

# Learning Better Sleep



What you can do ...  
but what will you do?

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## THE REGULATION OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS

The brain needs light in the morning and darkness at night to regulate sleep onset and waking up times. Spending long periods in bed trying to “catch up” on sleep or “sleeping in” gives the brain confusing messages.

The following information will help you make healthy changes to improve your sleep patterns and give your brain the good sleep messages.

### CONSTANT WAKING TIME

- Getting out of bed at the same time each day is more important than going to bed at the same time each night.
- Going to bed at the same time each night does not guarantee the onset of sleep.
- No matter what the previous night’s sleep was like, getting up at the same time sets the boundaries for the end of sleep and your time in bed.
- The same getting up time gives the brain important messages in the regulation of your sleep and helps to match your sleep with the environment.



## EARLY MORNING LIGHT EXPOSURE

- Light in the morning resets the brain sleep clock. This light does not have to be bright, direct sunlight.
- Outside light shuts down the production of the night-time sleep hormone melatonin (stops you feeling sleepy) which wakes you up and makes you feel more alert.

- The secretion of melatonin appears to be more effective when it has a definite suppression time each day.
- You may need to be outside or have other forms of light for at least 35 minutes in the early morning light each day.

### Remember:

- **Wearing sunglasses, tinted glasses or hats with a brim during this time prevents you from having that good early morning light.**
- **Avoid bright light and wear sunglasses for the rest of the day.**

## BED ACTIVITIES AND SLEEP

Bed needs to be a safe and comfortable place for sleeping.

- Noise from the environment, from the TV and other digital sources will disrupt sleep.
- Phones and iPads emit blue light and any interactive activity will delay the onset of sleep.
- Music is also not static and changes considerably which will potentially wake you at least briefly.

## CLOCK/PHONE WATCHING AND SLEEP

- Watching the clock/your phone at night tends to increase anxiety about sleep.
- The good sleeper sees 2am when she/he wakes and thinks “wonderful four more hours in bed” whilst



the poor sleeper sees the same time and thinks “disaster – I am never going to get back to sleep”.

- Keep the clock/phone (on silent) in your room but turn it to the wall or face down or even better put it on the floor or outside the door.

## OTHER SPECIFIC STRATEGIES FOR YOU

### DIET AND SLEEP

- A small carbohydrate snack (biscuit, piece of toast, rice, pasta) 30 minutes prior to bedtime is a useful “sleep enhancer”.
- Milk (with Milo/Horlicks if you like it) also helps to set the sleep pathway in action – tryptophan to serotonin to the night-time hormone melatonin.
- Avoid caffeine up to 12 hours prior to bedtime.
- Avoid high protein foods (with the exception of milk) and large meals a few hours prior to bedtime.
- Explore probiotic foods to aid in healthy gut bacteria.



### TEMPERATURE CONTROL AND SLEEP

A falling core temperature is crucial for sleep onset. Having warm hands and feet can be useful in drawing heat to your extremities and is very soothing, especially in winter.

#### Exercise

- Intense exercise too close to bedtime will make you more alert – make you feel “wired”. Gentle exercise will heat your body a little and takes some of the heat from your internal temperature which will help sleep onset.

#### Baths

- A warm, deep bath of at least 25 minutes one and a half hours prior to bedtime will raise your external body temperature. This will result in lowering your internal body temperature as you cool down and help sleep onset.

### RELAXATION STRATEGIES

Sleep is a continuation of the day’s events and is not a separate component of our 24-hour cycle.

- Reducing muscle tension and any thinking is a crucial component of sleep onset – needs practise, practise and perseverance!

- Any increase in either muscle tension or thoughts at night may lead to a release of adrenalin to keep you in a state of semi-alertness.
- Fight or flight mode - this is not the response that you want when you are attempting to sleep.

### HOW CAN YOU LEARN TO WIND DOWN BEFORE BED?

1. Practise relaxation and mindfulness techniques/ strategies.
2. Do something that you like doing at night and something that helps you to slow down.
3. Be aware of what thoughts “trigger” any anxious symptoms/thoughts.
4. Be persistent and patient – this will take time.



Remember Practise, Practise and Perseverance – that’s what it takes!

### STIMULUS CONTROL THERAPY OR THE QUARTER HOUR RULE (QHR)

Aims:

1. To associate bed with sleeping again
2. To improve sleep quality
3. To reduce the fear of not sleeping by getting out of bed when awake, anxious or frustrated

What to do and how to do it:

1. Get out of bed if you are feeling very uncomfortable and have racing thoughts within quarter of an hour of getting into bed.
2. Go into another room, or sit on the floor next to the bed or sit on the edge of the bed.
3. Do some activity which helps you to “slow down” – gentle breathing or relaxation exercises. Listen to music or lie on the floor in low-level light or in the dark. Keep light to a minimum level by using lamps – bright light in the middle of the night will only wake you up more.

4. When you feel less tense or a little sleepy, go back to bed and “see what happens” – let sleep happen. This behaviour change generally requires many trials, over many consecutive nights.
5. This is worth the effort as research shows it is a very effective relearning sleep strategy.

## **BED RESTRICTION/SLEEP CONSOLIDATION THERAPY**

Many individuals compensate for their poor sleep/wake pattern by spending long periods of time in bed, which generally results in:

1. Increased sleep anxiety
2. Deterioration in the quality of their sleep

Aims:

1. To reduce time spent in bed to approximately match sleep time
2. Where sleep time equals 85% of the time spent in bed

Keeping a sleep diary is a useful method of assessing both time in bed and how long you sleep. From the diary write down:

- Your sleep time then divide by how long you spend in bed. Now multiply by 100/1 – this is your sleep efficiency, e.g. 6 hours sleeps/8 hours in bed =  $0.75 \times 100/1=75\%$ .
- Which means you are only sleeping for 75% of the time you are spending in bed – is this efficient sleep?

## **PARADOXICAL INTENTION**

Trying so hard to go to sleep or go back to sleep often results in you feeling even more awake and wired! How about trying to stay awake when you feel like this?

1. Sit up in bed in the dark and focus on a spot on the opposite wall.
2. Keep your eyes wide open for around 5-10 minutes. Keep repeating: “Stay awake. Thoughts to the side.” Go back to bed and see what happens. If you start to feel uncomfortable and wired again – repeat this part of the intervention.
3. Put your energy into staying awake.

You may find that in trying to stay awake – and letting go of the trying hard to sleep story, that sleep just happens!



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