

## Sleep - Why we need sleep

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Sleep is essential to human beings as it has several useful functions: it allows the body to rest and recover, regulates blood pressure, strengthens our immune system, and allows memories and emotions to be processed.

Humans typically require between 7-9 hours of sleep on average, with the actual amount varying between individuals. It is normal that our sleep is affected occasionally by stress or illness. However chronic sleep difficulties or sleep deprivation is not healthy. Think of the time where you had less than ideal sleep, and notice how it affected your mood, concentration, memory, and judgment. Imagine the impact on your life if this happened for a long time.

## The Sleep Cycle and Stages of Sleep

When we sleep, the body goes through 4 – 6 sleep cycles. Each sleep cycle lasts 90 – 120 minutes and goes through 4 stages.

1. **Stage 1 Light Sleep:** Transition phase, lasting up to 10 minutes
2. **Stage 2 Light Sleep:** Heart rate and body temperature drop. We spend the most time in this stage.
3. **Stage 3 Deep Sleep:** Essential for physical restoration, immune system strengthening, and repairs.
4. **Rapid Eye Movement (REM) Sleep:** This is when we dream. Essential for memory consolidation and emotional regulation.

It is normal to experience some consciousness or even wake up briefly when we are in the sleep stage. This explains middle of the night awakening. Most of the time, our body simply returns to the cycle automatically.

[Brendan, maybe a diagram here might be useful]

## Factors that interfere with sleep

Sleep is a complex process and there are some factors that interfere with sleep:

- Stress and illness, including pain
- Caffeine and substance/alcohol intake
- Mental health disorders – anxiety, depression, PTSD etc
- Sleep disorders – sleep apnoea, insomnia
- Environmental factors such as noise, temperature, light, bedding comfort
- Technology use – phones and screens
- Shift work
- Stressing about not sleeping

There is no ‘right way’ to sleep, despite what we see in the media and on social media. The more we relax about sleeping, the more helpful it will be.

## Healthy Sleep Habits

We want our body and mind to associate the bedroom with sleep and relaxation, not with stress. Here are some **Helpful** and **Unhelpful** sleep habits to promote this.

### Unhelpful Sleep Habits

- Work or study in bed.
- Having serious discussions in bed.
- Using screens and devices in bed.
- Irregular sleep and wake times.
- Taking alcohol, caffeine, or substances before bed.
- Watching or reading overly stimulating material before bed.
- “Clock watching” when you cannot sleep.
- Worrying about not sleeping or not getting enough sleep.
- Worrying or problem-solving issues when in bed.

## Helpful Sleep Habits

- Go to bed and wake up around the same time daily. The body likes routine.
- Start a soothing wind down routine 1-2 hours before your desired bed time. This alerts the body that you are getting ready to sleep. Soothing activities could involve doing a 5–10 minute tidy of the house, turning down the lights, having warm shower, enjoying your favourite beverage, or doing a short meditation practice.
- Check that your sleep environment is comfortable. Lights, sounds, temperature, and bedding should be comfortable for you.
- Give your body clear day-night cues. Get some sunlight in the morning, and turn the lights down at night to mimic our natural sleep-wake cycles.
- Practice setting aside some time (about 15-20 minutes) earlier in the day to write down your worries, problem solve, or to do lists. This helps reduce mental activity at night. It is also a helpful reminder that you can attend to these issues the next day and you don't have to solve it *right now*.
- Avoid TRYING to sleep if you are struggling. Practice relaxation and mindfulness strategies to relax the body and mind. You fall asleep quicker if you are relaxed. There are plenty of free relaxation videos/guided mindfulness exercises on Youtube.
- Don't get frustrated if you cannot sleep or wake up in the middle of the night. This is normal. Instead, do some relaxation exercises and rest. Your body will still be able to function the next day.

## **Resetting your sleep**

Once you have identified some habits to change, you can follow these steps to reset your sleep.

1. Pick one small habit to adjust and proceed in small steps e.g. go to bed 15 minutes earlier than your current bed time.
2. Give your body at least 1 week to adjust.
3. Pick another small change, or increase the adjustment e.g. go to bed 30 minutes earlier than you current bed time.

If you still struggle with sleep after making some changes, you may find it helpful to speak with a professional. We often have unhelpful ideas or thoughts that make sleep stressful, or we may need some extra support.



Remember: you do not need expensive gadgets or big changes. Start with what is available and free/low-cost.

### **Check-in**

Take a moment to reflect:

- How has my sleep been going?
- What have I been noticing about my mood, concentration, memory, and focus?
- What is interfering with my sleep?
- Is there something small I can change now?
- How do I make this change sustainable?

### **Key Idea**

Sleep is important to our well-being and mental health. There are plenty of things we can do to take care of our sleep that won't break the bank.

More information can be found at: <https://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/>