

Modern life can mean we lose touch with some of the things that naturally support sleep. Being aware of these can help you make sleep-supporting choices, which can have a transformative effect on concentration, energy levels, weight management, the immune system and general wellbeing.

1) Build a sleep routine:

An evening routine that encourages your body and mind to wind down to prepare for sleep can be achieved in a few ways – have a regular ‘bedtime’; do things that relax you - a bath or light reading before you drift off; have a calming milky or herbal drink mid-evening; go round the home turning things off and locking doors in the same order; put away work well before bedtime. The body clock has natural rhythms for the amount of sleep each individual ideally needs, and this is encouraged by going to sleep and getting up at the same time each day. Napping during the day is best avoided as it affects the quality of nighttime sleep, disrupting the body clock. Mindfulness meditation and relaxation cds can help to calm before bedtime - regular use can be a helpful part of your routine.

2)Wind down technology:

Modern life is often lived through a screen – TV, computers and smart phones all emit stimulating light and often involve us in exciting activities that are not conducive to winding down for the night. We also become primed to respond to the ping of a social media notification or text, so sleeping with a phone on is inviting disturbed sleep. Ideally, turn all these things off at least one hour before you want to go to sleep. This also signals to the mind that it is time to ‘switch off’ for the night.

3)Cocoon yourself in warmth and soft light:

The body naturally winds down by producing melatonin and low lamp light during the evening supports this preparation for sleep. As we no longer ‘go to sleep with the sun and rise with the lark’ if you have curtains that let light in your natural sleep cycle can be disrupted, you could consider getting blackout blinds. The body also needs to be warm but not too hot to sleep well, and some ventilation can be good - hot centrally heated houses are not always the best thing.

4)Reduce stimulants:

Many of us use caffeine, nicotine, chocolate, sugar and even energy drinks to get through the day in our busy lives. These substances all create artificial spikes in blood sugar and stimulate the body and mind, which later in the day is not conducive to sleep. Try gradually reducing all these after 5pm, aiming to cut them out entirely if you can. Heavy meals late at night can also disrupt sleep. If noise is often an issue investing in good earplugs can be essential.

5)Put problems in their place:

If you have a stressful job, caring responsibilities or financial worries it can be hard to relax at the end of the day. A useful way to look at this is to ask yourself whether worrying about problems late at night helps? Keep a notebook for things going through your mind in another room in the house – write each one and next to it what you will do about it the following day, for example: ‘Worry – I have a big deadline coming up - Answer to worry – tomorrow I will make a plan prioritizing tasks’. Develop a mantra: “It’s nighttime, there is nothing I can do about that now, so I’m going to let it go.”

6)Create a relaxing environment:

Bedrooms should ideally be just for sleep and sex. Work, drama, television, anything that gets us riled up is best kept in other parts of the house. Learn to associate the evening and your bedroom as much as possible with calm and you will make a solid foundation for a good night’s sleep. If you have a partner, make an agreement not to discuss difficult or emotive things after a certain time of night, and try to keep them out of the bedroom completely.

7)Be aware of alcohol:

People who say alcohol helps them get to sleep also usually experience disrupted sleep and wake feeling less than rested. This is because alcohol prevents you going into the deeper levels of sleep and can also wake you up as it leaves the bloodstream. A hangover is actually part sleep deprivation,

part dehydration. Depending on your tolerance to alcohol, this will affect you in differing ways so if you do choose to drink, be mindful of the level at which it has an impact on your sleep quality.

8)Manage health issues:

If you have anxiety, depression, chronic pain, ME/CFS or other long term conditions, and your sleep is affected, all these tips apply. Seeking talking treatment with an integrative counsellor if you are really struggling can help you look at the interactions between your health issues and sleep. If you are taking medication check with your GP the best time of day to take it to support sleep - some drugs have soporific side effects, others stimulate which can disrupt sleep. If your sleep problem has no obvious cause, see your GP for investigation.

9)Have a coping strategy for 'bad' nights:

On nights when you have problems sleeping it is easy to get into a self-fulfilling cycle of expecting sleep to be poor. The following techniques can help you to avoid this: don't look at the clock; let go of thoughts about not being able to cope tomorrow by answering them "when I have slept badly before I have managed"; go into another room and do something relaxing until you feel sleepy, then return to bed. Use the technique described in 5) to get worries out of your head.

10)Exercise for sleep:

Regular exercise burns off excess adrenaline and relaxes us, encouraging good sleep. If you have a sedentary job finding a way to fit this into your busy day can be difficult so here are some ideas: walk part of your journey to work or go out at lunchtime; get up half an hour earlier and exercise before breakfast. Avoid vigorous exercise in the evening though - this can stimulate rather than relax. Getting some natural light outdoors throughout the year also helps the body clock to regulate, setting itself naturally to day and night.

I hope you can find something here to help you get a better rest, good night!