



DIFFICULTIES

SLEEPING

Explains what sleep problems can look like, possible reasons people have sleep problems, how poor sleep can affect you, ways you can manage poor sleep and some sleep exercises. Apps and websites for more support are also provided.

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What are sleep problems?

Sleep is very important. It contributes to our overall health and wellbeing; it enables our bodies to repair and get fit for another day. It is important to be getting enough sleep each night (see chat below).

School-age	6 - 13 years	9 - 11 hours
Teen	14 - 17 years	8 - 10 hours
Young Adult	18 - 25 years	7 - 9 hours
Adult	26 - 64 years	7 - 9 hours

If you aren't getting the right amount of sleep you may have a sleep problem.

A sleep problem can mean you are not getting enough sleep or that you are getting too much and oversleeping.

With poor sleep you may find it difficult to go off to sleep or have more disruptive sleep.

A number of things could cause you to have sleep problems or poor-quality sleep, but some common reasons include:

- Stress
- Problems with anxiety
- Low mood/depression struggles
- Noise
- Temperature
- Alcohol, caffeine & nicotine
- Shift work/working patterns
- Taking recreational drugs
- Another condition or having a diagnosed sleep disorder
- Certain medicines we take
- Diet

How can poor sleep affect me?

Sleep has an important restorative function. Maintaining a healthy sleep-wake cycle allows the natural rhythm of the body to be reset every day which optimises brain functioning. Missed sleep or heavily disrupted sleep can lead to physical and psychological problems. Ongoing poor sleep can be a huge factor in the future development of some depressive disorders. Feeling depressed or anxious can increase with the severity of poor sleep



Physical:

- Tiredness & Fatigue
- Lowered immune system which can lead to immune damage
- Negative effects on cardiovascular health
- Physical symptoms of Anxiety: increased heart rate, shakiness/trembling
- Change in our vital signs e.g., blood pressure and/or body temperature.

Psychological problems:

- Periods of low mood
- Increased irritability
- Anxiety
- Decrease in cognitive functioning and performance e.g. forgetfulness, slower thinking
- Forgetfulness or feeling fuzzy during the day
- Decreased ability to focus and concentrate
- Psychotic episodes

It can be very easy to get into a cycle of sleeplessness. Especially if you struggle with feeling anxious about sleeping, you may worry about the fact that you aren't getting enough sleep which prevents you from getting off to sleep and so when you wake you feel tired and find it difficult to cope with day-to-day functioning.

How can I help to improve my sleep?

Below are some ideas of how to improve your chances of good sleep. If you are struggling with poor sleep some of these ideas might be worth a try:

Keep a consistent sleep schedule

Try to go to sleep and wake up at about the same times every day — even on weekends. This reinforces your body's sleep cycle (your internal clock), which can make it easier for you to fall asleep and wake up every day.

Sticking to a consistent schedule may also help reduce daytime sleepiness.

Create a relaxing bedtime routine — and stick with it

A relaxing bedtime routine helps you unwind so you're ready to sleep. And keeping a consistent routine helps your body recognize that it's bedtime when you start the routine. This may help you fall asleep more quickly.

The best time to start your routine is about 30 to 60 minutes before you go to bed.

Your routine can include whatever makes you feel most relaxed, unless it involves a device that emits blue light. **Here are some ideas:**

- Take a warm bath or shower.
- Try some gentle stretches to help your muscles relax and release tension.
- Try listening to some soothing music while you focus on your breathing.
- Spend time reading a book but try to stay away from electronic reading devices.
- Avoid anything stressful or overly stimulating.
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Turn off electronic devices before you go to sleep

Electronic devices like your phone emit blue light, which can reduce the melatonin levels in your body. This is a chemical that controls your sleep/wake cycle. When your melatonin levels dip, it can be more difficult to fall asleep.

Devices that emit blue light can also distract you, keeping your brain alert. This may make it harder to fall asleep.

