

Sleep

Information for patients, parents and carers



Much of the following article was written by Anna Hinton, Health and Well-Being Promotion Specialist, based at Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. It has been adapted with her permission. The article draws on work by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, information from the NHS Choices website and some recent research.

Sleep

How are you sleeping? Do you get enough?

Do you find it hard to get off to sleep, or do you wake in the early hours and can't get back to sleep? Tired but wired? Did you know that one in three of us struggle with sleep?

Poor sleep revisited

Poor sleep undermines efforts to manage your stress or build your resilience; if you are a sufferer, try and prioritise it and address it.

Getting a good night's sleep isn't always easy, and for lots of reasons, including worries that seem to dominate our thoughts, especially at night, it can be hard to wind down. Wakeful children, wakeful partners, snoring partners; the need to feel connected 24/7 as we check emails and, increasingly, shift working are being researched and implicated in poor sleep.

Whatever the reason you aren't sleeping well, let's talk about improving sleep. Remember that if we always do what we have always done, we will simply get what we have already got – so try something different and be consistent in your efforts.

Poor sleep is an important, not to be ignored, symptom of stress, so do think carefully and recognise that, if you have a problem, it needs to be sorted out as early as possible. Poor sleep develops into a habit; it can make you grumpy, affect your thinking, make problem-solving a real challenge, and affect your focus, making it hard to concentrate. Errors can creep in and accidents can happen. In the long term, it is a major contributor to increased anxiety and depression.

*Even if you have become a chronic poor sleeper, **all is not lost; there are ways to help yourself.***

How well do you sleep?

Firstly, find out how well you do sleep, and how much sleep you need. For example, most of us need seven to nine hours of good quality sleep a night to function properly, but some need more or less.

If you wake tired, and spend the day longing to take a nap, it is likely that you are not getting enough. The following short test will give you a sleep score and summarise some practical tips:

www.nhs.uk/Livewell/insomnia/Pages/bedtimeritual.aspx



If you prefer, you can keep a record of how much you sleep. Visit the **Sleep Council**: www.sleepcouncil.org.uk

or **NHS choices** : for a printable sleep diary, to keep a note of your daily activities and night time sleep pattern for a week. www.nhs.uk/Livewell/insomnia/Documents/sleepdiary.pdf

If you are feeling **Tired All the Time (TATT)** without an obvious cause, find out more here: www.nhs.uk/Livewell/tiredness-and-fatigue/Pages/why-am-I-tired.aspx

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Take a closer look at some of the reasons we are suffering poor sleep

Do you feel you need to be 'connected and available 24/7'? Is your bedroom an extension of your living room, with technical devices plugged in charging? Phones used as alarm clocks? Laptops and tablets ready by the bed waiting for messages to ping?



A study of more than 2,000 adults found six out of ten of them were feeling sleep-deprived because they use a smartphone, tablet or computer in the two hours before bed. Blue light from our screens suppresses the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin. Also, being on our technical devices at night, means that we are stimulating our minds into an alert state. In addition, the feeling of being 'on call' can inhibit proper sleep.

Ask yourself, when did you last send an email to someone during the late evening or night? Consider how the person receiving it feels. You might be having a bad night, or be up and want to clear your emails, or want to relieve a worry that you might just forget – however, you may have created a worry for the person receiving it, and be defeating your own efforts at sleep. Perhaps you could save them to draft and send in the morning?

Working shifts: sleeping at the wrong time – shift work and parenthood

You may have to work at night, staying awake when you would normally be asleep. If you only have to do this occasionally, it's easier to adjust. It is much harder to cope with if you do it regularly. Shift workers, doctors and nurses working all night or nursing mothers, parents with small children may all find that they sleep at times when they ought to be awake. It's like jet lag.

A good way to get back to normal is to make sure that you wake up at the same time every morning – whatever time you fell asleep the night before. Use an alarm clock to help you. Make sure that you don't go to bed again before about 10.00pm that night. If you do this for a few nights, you should soon start to fall asleep naturally at the right time.

What can you do to help yourself? The answer is: lots!

This section is divided into five parts:

- ✓ improving your sleeping environment known as sleep hygiene
- ✓ checking and changing the way you think and feel before bed
- ✓ relaxation
- ✓ managing your sleep times
- ✓ apps and online help

✓ Sleep Hygiene

Create a zone in your bedroom or bed space which is free of devices; use an alarm clock to wake up, not your phone.

