with sleep or intimacy only. If you treat your bedroom like a second lounge room, your mind will associate your bedroom with activity not sleep. With almost universal access to modern technology it is tempting to lie in bed and use mobile devices or watch TV. It is best to leave devices out of the bedroom, but they can be helpful if you are using them to do some relaxation or breathing to promote sleep. Turn the screen off, place it face down or use night mode though! The blue light of devices can disrupt our sleep hormones.

Adults do not need naps

While it is tempting to take a nap when you are not sleeping well at night, adults typically do not need to sleep during the day unless you are physically unwell. Naps during the day may lead you to not feel tired at night and interferes with your natural body clock making night time sleeping more difficult. If you really are not able to make it through the day, keep it short (under an hour) and as early in the day as possible. Even if you have had a poor night sleep, avoiding day time activities because you are tired may reinforce night time sleeping difficulties.

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Say No to Drugs

Alcohol, caffeine, cigarettes and other drugs are best avoided if you have trouble sleeping. Caffeine and cigarettes are stimulants that interfere with the ability to fall asleep. While many people believe that alcohol is relaxing, it actually interferes with the quality of sleep. Prescribed sleeping medication can be temporarily useful as a last resort for sleeping difficulties and needs to be used only under medical supervision. Do not take medications that are not prescribed for you by a doctor. Feeling tired and sleepy during the day is one drawback of using medication to sleep, as is the 'rebound' effect which can make falling asleep harder when you stop taking them until your body readjusts. Using sleeping medication also does not address the underlying cause of sleeping problems. Finally, illicit substances also interfere with all aspects of sleep and are best avoided.

Get the basics right

A healthy balanced diet that is not high in processed or sugary foods is important for maintaining general health. If you are not eating well, are too full, or too hungry, when you are trying to sleep it can make getting to sleep more difficult. Regular exercise also helps our bodies to be more physically tired overall. It takes some time for our bodies to unwind after exercise however, so don't exercise too close to bedtime.

Unwind your mind

Stress and pressure of daily life (e.g. work, school, relationships, finances, health) may result in increased concern and worry. Learning to manage your stress levels is important if it is keeping you awake at night. Talking things through with a trusted friend, family member or professional can help, or check out our managing stress tip sheet for some helpful hints to unwind your mind. Relaxation exercises focussed on getting to sleep can be very helpful if your mind is active or you are focussed on worries. There are many Mobile Apps and YouTube videos that you can access to help with sleep. Search for "*passive muscle relaxation for sleep*". Remember to use night mode, turn off your screen or place your device face down! Try not to engage in stimulating activities close to bedtime, start to relax your mind about an hour before bedtime.

Clock watching is unproductive

When you have trouble sleeping, it is easy to keep an eye on the time. This is not helpful, it reinforces worries about not sleeping and is a sure way to keep you awake. If you are unable to sleep, get out of bed and do something calming and relaxing, take a bath, have a glass of warm milk, read a book and stay off your devices.

Agggh.....I need help

If you think that you are doing as much as you can but are still struggling with sleep, then our clinicians can help. To make an appointment with our team give us a call on 9882-8874

Prepared by Dr Jodie Thomas, Clinical Psychologist. This tip-sheet is based on principles from Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

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