



BODY & MIND
CONSULTING

SLEEP LIKE A CHAMP: 7 TIPS FOR BETTER SLEEP



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Everybody is busy. Often crazy busy. In fact, when I work with clients that come to me with life issues that seem unsurmountable--- I look for the seemingly small—but really HUGE steps they can put in place to get their life and thinking in check. One key piece of life functioning is sleep. If I had a dollar for every time an executive, typical client or family say they sacrifice sleep to “get it [life chores and the “to do” list] all done” I’d probably be set for life (or at least a few years!).

Unlike other basic bodily functions, such as eating and breathing, we still do not fully understand why people need to sleep. There are theories—some think sleep may be the process by which the brain shuts down so it can store the day’s memories . Others, point to sleep’s importance in regulating the body’s hormones. But these theories are not complete.

While a person sleeps, cells undergo a cycle of repair that provides both oxygen and glucose. When a person stays up all night, the brain’s cells are denied the products of this cycle, severely hampering the organs’ reactions to stimuli and instructions. Every cell in our body needs food and it produces waste, so all those things occur in a regular regimented way when we’ve slept well. And when we interfere with our body systems everything else is out of sync.

When I first started in the clinical world I was thrown a multitude of theories and ways to help people. True enough, all those theories and approaches are valuable in the right situations and circumstances, but for many people making one life change can make a tremendous difference in their ability to function and have a quality of life they desire. The reason many people have an idea that their “to do list” and desires to accomplish whatever they feel is necessary in a day eclipses sleep in importance has not looked at the big picture and how to function optimally.

There are a multitude of factors that can interfere with a good night's sleep — from pressure at work and family responsibilities to unexpected challenges, such as layoffs, relationship issues or illnesses. It's no wonder that quality sleep is sometimes elusive. So where do you even begin? How do your needs take some precedent so ultimately you are more effective and can get more accomplished than you did when you were sleep deprived?



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The good news is that there are strategies you can follow to maximize your sleep and increase your optimal functioning to be at your best, regardless of your age, circumstance or situation.

1. SCHEDULE MATTERS

The way you feel while you're awake depends in part on what happens while you're sleeping. During sleep, your body is working to support healthy brain function and maintain your physical health. Sleep plays an important role in your physical health. For example, sleep is involved in healing and repair of your heart and blood vessels. Ongoing sleep deficiency is linked to an increased risk of heart disease, kidney disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and stroke. In children and teens, sleep also helps support growth and development.

We schedule meetings, dentist appointments, lunch dates--- we need to schedule our sleep.

Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, even on weekends, holidays and days off. This routine will get your brain and body used to being on a healthy snooze-wake schedule. In time, you'll be able to nod off quickly and rest soundly through the night. Being consistent reinforces your body's sleep-wake cycle and helps promote better sleep at night.

Limit daytime naps-- long daytime naps can interfere with nighttime sleep — especially if you're struggling with insomnia or poor sleep quality at night. If you choose to nap during the day, limit yourself to about 10 to 30 minutes and make it during the midafternoon.

If you work nights, you'll need to make an exception to the rules about daytime sleeping. In this case, keep your window coverings closed so that sunlight — which adjusts your internal clock — doesn't interrupt your daytime sleep. Get out in bright light for 5 to 30 minutes as soon as you get out of bed. Light tells your body to get going!

2. SET THE STAGE

Just as your brain and body respond to cues for stress it also does so for sleep. This takes practice, though. Just as a stage in a play needs the right props to accomplish the mood and message of the show, so does your room for sleep. Begin with:

Developing a relaxing bedtime routine.

A relaxing activity right before bedtime conducted away from bright lights helps your brain differentiate sleep time from other activities that might cause excitement, stress or anxiety.

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Light matters.

Use light to help manage your circadian rhythms. Avoid bright light in the evening and expose yourself to sunlight in the morning. This will keep your circadian rhythms in check. Likewise, darkness counts when you are trying to get some zz's. Dim the lights in your home 2 to 3 hours before bedtime. Lower light levels signal your brain to make melatonin, the hormone that brings on sleep. One tip some clients have found helpful is using a 15-watt bulb if you are accustomed to reading in the last hour before bed to wind down.

Evaluating your room.

Design your sleep environment to establish the conditions you need for sleep. Your bedroom should be cool – between 60 and 67 degrees.

Nixing noise.

Your bedroom should also be free from any noise that can disturb your sleep. Faucet drips, nearby traffic, or a loud dog can chip away at your sleep. This includes a bed partner's sleep disruptions such as snoring. And if you're a parent, you might be all too aware of noises at night long after your children have outgrown their cribs. I have client say they cannot relax or sleep without a TV or some noise in the background. This actually has the opposite effect. Consider using "white noise" machines, humidifiers, fans and other devices rather than the television or other electronics.



Put away the clock.

If you glance at your clock several times a night that can make your mind race with thoughts about the day to come, which can keep you awake. Put your alarm clock in a drawer, under your bed, or turn it away from view so the light, and the linkage of the light from an alarm clock is diminished.

