

SLEEP

There is lots of evidence to show that balanced sleep is really important for good mental health; it can also be a really useful self-care tool for when you just need a break and to get away from your thoughts and situation for a bit.

The Mental Health foundation have created ten top tips; see below.

1. Tech-free bedtime

The bedroom should be somewhere that we associate with sleep. Where possible, you should try to remove distractions from your bedroom. It is better to watch TV, check social media and eat in another room. This will allow you to relax with no distractions in your bedroom.

Be mindful of the presence of gadgets and electronics, such as computers, phones, tablets and TVs. The backlit 'blue light' displays suppress melatonin production – the hormone that helps you sleep; the suppression of melatonin causes sleep disruption. You should stop using these devices two hours before you go to sleep to reduce their impact on your sleeping.

2. Prioritise managing physical symptoms

As anyone who has tried to get to sleep with a blocked nose or headache knows, physical health problems can stop you from getting a good night's sleep. It can be easy to forget with minor symptoms, but you will thank yourself when night falls if you prioritise speaking to a pharmacist about appropriate medication for symptom management.

3. Light, sound and temperature

It may sound common sense but too much light and background noise can prevent you from falling asleep or staying asleep. For light and noise sources that you can't control, eye masks or ear plugs are wonderful investments. Temperature is also important, and if you share a bed with someone with different temperature preferences, consider separate blankets or other solutions that make less of a sleep-compromise.

4. Dealing with worry

Thinking about sleep too much or trying to force yourself to sleep will only keep you awake. Learning how to relax both your body and mind instead will help you to get to sleep much more easily. Progressive relaxation techniques can help you to relax and unwind at these times.

5. Foods that help and hinder

Eating rice, oats and dairy products can produce chemicals that increase our desire to sleep. As well as the obvious caffeine, in terms of food and drink to avoid, things high in sugar can keep you awake if consumed late in the day. A big meal after mid-evening can also stop you from sleeping.

6. Alcohol alert

Although it can make you feel tired and can help you get to sleep, alcohol often impairs the quality of your sleep and makes you more likely to wake up during the night as the effects wear off, and you may need to go to the toilet frequently or wake up dehydrated to drink water.

7. Time your exercise

Exercising on a regular basis can help us sleep, helping to reduce anxiety and relieve stress. Exercising earlier in the day is better, as exercise increases the body's adrenaline production, making it more difficult to sleep if done just before bedtime.

8. No napping!

If you have trouble sleeping, you may feel tempted to catch up on sleep by taking naps. However, unless you're feeling dangerously sleepy (while driving or operating machinery, for instance), this usually does more harm than good as it makes it more difficult to sleep at night. If you feel tired during the day, get up and take a walk around, get some fresh air, or do something challenging for a short while, like a crossword or a sudoku.

9. If you're not tired, get up

If you're finding it difficult to get to sleep, don't just lie there worrying. Get up for a while and get a drink (no sugar or caffeine, remember!) try reading for a little while and go back to bed when you're feeling a bit sleepier.

10. Keep a sleep diary

Keeping a sleep diary to make a note of what the conditions were when you went to bed the night before can be useful for letting you look back and see what has and what hasn't worked for you. It also helps you to see how your sleep varies from night to night, and might help you note patterns in your sleeping.

Working together to keep our children safe and happy

Halina Rooney

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