

Getting a good night's sleep

Relevant to: Depression:  Anxiety:  Irritability/Anger:  General emotional control: 

Getting a good night's sleep is immensely important. It has ramifications for depression, anxiety, irritability, general emotional control and overall physical health and well being.

The fascinating fact, for something so important, is that no-one has conscious control over their sleeping, so success depends on setting things up for yourself so that the body automatically takes over and gives you a good night's rest. So the following ideas represent the accepted wisdom in this field.

Take exercise. Massively important, exercise has many benefits, of which improved sleep is one. It doesn't need to be strenuous exercise, but some exercise is essential. Walking, swimming, running, aerobic or anaerobic,

almost all exercise is good.

Maintain your circadian rhythm. The body has a daily rhythm; it likes to eat and sleep at roughly the same times each day. So make sure you have your meals at roughly the same time, and go to bed and get up at roughly the same time each day.

Beware caffeine, alcohol and nicotine.

The major sources of caffeine are coffee, tea, Red Bull (and similar) and Cola drinks. Chocolate also contains some. Some pain relief tablets have significant amounts (read ingredients). If you have sleep problems, no caffeine after 2pm is the general rule. Cigarettes raise blood pressure, speed up the heart rate and stimulate brain-wave activity. Alcohol generally impairs sleep, contrary to popular belief.

A short day-time nap is OK. But make sure it's no longer than 20 minutes (longer makes you groggy), and not later than early afternoon (later may disrupt night-time sleep).



Sort out worries. Easier said than done, sometimes. Nevertheless, the more worries you get rid of, the better you are likely to sleep.

Watch what you eat. Researchers at the University of Sydney showed that eating carbohydrate-based meals that break down rapidly during digestion - such as baked potatoes, white rice, and white bread - help bring on sleep, if you eat them four hours before bedtime.

Have a wind-down routine. It's no use thinking you can work and worry all day, then jump into bed and have a good night's sleep. You need a wind-down routine of at least a couple of hours. Watching (restful) TV, listening to music, a bite to eat, discussing the day with someone, writing your diary, having a bath – those sort of things.

Put the day to bed. You can do this (a) by writing a diary, (b) by reviewing the day with someone else, or (c) reviewing it 'in your mind's eye'. The third is usually less effective than the first two.

Have the bedroom set up nicely. Deliberately make it conducive to a good night's rest. Make sure the room is on the cool side, though not uncomfortably so.

Don't try to sleep. That's counterproductive. In fact, even if you were to simply relax for the night, that would benefit you. Tensely 'trying to sleep' won't.

What to do if you wake up in the night. Some people wake in the middle of the night, sometimes in an anxious state. The best thing to do then is usually to observe your breathing without trying to control it. Just 'observing' your breathing is generally restful, and allows it to get back in synchrony with your heart rate and other bodily activities.

Stick to the rules. If you stick to the rules here, you'll probably end up sleeping well. That doesn't mean you are now 'a good sleeper' and can throw away the rule-book. If you do that you'll probably go back to being a bad sleeper again.

In Session

Discuss the content of this sheet. If you already sleep well, try to pinpoint why that is. If you don't sleep well yet, try to identify where you are going wrong. The group leader will invite a maximum of 10 minutes discussion afterwards.

Project

If you already sleep well, then well done – there is no project for you. If you don't yet sleep well, your project is to act on what you are doing wrong. Read carefully all the guidelines above, and act on the relevant ones. The group leader may invite a maximum of 10 minutes discussion on this.