Comfort is key.

Make sure your mattress is comfortable and

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supportive. The one you have been using for years may have exceeded its life expectancy – about 9 or 10 years for most good quality mattresses. Have comfortable pillows and make the room attractive and inviting for sleep but also free of allergens that might affect you and objects that might cause you to slip or fall if you have to get up during the night.

3. MANAGE STRESS

When you have too much to do — and too much to think about — your sleep is likely to suffer. To help restore peace, consider healthy ways to manage stress. Before you roll your eyes and say “I have stress and just have to deal with it” – realize that stress and a lack of sleep is a vicious cycle that you can actually break.

A large literature on stress indicates that there are ways to lower stress. We humans like to have some control over our life circumstance. Having some personal control over a situation helps create a buffer against stress. Even if you feel as if your work life is effectively “out of your control” you can make strides to “control the controllables” at home and in your personal life. And by lowering stress, not only can you experience a variety of health and well-being benefits, but you will also sleep better. Indeed, one study shows that stress reduction programs lead to improvements in sleep.

When we're stressed, our minds race with thoughts instead of shutting down at night, inhibiting important functions involved in memory, muscle repair and mood. When we don't get enough sleep, our immune system falters just as much as when we're stressed.

4. GET OFF THE GRID

Wind down. Your body needs time to shift into sleep mode, so spend the last hour before bed doing a calming activity such as reading. For some people, using an electronic device such as a laptop can make it hard to fall asleep, because the particular type of light emanating from the screens of these



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devices is activating to the brain. If you have trouble sleeping, avoid electronics before bed or in the middle of the night.

If you can't sleep, go into another room and do something relaxing until you feel tired. It is best to take work materials, computers and televisions out of the sleeping environment. Use your bed only for activities like sleep and intimacy to strengthen the association between bed and sleep. If you associate a particular activity or item with anxiety about sleeping (or any other anxiety provoking thoughts) omit it from your bedtime routine.

During a two-week inpatient experiment involving a dozen adults, some participants were asked to read on an iPad for four hours each night before bedtime, for five consecutive nights. Others read printed books in dim light. After a week, the groups switched. Researchers found that participants using iPads displayed reduced levels of melatonin, a hormone that typically increases in the evening and helps induce sleepiness. They took longer to fall asleep, and spent less time in restorative REM, or rapid-eye movement, sleep. In addition, the iPad readers reported being sleepier and less alert the following morning, even after eight hours of sleep. They also displayed delayed circadian rhythms.

So other than a little grogginess, why should we worry about the apparent loss of sleep that our glowing screens are causing us?

Researchers say that as electronic devices become only more prevalent their role in significant sleep loss could lead to long-term health consequences. For instance, chronic suppression of melatonin has been linked to increased risk of prostate, colorectal and breast cancers. And a persistent lack of sleep has been associated with obesity and diabetes.

5. BODY AND BRAIN IN SYNCH

In order to get your brain and body in synch you must pay attention to what you put into your body. This not only includes food but nicotine, caffeine and alcohol deserve caution, too. The stimulating effects of nicotine and caffeine take hours to wear off and can wreak havoc on quality sleep. And even though alcohol might make you feel sleepy at first, it can disrupt sleep later in the night.

Reconsider food choices

Don't go to bed either hungry or stuffed. A large late evening meal interferes with sleep as your body is busy digesting. You may also suffer from heartburn or indigestion. Try to eat at least three hours before going to bed.

If you are eating high amounts of starchy or fatty foods, or very refined, sugary foods that stress your body, you are more likely to feel sluggish and lethargic as these foods place high demands on your digestive systems.

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Avoid foods such as pork, cheese, chocolate, tomatoes, potatoes and wine near bedtime as they are rich in an amino acid called tyramine, which the body converts to noradrenaline, a brain stimulant.

Nicotine is a stimulant, so smokers take longer to fall asleep and are more likely to suffer sleep problems.



Rethink Your Drink

Say no to an after-dinner espresso or late-night cup of coffee. The stimulant effect of caffeine reaches its peak one to four hours after it's consumed, but some people can feel its effects up to 12 hours later. Some over-the-counter cold and headache remedies are also high in caffeine.

Alcohol can make you sleepy at bedtime, but beware. After its initial effects wear off, it will make you wake up more often overnight. Although a couple of drinks may help you to drift off to sleep, too much alcohol decreases the REM sleep we all need and disrupts the body's natural rhythms. It causes blood sugar levels to drop, so you may wake up in the middle of the night. Alcohol is also dehydrating so you are likely to wake up feeling thirsty.

6. PHYSICAL ACTIVITY MATTERS

People sleep significantly better and feel more alert during the day if they get at least 150 minutes of exercise a week. A nationally representative sample of more than 2,600 men and women, ages 18-85, found that 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity a week, which is the national guideline, provided a 65 percent improvement in sleep quality. People also said they felt less sleepy during the day, compared to those with less physical activity. The study lends more evidence to mounting research showing the importance of exercise to a number of health factors. Among adults in the United States, about 35 to 40 percent of the population has problems with falling asleep or with daytime sleepiness.

