

What is Sleep Hygiene?

Sleep hygiene is a term to describe habits that help us to achieve a good night's sleep. Common sleeping difficulties and disorders are often the result of negative sleeping habits that have been reinforced over years. The goal of sleep hygiene is to retrain your body and mind to practice positive sleeping habits so that you can sleep well and wake feeling refreshed and rested. You can dramatically improve your sleep quality by making a few minor adjustments to your lifestyle and attitudes towards sleep.

How long will it take to improve my sleep?

It is important to clarify you will not be able to fix your sleeping problems in one night. Given that sleeping problems are often due to bad habits that have developed over a period of time, you will need to persevere with good sleep habits to witness a constructive change in your sleep.

Will this fix my sleep issues?

The information in this guide is general in content and should not be seen as a substitute for professional medical advice and psychological support. While the information in this guide is based on research, concerns regarding sleep, especially in the case of a clinical sleep disorder or other medical condition, should always be discussed with a professional.

So, what can I do to improve my sleep?

Below are several changes you can make to improve the quality of your sleep:

Listen and act according to your body clock:

“Go to bed when I feel tired? I always feel tired! That isn't the issue.”

Many people mistake listening to our body clock as pop-psychology or as an easy task that they already do. However, it is often one of the key issues in sleeping issues and can have a significant long-term effect on sleeping habits. You can improve your sleep by making the following changes:

- **Wake up and get out of bed at the same time every day.** This includes weekends which can be difficult at first. By following this simple instruction, you will develop a new habit or sleep routine that your body will adjust to and begin to predict. Within a period of 1-2 weeks, your body will begin to get sleepy at about the same time every night in preparation for sleep.
- **Respond to sleepiness and do not ignore tiredness.** Go to bed when your body is feeling tired and sluggish at night. Many people attempt to avoid or ignore this feeling (e.g., staying up to finish the show you are watching, going to the cupboard and eating some chocolate, getting a cup of tea, trying to finish off work or solve a problem). It is

essential that we learn to respond to our body in a healthy manner for our sleep to improve, so acknowledge that you are tired and prepare for bed.

- **Do not stay in bed if you do not fall to sleep within a short time.** Sometimes we might listen to our body, head to bed, and stay awake for hours. While we are making changes to our habits, this can increase but it is not the change that is causing this experience, it is the legacy of our bad habits. Your body is not used to this new way of responding to its signals and will need time to adjust. So don't put yourself through torturous hours of frustration trying to get to sleep, get up out of bed and do something else that is "low activity" (e.g., reading a dictionary, drawing a picture, meditation, listen to calm music). When you start to feel tired again, return to bed. Repeat as necessary.
- **Do not go to bed if you do not feel tired.** Another common error is that we should have a set "wake up" and "go to sleep" time regardless of how we feel. By going to bed before you feel tired, you will be reinforcing bad habits that lead to poor sleep, such as lying awake, worrying, tossing and turning, and restlessness. Your body will let you know when to sleep, trust and listen to your body's signals that you are tired and then head to bed.

Avoid reliance on drugs:

"Nah, alcohol really helps me get to sleep. That isn't the problem. It's the quality of my sleep that is the issue, how do I fix that?"

When we have experienced sleeping issues for a long period of time, we can often resort to other "tools" to assist our sleep. Common examples are alcohol, cigarettes, and medications. While they may assist in some aspects, they reduce our ability to sleep naturally. Often these drugs will help us achieve sleep at the cost of a significant decrease in the quality of our sleep and damage to our sleep habits. Here is some information about how each of these drugs affects our sleep:

- **Cigarettes:** The use of cigarettes can induce a strong sense of relaxation and calm in smokers. As such, many smokers may have a cigarette before bed to ease them to sleep. Unfortunately, this causes significant issues as the nicotine in cigarettes that may cause this relaxed experience is in fact a stimulant. While we may feel calm in our mind, our body is undergoing an opposite process. Nicotine has several side effects that reduce our quality of sleep, including accelerated heart rate and increased blood pressure, which are likely to keep you awake for longer.
- **Alcohol:** The use of alcohol can induce a strong feeling of drowsiness that may assist people to fall to sleep. Unfortunately, this causes an issue at a biological level as alcohol is a depressant. A depressant causes our nervous system to slow down and this disturbs the rhythm of our natural sleep patterns. Consequently, while you may get to sleep easier, it is likely that you will not feel refreshed and rested in the morning. Alternatively, you may find that you tire quickly on the following day.
- **Sleeping pills:** Prescription sleeping pills certainly have their use and can assist many people to achieve positive sleep patterns depending on how they are used. Sleeping

pills can help you fall to sleep easier and stay asleep for longer. However, they often have side effects and a risk that the user may become reliant on the medication to sleep. Side effects and problems of sleeping pills can include: sleepiness throughout the day, failure to address the causes of a sleeping problem, the 'rebound' effect after a stint of using sleeping pills, and falling asleep without them tends to be harder. Consequently, these drugs should only be used under strict medical advice and for short-term periods.