Keeping your phone near your bed can disrupt your sleep, even if you're not aware of it - the message notifications, buzzing, and light that can suddenly pop on in the middle of the night can wake you up momentarily, leading to an interrupted sleep.

Staying healthy: Diet and exercise

Exercise:

As little as 30 minutes of exercise per day can improve your sleep quality, as well as your overall physical and mental health. And if you can exercise outside, that might increase the benefits even more, since exposure to natural light helps regulate your sleep cycle. But if you can't get outside, don't worry. Even regular indoor exercise may help you sleep better. Just avoid exercising within an hour or two of your bedtime. This can increase your energy levels and body temperature, which may make it harder to fall asleep. If you want to do some type of activity later in the day, try doing stretches or yoga.

Diet:

Caffeine, alcohol, and high-in-sugar foods can all lead to sleep disruption. Caffeine in particular is a stimulant and it is recommended that you don't have any more caffeine 4- 6hours before bedtime. Caffeine isn't only in tea and coffee but it also in fizzy drinks, chocolate, and various medications so there may be more things with caffeine in in your diet than you originally thought.

Make your sleep environment work for you

A cool, dark, quiet room may help you fall asleep and stay asleep more easily. If your bedroom gets flooded with too much light, or if it is noisy outside, you may want to consider using an eye mask to keep your sleep environment as dark as possible, or earplugs to keep it quiet.

When you have a comfortable bed, it might be tempting to use it like a sofa, for reading, working, talking on the phone, watching TV, etc. However, it's important to use your bed for sleep only. This helps strengthen your brain's association between your bed and sleep, making it easier to fall asleep.

Reading may be one way you relax before going to sleep, but even books can be disruptive to your sleep if they keep your brain alert. Try reading on the sofa before moving to your bed instead.

Manage stress before going to bed

Thinking about things you're worried about can keep you awake at night. To help prevent your worries from keeping you awake: Write down your worries before going to bed to help get them out of your head. If your to-do list stresses you out, write that down as well. Prioritize what you need to do tomorrow and the rest of the week, then try to relax. Try a meditation or sleep yoga before bed to help calm your mind.

What to do when you can't get to sleep?

If you have created a good environment and resolved all your stresses but still find your sleep is very disrupted and you can't get off to sleep. Try one of these techniques to help you drift off:

1. Listen to an audio story/guided meditation

Listening to an audiobook or guided meditation can be seen as a shortcut to dreaming. Hearing the descriptions helps us build the bridge to dreaming, we are imagining the pictures the words are making for us. We see the colours and feel the emotions. It helps us to focus on something other than our worries and keeps us distracted from any stress.

2. Controlled breathing exercises

Doing a series of controlled deep breathing helps to calm. It helps to reduce our stress and prepare the brain for sleep by reducing any external stimulus that is distracting. Options for you to try are counting your breaths: Inhale slowly and gently through the nose, exhale out your mouth, count up- either by counting each breathe or each cycle. Another option is to do the 4-7-8 breathing technique. Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of four. Hold your breath for a count of seven. Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of eight. Now inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times for a total of four breaths.

3. Imagery

Using imagery can be really effective in getting you to relax so to help you drift off to sleep easier. It involves focusing your mind on a place you know well that feels calming in detail.

Firstly, make sure you are in a comfortable position, maybe do a body scan first. Begin on picking your image, it can be any place that you find calming, relaxing or just peaceful. This might be a real place, like somewhere you went on holiday or near where you were born or maybe somewhere you dream to go. Or it might be a made-up place, like being on a cloud or in space. Picture the place in detail, focusing on your senses and how you feel to be there: physically and emotionally. Start answering some questions: what are you wearing? Where are you sitting/standing/lying on? How does it feel against you? What is around you? Pay attention to your senses: what can you see/smell/hear/taste/touch? The more detail you include, the more your mind will thin its real, the more powerful and relaxing it will be. Do this imagery for around 20-30 minutes.