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Regular physical activity can promote better sleep, helping you to fall asleep faster and to enjoy deeper sleep. Timing is important, though. If you exercise too close to bedtime, you might be too energized to fall asleep. If this seems to be an issue for you, exercise earlier in the day.



7. FREE YOUR MIND

Put aside any work, touchy discussions, or complicated decisions 2 to 3 hours before bed. It takes time to turn off the "noise" of the day. If you've still got a lot on your mind, jot it down and let go for the night. Then, about an hour before you hit the sack, read something calming, meditate, listen to quiet music, or take a warm bath. Even 10 minutes of relaxation makes a difference. Try these other activities to help free your mind :

Schedule a worry time

Do you have a busy life? Are you so busy throughout your day that you have the chance to think about what is happening in your life only when you get into bed, a place that is quiet, dark and free of distractions?

When you are half asleep, you are not at your problem-solving best, and may be even more prone to im-agin-ing unlikely disasters and worrying about things over which you have little control. The solution? Problem-solve intentionally at a time when you are better able to generate good solutions. Give yourself a time to address worries earlier in the day so bedtime isn't the only available time to think about the day's events.

If you do that, worries about unfinished business will be less likely to follow you to bed. Start by scheduling a time in the early evening when you can have 20 to 30 minutes of uninterrupted time. On a sheet of paper (or electronic document), draw a vertical line down the middle. At the top of the left column write "Worries or Concerns." Label the right column "Next Steps" or "Solutions."

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Get out of bed

Perhaps bedtime represents your first opportunity to process the day's events. Perhaps your bed has become a place where you struggle night after night and therefore you approach bed feeling anxious. In this state of mind, you are more likely to start thinking about things that worry you.

One of the most effective ways to break this habit is to go to another room once the worrying starts and until it subsides. When you first start to use this strategy you may spend a lot of time out of bed at night and sleep even less, but this will be short-term and a relatively small price to pay for solving the problem. The sleep deprivation that may result from getting out of bed will increase your sleep drive and if you do it consistently you will quickly start sleeping better. Your bed will be associated with sleep rather than worry, and you can expect improved sleep.

A rule of thumb is that if you worry for what feels like longer than 15 minutes (do not watch the clock) or if you are wide awake in bed, it is best to leave the room and not return until you are sleepy and not worrying.

Occupy your mind

Racing thoughts and a tense body make restful sleep difficult. Have you ever been told to count sheep to help you fall asleep? Try this experiment right now. Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Imagine a field with a fence. What does your fence look like? What color is it? How high is it? Is it made of wood? Does it stretch the entire vista of your mind? Or is it only one or two sections of fence? Once you have a clear vision of what the fence looks like, imagine a sheep approaching it and jumping effortlessly and slowly over it. As the sheep's front feet touch the grass on the other side, a second sheep jumps with exactly the same height and velocity. As the second sheep's feet touch the ground on the other side, a third sheep begins the jump. Watch a fourth sheep jump. And a fifth. And a sixth. All of your sheep jump with the same form and speed. And then a seventh sheep jumps. And an eighth. A ninth and a tenth.

What does the sheep exercise tell us? Engaging your mind by picturing something occupies space in your busy mind. However, it also tells us that if the picture is boring, you may become distracted by unrelated thoughts. There is a strategy here: Engage your mind in an image that will compete with other thoughts. Perhaps sheep jumping over a fence isn't engaging enough to hold the attention of your overactive mind—in that case think of an engaging storyline in your mind and divert focus from what is causing anxiety.

Don't relive the worst part of your day

Draw your attention away from thoughts of the past by focusing on the here and now. Take a deliberate vacation from your repeated thoughts. How? First, focus your attention on your breathing—the sounds and feeling of air moving into your nose, warming your nasal passages and travelling down into your chest. Now focus on the sounds and feeling of air being moved upward and out of your body. If your attention wanders, do not judge yourself; that's normal. Instead, gently bring your attention back to your breath.

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Conclusion

There are a lot of ways to improve your mood, productivity and success.. Some work better than others, and I can say with certainty that these sleep strategies work because I've personally employed most of these and had the reward of better sleep and functioning.

That's what sleep and health can do—get your body optimally functioning so you can propel forward toward your dreams and goals. It seems counterintuitive that working fewer hours and maintaining sleep and good life patterns would make a difference--- but they do and impact the – whether a successful business, well-functioning home life or good grades in school. If you're still having trouble sleeping, don't hesitate to speak with your doctor or to find a sleep professional. You may also benefit from recording your sleep in a Sleep Diary to help you better evaluate common patterns or issues you may see with your sleep or sleeping habits.

One important thing to remember is this: A healthy life takes commitment and effort. And sleep is the first step toward realizing your goals.

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