



Sleep Health

Getting a good quality and quantity of sleep is vital to achieving and maintaining optimal mental and physical health. Despite this, as many as 40% of Australian adults experience sleep problems at any one time. Not getting enough sleep can impact many aspects of our lives, including workplace productivity and safety.

Stress, worry, or irritability experienced at work can lead to sleep disturbance. Over time, persistent sleep disturbance can make concentration and productivity at work even more difficult, leading to further stress.

Health Professionals around the world regularly share sleep hygiene strategies. These include habits and practices conducive to sleeping well regularly, such as monitoring caffeine intake, good temperature control, avoiding alcohol intake, improved level of darkness in the bedroom and other great tips to achieve a good night's sleep.

These strategies are good to know; however, they often don't always address the problem experienced by many. Trying to implement all of these 'do this' and 'don't do this' strategies can also incidentally ramp up your hyperarousal at bedtime.

Good sleep health can be achieved through understanding the many things that can affect the quality of sleep and taking a problem-solving approach to changes you implement.

The five key factors or principles to improve sleep considered by the Sleep Health Foundation are described in detail below.

Ensure you're sleepy and ready for bed

Your sleep drive rises with each waking hour and is typically high at bedtime. Going to bed too early, or when you are still wired or stressed, may mean your sleep drive is not high enough to fall asleep easily. Giving yourself additional time to unwind is more effective than attempting to sleep at a strict time. An afternoon nap or falling asleep in front of the TV in the evening will reduce your sleep time at bedtime.

Recognising when you are tired or sleeping, and only going to bed when you are sleepy can increase your capacity to fall asleep and stay asleep. Limiting your time in bed can help avoid a habit of wakefulness when attempting to sleep, during the night or before getting up. Sticking to the same waking up times in the mornings, including on the weekend, can help to maximise your sleep drive at bedtime.

Look after your body rhythm and natural body clock

Good sleep is more likely when your body rhythm is consistent. Melatonin is a hormone your body produces naturally and is often called the "sleep hormone". Melatonin needs darkness to be secreted, with levels rising during the early evening. Ensure you have a one-hour buffer from exposure to bright light at least one hour before bed.

Good sleep is also more likely when your internal body clock or rhythm is in line with daytime hours for your wake cycle. Exposure to good outdoor light, especially morning light to suppress the melatonin production on waking, as well as increased activity and exercise during the day, can help you to look after your body rhythm.

Minimise internal disruptions

Internal disruptions that create poor sleep are caused by your mind (mental) or your body (physical). Mental disruptions can be due to your mind being too active to fall asleep. Avoid taking your worries to bed by practising good strategies. Consider writing down your worries and options for managing these, mindfulness strategies, journaling, or other emotional regulation techniques.

Physical disruptions can include breathing problems (such as snoring or sleep apnoea), physical problems interfering with sleep (pain, restless legs), or stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine, or alcohol. If you have breathing or physical problems, speak to your GP about a referral to a sleep specialist.

Minimising external disruptions

Removing external disruptions can be especially helpful if you are a light sleeper or have trouble returning to sleep after being awoken.



External disturbances can include pets in the bedroom, morning light too early, poor temperature control, or partner noises such as snoring. Simple strategies such as ear plugs or eye covers or changes to your bedroom space, could help minimise external disruptions.

Positive & respectful attitude towards sleep

This principle is not just for those who tend to stay up late, spend too much time watching Netflix, or have poor sleep habits, but those who have already labelled themselves as poor sleepers. Having good knowledge and understanding of a normal sleep cycle, which includes periods of lighter and deeper sleep throughout the night with brief awakenings, can ensure people have a positive relationship with sleep. Accepting that for some people it may take many months of implementing positive changes to their sleep habits before consistent good-quality sleep is achieved can avoid you falling into the trap of labelling yourself a poor sleeper and giving in.

Final Words

Sleep helps promote attention, memory, learning, alertness, mental functioning, and productivity in the workplace and home. Understanding the key aspects and principles of sleep while maintaining good sleep hygiene, is key to achieving good-quality restorative sleep.