4. Mindfulness and Meditation activities

There are lots of mindfulness and meditation activities for you to try to get you to calm and help you sleep. **One example is the body scan meditation exercise:**

- Begin by noticing the sensations happening at the top of your head
- Then focus your attention on your skull, note how it contacts the pillow
- Scan your face area, forehead, eyes, and nose. Pay attention to your cheeks and mouth, you may feel tingling, tightness, notice the sensations in your throat.
- Bring your attentions down into your shoulder area- notice any tension.
- Shift your attention to your left shoulder, down your arm, paying attention to any tingling, coolness or pressure in your elbow, lower arm and then your hand. Allow your hands to relax and soften.
- Now, bring the attention to your right shoulder and do the same all the way down to your fingertips
- From the tops of your shoulders go down your back- in a zigzag sensation or an up and down motion across your back.
- Notice your upper, mid and lower back sensations- if any thoughts come up doing this, see if you can let them go floating across your mind.
- Now shift your attention down to your pelvic area and the places where your body has contact with the bed. Gently bring your focus down your left hip and down your leg.
- Bring this attention to your leg, knee and left calf. All the way through you ankle and toes.
- Now do the same from your right hip, down your leg to your knee and then your ankle, right foot, and toes.

5. Progressive muscle relaxation

Creates a calming effect by gradually tightening and releasing muscles throughout the body in conjunction with controlling your breathing.

- With your eyes closed, breathe in and out slowly.
- Starting with your face, tense your muscles (lips, eyes, jaw) for 10 seconds then release your muscles and breathe deeply
- Tense your shoulders for 10 seconds and then relax them and breath
- Continue tensing and relaxing parts of the body. Exclude any area where it causes pain.

Examples of body parts to try:

- Shoulders
- Upper arms
- Back
- Lower arms and hands
- Stomach
- Buttocks
- Thighs
- Calves
- Feet.

Helpful Information

APPS:

Calm: For Sleep, Meditation and Relaxation. Try It for Free For 7 Days. Calm Creates LifeChanging Audio Content to Help You Stress Less.

Headspace: Everyday Mindfulness and Meditation for Stress, Anxiety, Sleep, Focus, Fitness, and More. Meditation Techniques for Mindfulness, Stress Relief & Peace of Mind. Learn the Basics for Free. Use Anywhere, Anytime. Track Your Progress. Dozens of Unique Themes.

Pillow: Pillow is a free app that turns your iPhone into a sleep tracker and keeps you accountable for how much you sleep. Pillow can analyse your sleep cycles automatically. Pillow will monitor your sleep overnight and provide a breakdown of sleep quality the next morning.

Relax Melodies: Relax Melodies is a relaxation and sleep app that allows you to select sounds and melodies that you like and combine them to create a mix.

Websites

Mental Health Foundation: [mentalhealth.org.uk](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk) Provides information about mental health problems including sleep problems.

Narcolepsy UK: <https://www.narcolepsy.org.uk/> 0345 450 0394 (helpline) [narcolepsy.org.uk](https://www.narcolepsy.org.uk) Supports people with narcolepsy, their families, carers, and others interested in improving their quality of life.

NHS Choices: [nhs.uk/livewell](https://www.nhs.uk/livewell) Includes tips and tools to help you improve your sleep, including a template sleep diary.

The Sleep Apnoea Trust: [sleep-apnoea-trust.org](https://www.sleep-apnoea-trust.org) Information and support for people who experience sleep apnoea, and their partners and families.

Sleep Foundation: <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/> . Provides resources, information on sleep hygiene, deprivation and how sleep works. As well as presents some healthy sleep tips.

The Sleep Council: <https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/about/>. Provides advice and support on sleep and sleep tools.

Sleepio: <https://onboarding.sleepio.com/sleepio/nhs/77#1/1>. A 6-week online programme to change your sleeping habits and improve your sleep long term.