



Achieving Sweet Dreams During a Time of Unrest

Learn how to recharge your body as frequently as you do your phone - through sleep.

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Sleep Well - Even Through COVID-19


Do I really need to sleep? We've heard it 1000x. "Sleep is overrated", "I don't have time to sleep", "I work better at night", "I can't sleep anyway". At work we have coined phrases like "time is money", "you snooze you lose", and we even go as far as celebrating lack of sleep with statements of "I pulled an all nighter", "I am too busy (and important) to sleep", "I'm so committed I don't have time to sleep". Office cultures have often awarded the first one in and the last one out - a perceived role model to exemplify hard worker, and sending emails at 3am is viewed as some sort of victory or stamina lap. Over time we have sent out the message that sleep is not a valuable or necessary use of our time.

The tide has turned, and even more so now with COVID-19. If you do not believe sleep has power and you down play it, now is your time to discover more. We have secrets to share.

Scientifically we have known this for a long time, and now finally socially and in work cultures we are catching up - our views have shifted and we are learning to realize that quality and sustained sleep plays a significant role in reducing health risk and improves immune system functioning. Sleep impacts weight loss and gain, and even influences the appearance of wrinkles (there truly is something to beauty sleep!), not to mention playing a vital role in memory, attention, focus and concentration which is very important for optimizing performance and making meaningful connections.

However, we know that insomnia affects an average of 10% of the population, yet the majority of people find plenty of things keep them awake at night, resulting in feeling tired and distracted during waking hours.

Sleep patterns shift through life too and different circumstances can disturb sleep. There could be short to mid-term life circumstances such as a new baby, a bereavement, a new puppy, or the more regular interruptions every night such as the neighbor who works the late shift, the party, restaurant or bar near your home (although currently not so with the COVID-19 situation), or fire trucks, police, or car alarms at 3am, or perhaps even the overnight garbage truck noises. Not to mention the other stressors such as a virus pandemic that threatens your finances, livelihood and health of yourself and loved ones which prevents your mind from shutting off. Regardless of the culprit, improving quality sleep is of utmost importance. Whether you are struggling to sleep, or you are part of the lucky few that sleeps soundly through the night, there is still curiosity about whether you can improve on your sleep and how you can do that.



Here is your sleep guide to help you fall asleep faster, sleep through the night, and wake up feeling rested.

1. How much sleep do I really need?

The societal gold standard of 8 hours is not actually a one size fits all number. While the average U.S. woman has a shoe size of an 8.5-9, and men 10.5, this is only an average, we are all unique and our shoe sizes vary. The same applies for sleep! Some individuals are short sleepers, requiring a shorter amount of time to be fully rested, while others need more. Much of this is dependent on how quickly we cycle through the different stages of sleep. And to debunk yet another misperception, we require less sleep the older we get. When we are young, we are working hard and feeling sleepy and never seem to have enough time to sleep, yet when we retire and have extra time to rest, our bodies wake us up at 3am. This is the terrible joke that the universe seems to play on us! However, if you think of it logically, sleep is designed for repair, rejuvenation and growth – as we age, our cells are changing at a much slower pace, and we are not hitting growth spurts in our 50's the same way we were in our early adolescence – think of how much sleep a newborn needs vs. a 6 month old vs. a 2 year old vs. an 8 year old, etc. When you have achieved your ideal amount of sleep, you will fall asleep within 10-15 minutes, sleep straight through the night (minus a possible bathroom break) and wake up feeling rested without daytime fatigue. Question 3 will walk you through the steps to determine your ideal sleep window and how much sleep you individually need.

2. Is a consistent sleep schedule/routine necessary?

One of the most important things we can do to improve our sleep is to have a consistent sleep and wake time seven days a week. If you go to sleep one night past your bedtime, it is very important to still wake up the next day at your regular wake up time, and although you will feel sleepier throughout the day, it is important to stay awake until your normal bedtime. Consistency is the key! Do not extend your time in bed. If you have a night where you did not sleep well, do not go to bed earlier the next night trying to catch up on sleep. When you try to force yourself to spend more time in bed than your body needs, you will wake up more often and get less quality, sustained sleep.