Shun alerts on devices, as the brain views these as pieces of information that need attending to immediately – turn your ‘notifications’ off.

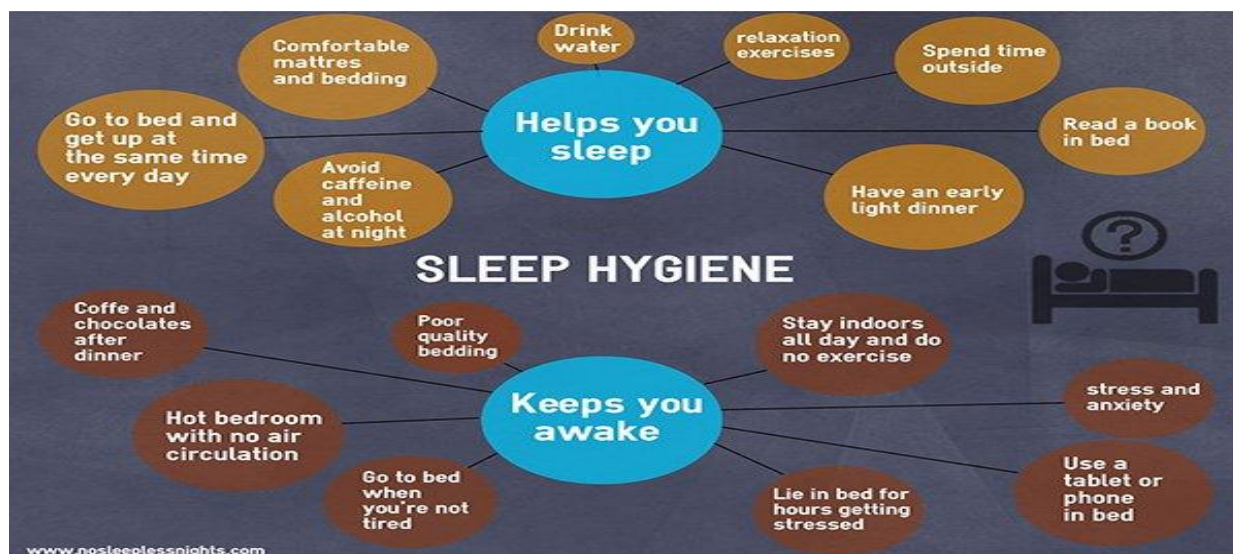
Things to consider during the day

- ✓ **Have your evening meal early rather than late.**
- ✓ **Alcohol**, which seems to help you sleep initially, often means you get up in the night;
- ✓ **Caffeine** is a stimulant, so avoid it too close to bedtime. Some people can't drink it caffeine after 2.00pm in the afternoon – are you one of them? Check the back of medication for hidden caffeine, as some cold remedies contain it.
- ✓ **Get some exercise.** Don't overdo it, but try some regular swimming or walking. The best time to exercise is late afternoon or early evening (later than this can disturb your sleep).

As you are preparing for bed, focus on one thing at a time e.g.:

- ✓ **Focus on turning off everything** so your brain registers that you have actually done it – banish your devices and put your phone away until the morning.
- ✓ **Dimming lights before bed** and separating yourself from the constant alerts from handheld electronics can help to increase darkness in the bedroom. Darkness releases melatonin, the natural chemical that helps put us to sleep. We make most of our melatonin between 10.00pm and 2.00am so its best stop using blue light emitting devices after 10.00pm
- ✓ **Set your thermostat to a cooler temperature** between 15-20 degrees Celsius. It gets cooler at night, which helps with putting our bodies to sleep.
- ✓ **Open a window at night** to ensure air circulates throughout the night, or open it for a few hours before bed to refresh the air in your bedroom. Fit some thick curtains to reduce light, use earplugs if you are disturbed by noise, try an eye mask.
- ✓ **Calming your mind and body** before bed can help prepare you for a good night's sleep. Relax before going to bed by reading, listening to music or using a relaxation technique. Finish all mental and physical activity in advance, to let your body know it is time to unwind and prepare for bed.

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If you can't sleep

If you can't sleep, don't lie there worrying about it:

get up, leave the bedroom and do something you find relaxing; read, watch television or listen to quiet music. Don't interact with your electronic device!