Please note: it is not recommended that you cease use of these drugs without medical and psychological support. There is a great distinction between the "reliance on drugs" that this guide discusses and "ceasing the use of drugs".

Increase relaxation and reduce worrying:

"Once my head hits the pillow, I find myself thinking about everything that is going on in my life, the challenges at work, things that I haven't done yet, and.. it is really hard to stop!"

The experience of having an active and busy mind when we head to bed is very common when we have sleep difficulties. There can be several reasons for this experience and it is worth seeking psychological support to address this issue. Generally speaking, the moment between lying down and falling to sleep is normally one of the few peaceful and calm moments in our day. The mind will often utilise this time as an opportunity to review, reflect, hypothesise, plan, imagine, and rehearse actions to address issues in our lives. Unfortunately, this can become a habit that seriously impairs our sleep patterns. You can improve your sleep by making the following changes:

- **Use relaxation techniques before bed:** Sometimes we may feel tired, but our body is tight and full of nervous energy. Introducing relaxation techniques to our regular sleep routine can help address this issue. There are thousands of techniques you can find online and the real challenge is finding one that you enjoy and find helpful. It can be helpful to discuss these techniques with Shaw Psychology to find one that works for you.
- **Use grounding techniques when worrying or anxious:** Grounding techniques have a very different goal when compared with relaxation techniques. Grounding aims to make you really aware of your surroundings and attentive to everything in your environment. They can help us to "get out of our head" which is a common issue with worrying. It can be helpful to discuss these techniques with Shaw Psychology to find one that works for you.
- **Schedule time to worry before bed:** In the event that relaxation and grounding techniques do not make the cut, we can outsmart our own behaviour and habits. If we know we are a worrier, we can dedicate a 30-60 minute block of time to sit down and worry through all our problems. It is recommended that you write your thoughts down. Not just your concerns, but all of your thoughts attached to them. For example:
 - Concern: *"I forgot to cancel my appointment tomorrow and it's going to cost me money I can't spare."*

- Thoughts:
 - *“I can’t believe I did this”*
 - *“Why didn’t I just call this afternoon”*
 - *“I’m stupid for doing this”*
 - *“Maybe I can see a doctor and get a medical certificate?”*
 - *“What if they won’t give it to me?”*

You may find yourself repeating the same thoughts and that is okay. Either re-write them or tick them each time it comes up. Once the time is up, close the book you are writing in and move on. If you find yourself thinking about it in bed, remind yourself that you’ve already thought about it and you can pick up the book tomorrow if you need to. Use your relaxation and grounding skills again to manage any urge to return to worrying.

Minimise exercise and activity before bed

“I can’t sleep unless I do a good round of intense exercise: push-ups, sit-ups, lunges... all that stuff. It wears me out, makes me feel tired. That is the way I fall to sleep.”

While exercise and intense activity can help us feel tired and ready to sleep, it can also confuse the biological process of sleep in our bodies if it is done too close to when we normally sleep. Exercising vigorously immediately before sleep or within approximately three hours of sleep can make it difficult to fall asleep or decrease the quality of sleep. While you feel tired, vigorous exercise before sleep stimulates your heart, brain and muscles which may induce an opposite biological process to what is required for sleep. You can improve your sleep by making the following changes:

- **Engage in daily exercise during anytime from the morning to late afternoon, preferably exposed to daylight.** Regular and vigorous exercise does improve sleep quality when it is done at the correct time. Try and include some level of activity and exercise into your daily routine, it will likely improve your mood and health as well!
- **Create a 1 hour window of time before sleep to engage in low intensity activity.** Our body isn’t like a light switch. It can’t switch from “active alert mode” to “relaxed sleeping mode” within a matter of seconds. Rather, we need to create time for a gradual change to occur.
- **Avoid exciting or highly emotional stimulation before sleep.** While physical activity is the primary example, watching exciting action-based explosive war movies or engaging in intense conflict with our partner before bed may also reduce our quality of sleep. While you can control when conflict occurs, there are several strategies and communication skills you can learn to manage them better. Please contact Shaw Psychology for support in such circumstances.
- **Is sex before bed okay?** Good question, unfortunately the research is unclear on this issue. Make this a choice between you and your sexual partner.