3. What is my ideal sleep window?

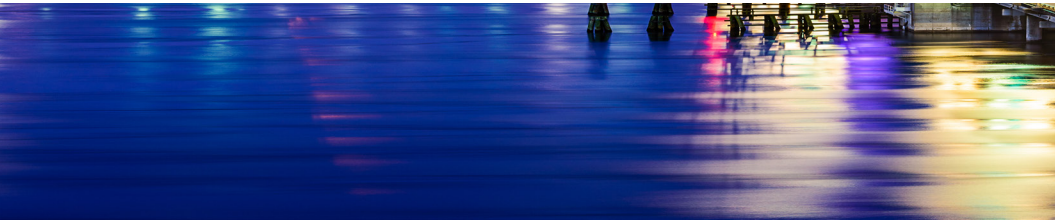
Sleep experts want you to become an efficient sleeper meaning that you should be sleeping for the majority of the time that you are in bed. There is a difference between what your mind can perceive and what your body needs when it comes to sleep. To determine your ideal sleep window and put yourself into a renewed sleep training this is what you need to do:

First determine how much sleep you are cumulatively getting on average in a 24-hour period (not time in bed, but actual time sleeping including naps throughout the day). As an example, let's say you sleep for 5 hours on and off at night and nap for 1 hour during the day, that is total of 6 hours. Next, determine the earliest time you have to wake up during the week. Let's say twice a week you wake up at 6am to exercise before your day begins. With this information, we set your wake up time for 6am and work backwards 6 hours. Your new sleep window is now 12 midnight to 6am.

For 7 days, keep this schedule. If you do not fall asleep until 4am, you still wake up at 6am and do not go to bed the next evening until 12 midnight. You are training your body when it gets to sleep. After 7 days, if you are falling asleep within 10-15 minutes, sleeping straight through the night minus a possible quick wake up, and waking up the next day feeling perfectly rested and alert all day, then you have your ideal window. If instead, you still feel sleepy, then after 7 days, you add 15 minutes to your sleep window. You would adjust your bedtime by bringing it forward by 15 minutes (11:45pm to 6am). Do not change your wake time – that always stays the same. After 7 days, repeat and continue until you get to the point where you are falling asleep within 10-15 minutes, sleeping straight through the night, and waking up feeling rested all day.

4. I have had insomnia for years, am I a lost cause?

You are definitely not a lost cause! This is actually a very common question that many people have worrying that they are stuck and beyond help. However, the good news is that there are a number of behavioral changes, such as sleep schedule, routine, and sleep habits that can get you right back on track. In fact, I have worked with Vietnam Vets who have been sleeping poorly since the war, and many decades later after implementing these strategies, they saw sleep improvements, increased duration of sleep and improved quality of sleep. All that is required is an open mind and a willingness to suspend judgment and try new strategies. Your mind and thoughts can be the biggest hurdle to overcome! You will need to make changes and that can be challenging for some, but if you have not been sleeping well for days, weeks, months, even years, then why not try something new for a week or two and commit to it? Nothing ventured nothing gained.



5. I used to be able to sleep, but now with COVID-19, my sleep routine has been affected, what can I do?

For some people, it is the fact that now they are home all of the time, they are not able to exercise in the same way and do not have a daytime routine that naturally tires their body. They can stay up as late as they want, or sleep in, or both. When our sleep becomes irregular, our body does not know when to feel tired and will try to get sleep whenever it can, therefore making us feel more tired during the day. The best thing you can do is to determine your ideal sleep window - the ideal amount of time that your body needs to sleep each night (see question 2), and then set a new schedule that works for your new COVID-related routine. For example, if you need 7 hours a night to feel refreshed and rested, instead of 10pm to 5am which you used to do, you might switch to 11pm to 6am or 12midnight to 7am, but the goal is to keep the same amount of sleep. Resist the urge to spend more time in bed, hide in bed, and avoid stressors in bed (i.e. reading the news on your phone). Additionally, do not take your worries to sleep with you. Take the time to implement a worry / process time (see question 11) and create a new bedtime routine to help your body get into the rhythm of winding down and getting sleepy.

6. My children don't seem to be sleeping as well at the moment, how can I help them establish a routine again?

Many parents are commenting that during COVID their children's sleep has been off. The most important thing is to keep a routine for your children. Even if you're not able to tire them out in the same way as before, or just because they can stay up later it does not mean that they need to. If they stay up later for many nights in a row, their body will become used to the 'new' bed time, and it will be more difficult for them to fall asleep earlier. Apply the same concept to eating dinner: if you usually eat at 7pm, your body is less likely to feel hungry at 5pm.