When you feel tired enough, go back to bed. If you've had a bad night, don't sleep in the next day as it will make it harder to get to sleep the following night.

✓ Checking and changing the way you think and feel before bed

Are you worrying about work, life, or your relationships? The middle of the night tends to be the time when we worry most – no distractions to stop thoughts getting hold and no relief as the mind tracks on to all the negative things that have happened, exaggerates them and keeps you awake.

Why the middle of the night? Sleep specialists say we sleep in cycles of 90 minutes to two hours long and it's perfectly normal to wake up. Most people aren't aware of these cycles. You wake up, change position, and then go into the next sleep stage. For a normal sleeper, if you have a really stressful day at work, or are managing something challenging in your day-to-day life, rather than slipping seamlessly from one sleep cycle to another you tend to fully wake up out of the cycle. Once woken, you wake up fully with a feeling of dread and anxiety, actually in a state of fight-or-flight.

If something is troubling you, and there is nothing you can do about it there and then:

Try writing your worries and any possible solutions down, ideally even before you go to bed. Fold the piece of paper up and tell yourself you will deal with it in the morning, and then go back to bed. Sleep with a pad and pencil by the bed (not your device) so you capture your worries without introducing any temptation to switch on and put your mind into an alert state.

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Sometimes the things keeping you awake are enjoyable things, planning a holiday, wedding, new goals or working through an essay. Writing these ideas down, so they are not 'lost' in the morning, can also help.



Also try visualising a large 'STOP' sign, and consciously say:

"I can't do anything about this now except sleep. Having a good sleep will mean I am more able to sort it out in the morning".

Use the research!

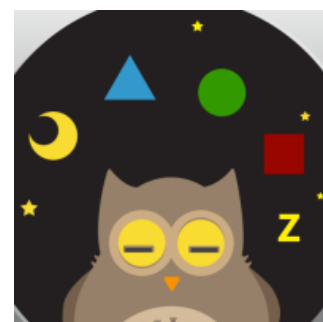
The Canadian cognitive scientist Luc Beaudoin (2013) has developed a mechanism for managing insomnia, which he calls the '**cognitive shuffle**'. Essentially, it is a way of deliberately scrambling your thoughts, so they make no sense.

The cognitive shuffle involves mentally picturing a random sequence of objects for a few seconds each: a cow; a microphone; a loaf of bread, and so on. **It's important to ensure the sequence is truly meaningless; otherwise you'll drift back into thinking about things. Another is simply to pick a word, such as 'bedtime', then picture as many items beginning with 'b' as you can, then 'e', then 'd', then...** Well, by then, if my experience is anything to go by, you'll be asleep. I use the word CAT as I like cats and the image of one is calming, and I often don't even get to the letter T, so if my experience is anything to go by, it works!

In part, Beaudoin argues, this works because the brain has evolved to determine whether it's safe to fall asleep by checking what one specific part of the brain, the cortex, is doing. If it's engaged in 'sense-making' activity, that's a sign it may be weighing up dangers. But if thoughts have degenerated into rambling nonsense, the coast is probably clear.

By filling the mind with nonsense, you trigger the 'sleep switch'. Yet the technique also works for a simpler reason: it's hard to focus on multiple things at once. While you're busy generating a mental image of a microphone, it's tricky to fret about your mortgage, or in my case thinking of cats and couches and cushions and churches and so it goes on.

More information can be found at: <https://mysleepbutton.com/support/the-cognitive-science/>



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Another activity that might be helpful is to look at what is available in the Mood Zone on NHS Choices. The Mood Zone deals with feelings and common life problems that affect us all. Perhaps you've been feeling down for a few days, or you're having a stressful time at work: the Mood Zone offers tips and how-to guides to improve your mental wellbeing. It also offers an audio guide with advice on how to approach poor sleep.

www.nhs.uk/Video/Pages/sleep-problems-podcast.aspx

When you next get ten minutes, sit and write down your thoughts and feelings. Complete the mood assessment quiz in the Mood Zone on NHS Choices.

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/low-mood-stress-anxiety.aspx

✓ Relaxation



What do we mean by relaxation? The dictionary would say: the act of relaxing or the state of being relaxed. Relaxation can help reduce tension, which in turn helps to improve your chances of getting to sleep.

Tension shows itself in headaches, inability to sleep, pains in the muscles and even physical illness. It often concentrates itself in the head and neck areas. Jaw muscles get tight and you clench your teeth or even grind them.

