THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

Sleep tips

Sleep plays an important role in both your physical and mental health. Studies show that a good night's sleep improves learning and also helps your attention, decision making and creativity.

Why is sleep important for good mental health?

On average, each night, people aged 14–17 need between: 8–10 hours and people aged 18–25 need between: 7–9 hours

Good sleep habits have been shown to improve our mood, concentration and performance at university or work. Lack of sleep is linked to symptoms of depression such as feeling down, hopeless, irritable, having thoughts of suicide, and using alcohol or other drugs. Research suggests that for every hour of sleep you miss at night, there is a:

– 14% increased risk of experiencing unpleasant emotions or feelings that affects day to day functions

– 23% increase in using tobacco, alcohol or other drugs

– 38% increase of feeling sad and hopeless

– 42% increase of having thoughts of suicide

– 58% increase of suicidal behaviour

– People who regularly go to sleep very late each night and do not get up until the afternoon are at an increased risk of developing Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome, leading to insomnia and depression.

– Those who sleep less than five hours each night are more likely to experience long–term mental health issues than those people who get the recommended amount of sleep each night.

What gets in the way of a good night's sleep?

For some people, not getting enough sleep might be caused by multiple factors such as:

– Biological factors; such as puberty or changes in your body clock

– Environmental factors; such as social pressure, school or university workload, use of electronic devices, or using alcohol or other drugs

Please note: However, if you sleep more than the recommended amount each night, and find it hard to wake up in the morning or still feel tired during the day, there may be something else going on. If this is the case and you are worried about any aspect of your sleep, get in touch with your GP for advice and assistance.

What you can do to improve your sleep

- Develop a good sleep/wake cycle by going to bed and waking up at the same time each day, even on weekends.
- Aim for 7–8 hours of sleep per night.
- Create a comfortable sleep environment including a comfortable mattress and with minimal noise and light.
- Do some light exercise daily, such as walking or going to the gym but not too close to your bed time.
- Unwind before bed by doing something that relaxes you.
- Try a guided relaxation or meditation exercise prior to bed.

Things to try to avoid to help improve your sleep

- Napping during the day.
- Consuming stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine, soft drinks, alcohol or black tea for 4–6 hours before bed.
- Engaging in high intensity exercise 3–4 hours before going to bed.
- Using electronic devices or watch TV in bed.
- Studying in bed.
- Looking at your clock to check the time if you wake up during the night.
- Studying right up until bedtime.

Strategies to improve sleep

Studies also show that if you are sleep deficient, you may have trouble making decisions, problem solving, managing your emotions, and coping with change. One of the most common causes of poor sleep is stress and anxiety. If you find yourself lying in bed unable to turn your mind off, try the following strategies:

Worry time
Try writing down all of your worries and schedule a time the next day where you will commit to review these worries and try to problem-solve. This gives your mind permission to let go of the worries so that you can focus on getting to sleep.

Breaking the cycle
Staying in bed awake for hours can make getting to sleep harder as it creates negative associations between your bed and getting to sleep. To break this cycle, get up and leave the room if you have not fallen asleep within 20 minutes of going to bed. After 5-10 minutes of sitting quietly, come back to bed and try again. Repeat this process if necessary.

Leaves on a stream
To help let go of your worries, try imagining yourself placing the worry thoughts on leaves that are floating down a gentle stream. Try to let the leaves flow out of your sight. If the thought returns, then just place it on a new leaf and repeat the process.

Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

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Level 5, Jane Foss Russell Building
Opening hours: 9am to 4.30pm,
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Crisis contacts
Ambulance/Fire/Police: 000
Lifeline (24 hours): 13 11 14
Mental Health Access Line: 1800 011 511

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