Increase your exposure to daylight:

“Well I go to work during the day, so how could I not be getting enough daylight?”

There is a fundamental role of daylight in our sleep patterns. Waking during the day and sleeping at night is a natural and normal part of our sleeping habits and disruption of this routine can result in significant psychological and health issues. Consequently, light and darkness is a key factor in how sleep is regulated by our bodies. Exposure to light stimulates a neural pathway from our eye to an area in the brain called the hypothalamus. At the hypothalamus, the presence or absence of light initiates signals to other parts of the brain that control hormones, body temperature and other functions affect whether we feel sleepy or wide awake. Melatonin is a natural hormone that is involved in this process. It is made in the pineal gland which is active during the night and inactive during the day. When it is dark, melatonin is released into the blood and we begin to feel less alert and sleep becomes increasingly attractive. Melatonin remains in the blood throughout most of the night and they only reduce to low levels when our body detects daylight.

Now that the biology lesson is out of the way, many of us think that we will get enough daylight through our usual routine. Unfortunately, this is usually not the case unless you work outside most days. The rest of us need to make a conscious effort to expose our bodies to daylight whenever we can. You can improve your sleep by making the following changes based on this natural system:

- **Avoid brightly lit environments when preparing for sleep.** Many of us will have a brightly lighted room at night to cook dinner, watch television, read a book, or to talk with our friends or partner. However, we often only reduce the light (e.g., turn off the lights) when we are going to sleep. Unfortunately, our body cannot respond biologically to darkness at the same speed that a light switch can flick off. Try to induce a gradual introduction of darkness into your environment, or, allow time for your body to adjust to darkness before attempting to sleep.
- **Avoid use of items that emit light before sleep.** Many modern technologies that we commonly use emit light that counteracts our natural sleep process. **Attempt to minimise the use of mobile phones, televisions, computer screens, tablet devices etc.** before attempting to sleep. The use of such devices, even in dark rooms, may delay the release of melatonin.
- **When getting up, increase the light in your environment.** Increase your exposure to natural light when you wake up. Exposure to light during early waking hours helps to reset your body clock and avoid feeling fatigued or sleepy later in the day.

Please note: We have a normal increase in sleepiness between 1pm-3pm each day due, in part, to our natural sleep rhythm. Traditional sleep hygiene guidance does not recommend the use of naps during the day. However, some recent research from Europe is challenging this principle. It is recommended that naps are avoided unless they are part of your usual cultural practice.

Create an appropriate sleeping environment:

“I’ve bought all the relaxation cds, sleeping pills, and exercise training sessions during the daylight I can afford, why isn’t my sleep better?”

Sometimes our issues with sleep can result from a combination of a poor sleeping environment and negative sleeping habits. Changing your negative sleeping habits will improve the quality of your sleep, but if we are sleeping on a bed of concrete or if we freeze during the night we will experience difficulties. You can improve your sleep by making the following changes to your environment:

- **Only use your bed for sleep and sex.** Often we make the mistake of treating our bedroom and our bed as a second lounge room (or in some cases it is the lounge room). We might watch television, talk to friends over the internet or the phone, eat food, read a book, or listen to our favourite music in bed. While it is certainly comfortable, these behaviours result in our mind associating activity (as opposed to sleep) with our bed.
- **Invest in quality mattresses, pillows, sheets, and doonas.** Sometimes we have to bite the bullet and ask how much is poor sleep costing us and whether it is worth investing in better sleeping equipment.
- **Ensure the room is dark enough.** If you are living in a busy city district you may have an excessive amount of street light coming into your room. Invest in blinds and curtains to reduce this.
- **Ensure the room is quiet.** Sometimes we think our room is quiet but it may not be. There may be a delivery truck that goes past your room at 3am or a pesky mouse that scratches the walls. If you are struggling with sleep, it is worth using a recording device or your phone throughout the night to see whether there is noise. You may even discover that your own snoring is an issue. If you can’t control noise (such as barking dogs or loud neighbours), try buying a pair of earplugs or putting on soft relaxing music to lessen the impact.

Best of luck and I hope you enjoy your newfound rest!

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