Can relaxation help? It's a physical skill to help overcome physical and mental tension. If you recognise when your muscles are tense, you will be able to control them and relax more quickly and deeply in any situation.

There are many self-help books, CDs, Apps, websites and group classes promoting ways of relaxing.

Book titles such as 'Mindfulness: Peace in a frantic world'; 'Conquer your Stress' and 'Manage your Mind' are all focused on supporting a change to the way we react to worry and stressful events.

Yoga, Pilates, walking, singing and exercise in general, all focus on the how to combat worrying and stress in the short term and build your resilience in the longer term.

Importantly, whether you from home or in an office, look after your children, or are busy studying, **take your breaks**, to help build opportunities for you to relax in the day.

Here are some exercises for you to try.

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Breathing

Good relaxation always starts with focusing on your breathing. Breathe in and out slowly and in a regular rhythm, as this will help you to calm down. Deep breathing keeps the body and mind working at their best.

The 4-7-8 Breathing Exercise can help you get to sleep

It is simple, takes almost no time, requires no equipment and can be done anywhere. Although you can do the exercise in any position, sit with your back straight while learning the exercise. Place the tip of your tongue against the ridge of tissue just behind your upper front teeth; keep it there through the entire exercise. You will be inhaling through your mouth around your tongue; try pursing your lips lightly if this feels awkward.

- 1) Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound.
- 2) Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of four.
- 3) Hold your breath for a count of seven.
- 4) Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of eight.
- 5) This is one breath. Now inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times for a total of four breaths.

Note that you always inhale quietly through your nose and exhale audibly through your mouth. The tip of your tongue stays in position the whole time. Exhalation takes twice as long as inhalation. The absolute time you spend on each phase is not important; the ratio of 4:7:8 is important. If you have trouble holding your breath, speed the exercise up but keep to the ratio of 4:7:8 for the three phases. With practice you can slow it all down and get used to inhaling and exhaling more and more deeply.

Watch the following 'youtube' clips to help you practise during the day then try it on your own at night.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRPh_GaiL8s



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gz4G31LGyog>



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Try this quick relaxation technique

- 1) When you feel wound up, or worrying thoughts are taking hold, take a deep breath deeply from your abdomen. This passes a message to your brain to keep you relaxed and calm.
- 2) Fill up the whole of your lungs with air, without forcing; imagine you're filling up a bottle, so that your lungs fill from the bottom.
- 3) Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- 4) Breathe in slowly and regularly counting from one to five (don't worry if you can't reach five at first). Then let the breath escape slowly, counting from one to five.
- 5) Keep doing this until you feel calm. Breathe without pausing or holding your breath.
- 6) Practise this relaxed breathing for three to five minutes once in bed.

**✓ Managing your sleep times**

Introduce a routine you are able to stick to consistently; go to bed at the same time and get up in the morning at the same time every day, no matter how you feel, and never spend more than nine hours in total in bed, as sleep becomes less efficient.

An alarm clock, not your phone, will avoid triggering your brain awake with the blue light if you are awake in the night and want to look at the time – see section on sleep hygiene above.

Suffering from insomnia?

Glasgow Sleep Research Unit has written an excellent comprehensive leaflet which covers everything and more to help you tackle entrenched sleeping problems.

<http://wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk>

✓ Apps and online help

- **Sleepio** supports an evidence-based approach, which compresses your sleep time by asking you to work out how long you sleep for (keep a sleep diary first) then to go to bed just for the number of hours you sleep before you need to wake up. If you sleep for four hours and need to be up at 7.00pm you stay up until 3.00am.

Sleepio comes highly recommended. It's based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and evidence suggests that it can even help people who have long-term sleep problems to sleep better. Sleepio works on desktop computers, tablets or via an iPhone app. It's also compatible with some of the tracking devices you can use to track your daily lifestyle habits.

<https://www.sleepio.com/>

- **Headspace** is an excellent App with guided help steering your ability to let go and unwind from the worries in your mind. <https://www.headspace.com/>
- The **Royal Society of Psychiatrists** has an excellent general overview of sleep and sleep hygiene: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/sleepingwell.aspx
- **Calms** : a website or app which has free guided relaxation audios <https://www.calm.com/>

Please remember you can discuss sleep with your GP, practise nurse or at your clinic visit.

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