

Relax & Sleep Well: How To Promote Good Sleep

Leo Dolias – Counselling & Wellbeing Service (April 2010)

Introduction

The following information and activities are intended to help you gain a better understanding of relaxation and your sleep patterns and to find ways of resolving any sleep problems you may have. You will find it most helpful if you work through the information slowly, carefully completing the activities and observations and writing down your answers in a journal. In this way, you are becoming like a scientist of your own life, observing carefully, making notes and working out a solution. If you feel that you know where you need to focus, feel free to pick and choose from the suggested exercises, or follow them in the presented order as suggested before.



Getting Started

Relaxation and sleep problems are very common - a recent study found that as many as 30% of us are affected by sleep difficulties. Sleep difficulties can cover a variety of experiences, such as: restlessness, over-thinking, illness, insomnia, environmental issues, lifestyle, bad dreams etc. This leaflet aims to increase your understanding of what can go wrong with your sleeping patterns and suggests ideas that can promote a better quality of sleep.

Why is sleep important?

Exercise



Just notice: How you feel after relaxing and a good night's sleep in comparison to a bad one? How is your mood, concentration, motivation, stamina, health and well-being? Spend a day observing this and make notes about it in your journal.

Sleep is the time for body and mind to stop, rest, restore, recharge and revitalise.

How much sleep do I need?

The answer is that people vary greatly in their need for sleep. The popular idea that we all need 8 hours of sleep is not quite true. You need to find your own balance by checking when you feel best. Depending on your age and level of activity (mental or physical), and events in your life (exams, holidays, illness, partying, working etc.) you might need more or less sleep. Many studies have shown that people need from 4 to 10 hours sleep. In terms of age, babies spend 16 hours sleeping on average and we progressively sleep less and less the older we get.

Exercise



Observe when you feel tired and sleepy. Is it after a long night out? After exams? Exercise? Or perhaps after an argument? Do you also feel low? Make some observations of this and again make notes about it in your journal.

The different levels of sleep

Awake → Drowsiness (stage 1) → Sleep (stage 2) → Deep Sleep (stage 3) → REM (stage 4)

Sleep goes in cycles, waking up and going back to sleep deeply several times over the night. Waking up during the night does not mean you are having a bad night sleep! Not being able to go back to sleep might be a problem. Surprisingly, stages 2 and 3 repeat backwards before REM sleep is attained.

So, a normal sleep cycle has the following pattern: waking, stage 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 2, REM. Usually, REM sleep occurs 90 minutes after the onset of sleep. Poor sleep quality seems to be linked to increased REM and anxious dreaming, mind/brain not resting well, which then affects stamina, wellbeing and motivation when awake.

What sort of sleep difficulty do you experience?

- Getting to sleep - the most common one, some times taking hours
- Staying asleep - the next most common difficulty is a disturbed sleep pattern; waking up and difficulty going back to sleep
- Waking up too early - earlier than desired with difficulty getting back to sleep
- Poor sleep quality - sleeping lightly, dreams, restlessness



Exercise



Notice any patterns linked to poor sleep: When? Where? After what? With whom? What do you notice about these patterns? When you have completed this, read through the next section and note which of the factors apply to you.

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What factors might contribute to relaxation and sleep problems?

1. **Surroundings, comfort & safety:** It could be things you take for granted such as room temperature, light or dust - Sleeping in a new place? Feeling safe enough?
2. **Disrupted sleep routines:** Shift work, partying, study patterns, no consistency
3. **Diet, medicine and other substances:** Eating late, coffee, alcohol, smoking, other substances - **Medical reasons:** need to go to toilet, breathing problems (snoring could be a symptom), pain, certain medicines/drugs do interfere with sleep (check with your GP)
4. **Stress and worrying:** Homesickness, exam stress, new friends, other stressful or shocking events? How is University life for you? Worrying about not-sleeping?
5. **Feeling low and/or feeling hyper:** Getting the blues, bereavement, separation, big changes in life (migration, moving home or changing work).

Let's now look closer at these factors one by one. See where you identify problems that you can tackle, and build on ideas and behaviours that might already help you to relax and sleep well.

Tackling Sleep Problems

1. Surroundings, comfort & safety

Exercise



Comfort and safety are essential for your mind and body to be able to relax, de-stress and sleep well. Please go through the following list and see whether there are any positive changes you can make to your surroundings:

- a. Noise (too quiet – too noisy?) *Why not try earplugs?*
- b. Temperature (too hot – too cold?)
- c. Light (too bright – too dark?)
- d. Comfort of mattress (too hard – too soft?)



- e. Cleanliness, tidiness (breathing problems, sneezing?)
- f. Size of the room (too small – too big?)
- g. Safety of the place (sharing, new place, rough neighbourhood?)

How can I improve a, b or ..? What can you do to solve or improve upon any of the factors given above? Make a note of any action you can take, however small it may seem.

