

Best Practices For a Good Night's Sleep

Sleep is fundamental to good mental and physical health. Sleep is the first item on our symptom checklist when you come to our office to complete paperwork. Sleep deprivation affects working memory and attention and makes it difficult to manage stress, anxiety, and depression. Here are some rules we frequently use with our clients to help establish and maintain a healthy sleep routine.

Rules for Establishing a Sleep Routine

1. To reset your sleep schedule, restricting your sleep is an important starting place. Restrict your sleep to the time between your regular bedtime and rising time. Always get up and go to bed at the time you set, whether you slept well or not. Decide with your counselor if this step is necessary for you. Your counselor may suggest you stay up until midnight and get up at 5:00 AM, whether you slept or not. Persist with the restriction until you fall asleep more quickly, and then begin moving your bedtime incrementally earlier.
2. Develop a ritual of winding down before bedtime. Do not watch disturbing programs on television or read disturbing material (like Stephen King novels) before bedtime. Read for pleasure, or if you're religious, read scripture or positive affirmations. Schedule conversations about stressful subjects for daytime problem-solving rather than before bedtime. A hot bath or shower can be relaxing.
3. Avoid alcohol as bedtime approaches. While alcohol may help you fall asleep, it tends to cause early awakening and interfere with the quality of your sleep.
4. Do not use caffeine or other stimulants at least six hours before bedtime. Remember, many sodas and teas contain caffeine. Caffeine will interfere with your ability to get a deep sleep. Both prescription and over-the-counter medications may contain stimulants that can keep you from a deep sleep or cause sleep-onset insomnia.
5. Stop watching television, using your computer, or using fluorescent lighting an hour before bedtime. Sources of blue light stimulate the hypothalamic system. This will suppress the production of the natural sedative melatonin.

6. Do not take naps. Stay awake until your normal bedtime.
7. Avoid using over-the-counter sleep aids and only use prescribed medications for sleep for short periods of time. Becoming dependent upon sleep aids suggests biological or psychological factors, or emotional distress. Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) was found to be most effective for sleep problems and provided long-lasting positive outcomes compared to medication, placebo, and medication plus CBT (Jacobs et al Archives of Internal Medicine 2004),²⁰
8. Get out of bed. If you can't fall asleep within 15 or 20 minutes, get up and do a relaxing activity. Read a book or magazine (not a thriller or page-turner), listen to quiet music. When you feel sleepy return to bed. When you get up, don't make the room too bright because this may act as a cue to your brain to wake up. Repeat this cycle as often as necessary until it is time to get up. Nonetheless, even if you don't feel that you slept, get up. Sleep restriction will help you fall asleep (see rule #1).
9. White noise can block out conversations or other sounds that tend to get your attention. A fan or sound machine works well for most people.
10. Exercise almost every day. Start with small steps and gradually work your way up to a target of 45 to 60 minutes. This number is cumulative; two or three short walks can easily add up to 45 minutes or more. Some people are stimulated by late exercise-it may keep them from falling asleep. Keep in mind that everybody is different, so late exercise may be just fine as long as it is not too intense.
11. Turn your clock to the wall, so you aren't waking up and checking to see how much time you have to sleep.
12. Use your bed only for sleeping and sexual activity. Avoid watching TV (see rule 2), paying bills, or reading in bed. You are trying to teach your brain and body that it is time to sleep when you go to bed.
13. Make sure you have a comfortable bed and the temperature is right. Cool rooms with warm blankets can be helpful.
14. Eat a snack if you feel hungry. Being hungry can interfere with your ability to fall asleep. Avoid a heavy meal or foods that may induce acid reflux or indigestion. Dairy products or meats containing tryptophan may aid your sleep.
15. Practice controlled breathing from 4.5 to 6 cycles per minute.
16. When it is time to get up, turn on the bright lights or go outside into the sun and turn your face toward the sun. The sun's light can help reset your biological clock.

17. Practice meditation 4+ times per week. Go to marc.ucla.edu and go to the link at the top, Free Guided Meditations. the above information was taken directly from our book, which is available on Amazon for \$5-10, Kindle or paperback.

Adapted from Barnhart et al. (2020). Writing and living your fears away: How writing your worst-case *scenarios and facing your fears* can *reduce anxiety, depression, stress, and emotional discomfort*.