To get back into a routine, set up a wind down routine and schedule that is consistent every night, even throughout the weekend! Brushing teeth, reading a book, talking about what they're grateful for from the day (this will help create good mental health habits that support them into adulthood) and so on. Also, it is very common for children to experience anxiety during this time, so ensure you find time throughout the day to give them space to talk and share questions, express how they're feeling, and check in to see what's on their mind. They may be a bit more clingy to you during this time, and while it is ok to comfort, you still want to maintain structure and help them to feel comfortable sleeping in their own bed at night. The NCTSN.org has a fact sheet that can help parents and caregivers help children cope which you may find useful, [access here](#).



7. Are naps a good thing or a bad thing?

Just as you were told as a child not to eat a snack because it would ruin your dinner, so will a nap ruin your ability to get a full night of sleep! While there is perceived enjoyment in taking a nap, napping actually impairs your quality sleep at night.

Throughout the day, our bodies build up and accumulate sleepiness the same way that between meals we build hunger. When we sleep, we deplete that sleepiness just like our hunger is satiated as we eat our dinner. From the time we wake up until the time we go to bed, our sleepiness grows, and the amount of sleepiness that we have determines how long we are able to stay asleep at night. If your body needs 8 hours of sleep for full rest and repair, but we took a 2 hour nap during the day, we now only have 6 hours of sleepiness remaining which keeps ourselves from getting the total amount of restful sleep that we need. If you absolutely cannot keep your eyes open and decide on that rare occasion to take a nap, then it is recommended that the nap be no longer than 20-30 minutes. This will provide you with a quick resurgence of energy without depleting your sleep debt to prevent you from sleeping through the night that evening.

8. What is the ideal sleep environment?

Quiet, dark, cold, and comfortable. Ear plugs and eye masks are ok too! Maybe it is time for some new blackout window treatments. If you have to have noise, have it be consistent and static – not a TV or podcast with voices as volume changes will wake you up. The same is true for music as the crescendos will again stir your body's ability to sleep. Instead if you absolutely need to have some sound it is recommended you choose a static noise such as white noise - rain or a fan. Also, it is easier to sleep when it is cold, so it is recommended for the room to be cold enough that you need a cover.

9. Why can't I read, watch TV, snack, or check my phone in bed?

If you were to ask what snack most people would get at a movie theater, most would think of popcorn. We immediately associate popcorn with the movies. In the same manner, we want your brain to do the same thing with your bed – to associate your bed with sleep, rest, and relaxation. Therefore, it is important to stop watching TV, reading, checking phones, etc. in bed. Otherwise the brain gets confused and is not sure what to associate the bed with and whether it should be awake or asleep when in the bed. The same applies with NOT sleeping anywhere else like the couch or your favorite comfy chair. If you are watching TV and notice yourself starting to nod off that is your cue to go to bed (assuming it's bedtime!), or adjust what you are doing to keep yourself awake until your chosen bedtime aligned with your sleep window. You can catch yourself nodding off by sitting with your elbows on your knees and your head in your hands – as soon as you start to nod off your head will droop and wake you up!



10. Does a wind down routine really help?

Yes! A deliberate bedtime routine can be very helpful. For example, if you do not already have a routine, for the next week, try this one. About 30 minutes before bed, start getting ready by washing your face, brushing your teeth, and changing into your PJs. Then do something relaxing like deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation (PMR). This cues your body and mind that it is time to get sleepy and prepare to go to bed. There are many free apps available to guide you through relaxation, breathing, progressive muscle relaxation (PMR), mindfulness, and grounding exercises.

11. How do I shut my brain off?

One effective tip is to have a dedicated worry / process time for a few minutes before bed. Oftentimes when we crawl into bed and turn off the lights, this is the first time of the day that there are no distractions and we are alone with our thoughts. Just like when you attempt to turn off your computer and you get a message asking about a forced shut down because the hardware is ready to shut down but there is a program still running, your mind can still be processing even when your body is ready to collapse.