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2. Disrupted sleep patterns – lack of consistency

- Notice your sleep routines: When/how do you fall asleep? Where? Day naps?
- Try out a more consistent routine and see the difference ('body clock' likes it)
- Pre-sleep routine: prepare mind/body 30 min prior to sleep (read, music, bath, relax,)
- Try and use your bed **just** for sleep, for intimate moments and sex (it can be easily taken over by phones, laptop, friends etc.). Recognise the challenges living in one room as a student.



Observe yourself over a weekly period and take note of what helps and what doesn't help with your sleep routine? Use the space below to record your findings or draw this box in your wellbeing journal, making an entry after each period of sleep. Notice how, when or whether you are able to feel relaxed.

<i>Helps my sleep</i>	<i>Doesn't help my sleep</i>
<i>Day 1:</i>	<i>Day 1:</i>
<i>2:</i>	<i>2:</i>
<i>3:</i>	<i>3:</i>
<i>4:</i>	<i>4:</i>
<i>5:</i>	<i>5:</i>
<i>6:</i>	<i>6:</i>
<i>7:</i>	<i>7:</i>

3. Diet, medicine and other substances

Research and personal experiences have shown the following:

- Eating late and eating heavy food, usually affects sleep negatively. Try and get in the habit of having a good breakfast and lunch, and a light dinner.
- Carbs (bread, pasta, potatoes) = drowsy - Proteins (meat, fish, beans) = alert.

- Coffee, tea, chocolate, cola, energy drinks can make it harder to relax and will affect sleep (avoid these 4 hours prior to sleep).
- Cigarettes affect sleep – keep 3-4 hours nicotine-free before sleep.
- Alcohol: large amounts cause drowsiness and seriously affects the quality of sleep. Check your average intake, what is recommended and find your balance.
- Some medical and/or recreational drugs can seriously affect sleep (stimulants). *If you take any substances check with your pharmacist, GP or get drug advice.*
- Sleeping tablets prescribed by your GP can help in the short term, They can also cause problems if misused or used for prolonged periods.
- Having body aches? Taking drugs for asthma or migraines? Using a lot of recreational drugs? Any of these might seriously affect your sleep, as well as your mood, thinking or ability to relax: check with your GP.
- Try natural treatments and substances that can help relaxation and sleep: acupuncture, massage, valerian herb (drops or pills), lavender (inhaled), camomile, warm milk with honey.

Ask for further advice on alcohol consumption or drug usage if you are concerned. See your GP and ask a counsellor for further advice, if need be.

Exercise



Relaxation: anything that can distract your thinking mind by focusing on your 5 senses, your body and the present moment (e.g. music, aromatherapy, warm bath) activates your right brain, promotes relaxation and helps sleep. Thinking, worrying, feeling stuck in the past/future is a left brain activity. A good way to distract the worrying mind is to count or categorize things you can imagine, e.g. colours, animals, while you try to relax and fall asleep (see also on the London Met Counselling & Wellbeing website, self-help materials: creating categories, helping you with sleep problems). Categorising induces melatonin in the brain that helps sleep. There is wisdom in the old 'counting sheep'! Imagine it in vivid colours or give your sheep names to make it more effective.

4. Stress? Worrying? Over- thinking?

Student life is exciting but might also include various stressors: homesickness, exam stress, assessment pressures, new friends, relationship problems, debt, housing difficulties, or any other stressful or shocking events. Life can also throw extra problems such as loss, illness or accident. Do you also worry about not-sleeping? How do balance life's demands with personal needs, such as relaxation, good enough sleep and diet, feeling emotionally connected or doing something worthwhile.

Please be mindful that stress is a normal feeling, that is also motivating and useful, but if it is too intense and constant it will create problems. If you feel too burdened for days or weeks it would be advisable to talk to someone; it could be a good friend, a family member or a professional: your personal advisor, a chaplain, a counsellor or your GP.

Exercise



Take notice: how do you generally treat yourself? Is it with an accepting and caring or a rejecting attitude? What are you telling yourself? Stress and anxiety feed on self-rejection, attack, criticism and perfectionism. Make some notes about this in your wellbeing journal.

Follow the table below as a starting point for you to rate your levels of stress, and identify relevant feelings, thoughts and behaviours. This is a way to become more self-aware which is really important in helping your self with stress and worrying. Can you slow down your worrying mind?

1. Rate the level of stress (1: not stressed – 10: very stressed)

yesterday AM:

today AM:

yesterday PM:

today PM:

2. Describe what is distressing about the situation?

3. What thoughts and/or feelings do you identify? When do they get worse? Any past distressing memories?

4. What do you do when you are very stressed? Does it help?

Relaxation is the natural answer to stress: Each and every one of us should make time in the day to relax. We all normally relax naturally by taking a break at work or being at home, but some of us need extra help to do so. How do you relax? What makes you less stressed? How do you 'empty your mind'?

- Relaxation: self-regulates anxiety, maintain balance & a clear mind to study
- Reduces distressing effects of adrenaline and high blood pressure
- Improves sleep, mood, concentration
- Distracts the worrying mind and creates 'headspace'
- Relaxation techniques: muscle relaxation, breathing, visualisation, walks, meditation, music (try out a relevant CD or self-help book – such techniques need practice, do not expect immediate results)
- Enjoyable and absorbing hobbies can also have a very relaxing effect (sports, play, gardening, pets, chess, drawing, reading, cooking, dancing etc – just build on what speaks to you).
- Finding your balance between life's demands and relaxation - doing and being - is the key!