10-15 minutes before bed, take out a notepad and a pen (do not do this on a laptop/tablet/phone/any technology the important thing here is pen to paper). Start with 5 minutes each night (set a timer so you do not quit early!) and slowly build up to 10-15 minutes. On the right side of the paper, write your to do list for the next day. On the left side, pour out all thoughts, good and bad, going through your mind. Problem solve and process. Let all of your worries out and do not hold back, you might surprise yourself with what comes out. Contrary to some people's thoughts this does not create worries, but instead it allows you to let out all the subconscious thoughts floating through your mind from the day. It will feel exhausting yet relieving at the same time, much like after a "scream to release pent up frustration."

After writing, you will be completely ready to collapse into your bed, so put down the pen and paper, knowing that everything will be there the next day, and you no longer have to carry it with you into bed. If your mind continues to run and race, get back out of bed and continue writing until it is empty and you are completely exhausted. Do the same if you wake up in the middle of the night with thoughts and ideas - instead of turning on your phone to see what's there.



12. How does light affect my sleep?

There is a “sleep switch,” a part of our brain called the suprachiasmatic nucleus (SCN), that receives messages from the optic nerve in our eyes that perceives light. As we perceive light, a message is sent that we should be awake. Think of evolution – when the sun is out, we should be up to hunt and gather, but when the sun goes away, it is safest to go to our protective place to sleep and rejuvenate for the next day. Therefore, we should reduce the amount of light we are exposed to in the evening to start sending signals to our brain to slowly wind down. It is the same reason why we should use a nightlight instead of turning on all of the lights when we wake up to use the rest room in the middle of the night, and the same reason why it is important to get as much light as possible when we wake up in the morning. Exposure to light at night, such as through electronics, can significantly delay our ability to fall asleep, and too much light too early in the morning can wake us up before we are fully rested.

13. What should I do if I’m lying in bed wide awake?

If you find that you are awake for more than 15 minutes, get out of bed and do something boring, and in low light, until you are sleepy enough to return to bed. The longer you spend in bed when you are not sleepy or are worrying, the more you will associate your bed with fear/worry/anxiety/frustration. Also, do not check the clock! This can add to your stress as you begin calculating how much more sleep you might get and worrying you about whether you will be tired or able to function the next day. If your alarm has not gone off, then it does not matter what time it is because it is not time to be awake yet. If you feel like it’s been 15 minutes, it most likely has!

14. Is a bedtime snack a good idea?

While no one would say to go to bed hungry, it is best to not eat very heavy right before bed so that your body can use all of its resources to repair and restore you mind and body during sleep instead of diverting energy to digesting food. Additionally, limit the amount of liquid intake before bed to reduce your bladder waking you up in the middle of the night. If you do wake up in the middle of the night, do not feed your sleep! If we eat or drink something in the middle of the night, our bodies learn that that is a time to get nutrients and will begin waking us up at the same time every night to get needed nutrients. Therefore, while it is ok to have a small sip of water if necessary, do your best to reduce any intake throughout the night.



15. Does smoking, drinking, or eating food later in the evening really make a difference to my sleep?

While alcohol may have an initial soporific effect, you actually do not get quality sleep and often will find that you have more awakenings throughout the night as your body is working to get back to balance with chemicals such as GABA and Glutamate. Additionally, while many think of nicotine as having a relaxing effect, it is actually a stimulant that can have a significant negative effect on your sleep. And then there is caffeine ... did you know that it takes on average 7-8 hours for the body to metabolize the amount of caffeine in one cup of coffee? Therefore, if you have a bedtime of 10pm, you should stop consuming caffeine at 2pm or earlier.

16. When is the ideal time to exercise so that it doesn't interrupt my sleep?

In general it is recommended to not exercise too closely to bed time as you want your body to be entering a less stimulated, more relaxed mode as bed time approaches. The best time of day to get full benefits of the workout and to sleep better at night would be the early morning workout times. Not only does it help to keep workouts consistent and prevent other daily events from interfering with the workout, an early dose of sunshine and lights helps to jump start the body for the day. Afternoon workouts can also be beneficial and have positive impacts on your sleep raising the body temperature for a number of hours (one of the reasons why you do not want to work out right before bed). Exercising close to bed raises your temperature and excites the body which typically makes it more difficult to wind down and fall asleep.

Conclusion

There is a difference between simple and easy. While many of these strategies may seem simple, making changes to any habit can be a challenge. Creating new sleep patterns requires intention and perseverance, as consistency is the key. However, by making these adjustments, you truly can take back control over your sleep, and reverse weeks, months or even years of poor sleep through these new behaviors turning the dream of peaceful sleep into reality.

Questions

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