Exercise



Try a simple breathing exercise for 15 minutes before you go to bed, and/or when you feel very stressed and worried: breathe in deeply focusing on counting 1-5; breathe out counting 5-1. Focus on how the air feels when it enters your nostrils. When your mind goes to worrying thoughts - or 'to do lists'- bring your attention gently back to your breathing. The more you practise the more effective it can be! Make some notes in your journal on how this exercise feels for you.

How's your **dreaming**? Any bad, recurring, frequent dreams? Any painful memories or images that keep you awake? It might be time to talk about them with someone you feel comfortable with: a good friend or family member, your personal advisor or a counsellor.

Exercise



If making mental lists in bed keeps you awake, try writing down what needs to be done in your journal or a piece of paper before you go to bed. Having done this, separate the tasks that can't wait from those that can wait.

If your stress and feeling low gets too much start by talking about it: to a good friend, counsellor, tutor, chaplain, your GP.

5. Feeling low? Feeling blue? Or too hyper?

- Feeling up/down at times is natural and normal, but if you feel too low and/or hyper or anxious for long periods and your sleep is seriously affected you might need to tackle your mood and speak to someone. Our mood, thoughts and how we sleep affect each other greatly.
- Disturbed sleep usually feeds low feelings, irritation and obviously tiredness.
- Life's events can play a big role: Bereavement, loss, separation, changes (e.g. moving house)

Exercise



The key to positive change (of all kinds) is self-awareness: Taking on board all the previous points that resonate with you, use the table below to update your weekly journal for 2 weeks. Rate quality/amount of sleep 1-10, see how you feel, how's your stamina, check what helps or doesn't, do small experiments and notice any difference (e.g. eat/drink early, try relaxation, go for a walk, make your room cosier, talk to someone). Small changes can make a big difference!

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Rate (1-10) quality/amount of last night's sleep							
Surroundings, comfort, safety							
Sleep patterns (sleep late, late internet, wake early, work late?)							
Drinks, diet, other substances – medical problems							
Stress, worries, over-thinking? When? Where? What helps/not?							
Relaxation: how much time allocated today? When? Where? What works for me?							
Overall mood and energy levels am & pm							

Exercise



*If you are not asleep after 30 minutes try the following: get out of bed and do something **relaxing** that distracts your mind, e.g. read a novel, drink something warm, listen to music. Or try something really **boring** like reading the yellow pages standing - your mind might want to go to sleep then to avoid boredom!*

Recap: A few simple guidelines to improve sleep

- ✓ **Do** remember that sleep problems are very common, sleep changes throughout our life cycle and can be affected by emotional experiences and life changes
- ✓ **Do** try and go to bed and get up at a more or less regular time - notice the difference if you don't
- ✓ **Do** have a bedtime routine that you enjoy and wind down before going to bed
- ✓ **Do** get up if you are worrying, or are not asleep after 30 minutes, and do something relaxing or boring (your mind will want to switch off!)
- ✓ **Do** something physical (work out, walk, dance) regularly (but not too late in the evening), or develop an enjoyable and absorbing hobby that calms your mind (e.g. drawing, knitting, collecting, music)
- ✓ **Do** make sure that your bed and bedroom are safe and comfortable in terms of noise, light, temperature, quality of mattress
- ✓ **Do** check whether any medicine you take might affect your sleep
- ✓ **Do** remember that late eating, smoking, drinking alcohol or coffee affect sleep in different ways for different people
- ✓ **Do** take notice of your thoughts and feelings with a self-accepting rather than rejecting attitude
- ✓ **Do** try some relaxation techniques when stressed; e.g. a simple breathing exercise: count slowly 1-2-3 breathing in – then 1-2-3-4-5 breathing out, imaging that you breath in energy and vitality, you breath out tension and you let go. Repeat 6 times and repeat again as long as you feel comfortable.
- **Don't** worry about not getting enough sleep
- **Don't** lie in bed worrying about life's problems
- **Don't** stay in bed longer to catch up on lost sleep
- **Don't** go to bed until you feel sleepy
- **Don't** take naps during the day if that makes you stay up late – try to keep some regularity
- **Don't** drink, smoke or eat close to bedtime on a regular basis
- **Don't** just stay isolated for long periods with negative thoughts and feelings - talk about it
- **Don't** follow unrealistic demands and expectations (yours or others') that are too stressful - be mindful of your limitations and practice saying 'no' to others if need be

Further Information

<https://intranet.londonmet.ac.uk/studentsservices/counselling/>
http://www.mind.org.uk/help/information_and_advice
www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/over60s/Pages/Thesleepclinic.aspx
www.nhs.uk/conditions/insomnia/Pages/Introduction.aspx

Books

'The power of Now' by E. Tolle
'The Promise of Sleep' by William C. Dement
'The Good Sleep Guide' by Sammy Margo
'Deep Sleep' (Audio) by Glenn Harold