

PBS Helpline Resources

Sleep

Sleep is vital for good health, energy and wellbeing. It can enhance memory, ward off colds, and help us feel happier and less anxious. Lack of sleep is linked with a host of health complications, and can play havoc with our emotions. Only 2/3 of adults get the recommended 7-9 hours of sleep per night.

Improving the amount of sleep is easier than improving the quality. If bedtime has got later and later, try gradually bringing it back 15 minutes every few days until you're back on track.

Sleep quality means falling asleep and staying asleep. It takes commitment, but has so many benefits: improved focus, flexible thinking and memory retention, physical and emotional wellbeing. Small things can make a big difference.

Here are some hints for a restful night's sleep, for you or someone you are caring for:

An environment to aid sleep

Create an environment that is dark, quiet and free from distractions. Consider the sensory environment – you want to keep the bedroom cool, quiet, and dark to stop unnecessary distractions. Often we won't be aware these things are affecting our sleep. Some people have sensory differences and may be sensitive to light or sound. It may help to turn off appliances and reduce noise by moving the bed slightly away from the wall if someone is on the other side. For some people an electric fan or 'white noise' machine or app can also help mask noises.

You could also consider black-out blinds, a blanket over the curtain or even an eye mask for summer evenings and early risers.

Next consider bedding – what are you sleeping with at night? The person may not be able to let you know their duvet is too hot or the cover is uncomfortable.

If possible, keep the bedroom solely for sleep. If possible, find another place to do activities and keep bed for winding down. This will strengthen the association between bed and sleep.

Bedtime routine

Keep a regular sleep/wake schedule. A consistent bedtime/wake up time helps to regulate our body clock and promotes feelings of sleepiness. We often set an alarm clock to wake up – why not set try setting one for bedtime?

Keep tasks in the same order. Try and keep “get ready for bed tasks” in the same order every night for example. “Wash, change, hot drink, story”. This will help the routine become familiar and predictable over time. It will also help signal “it’s time for bed”. Use visual support to increase understanding of someone you are caring for if this might be helpful. Visual timetables can be useful to indicate parts of the new routine until they become familiar.

Develop a relaxing bedtime routine and separate this from any activities that cause excitement, stress or anxiety. Dim the lights an hour before bed, and use this time to wind down - try and keep these “low energy activities” –a warm drink, reading, colouring, a bath (the cooling down that happens to us after a warm bath can actually help make us sleepy)

Other things to try

Go to bed when tired.

Get out into natural light - exposure to sunlight in the morning can help reset our internal body clock.

Try and think about problems BEFORE bed - set time aside before bedtime – the aim is to avoid doing these things in bed. Often planning the next day in advance can alleviate worries.

Some people can develop a fear of going to bed. It may be worth scheduling in talking time earlier in the day to discuss any worries. Social stories can also be really helpful to reassure the person that they are safe. It’s worth helping people to understand that we feel better after a good night’s sleep than a bad night’s sleep.

Keep Active - regular exercise not only helps banish pent up tension but promotes the quality of your sleep.

And if you can’t sleep? Get up! - lying in bed can increase anxiety, try going into another room and doing something relaxing.

Things to avoid

Napping - it can seem like a good idea to get us through the rest of the day, but can confuse our sleep schedule and stops us developing a normal wake/sleep time. If you or the person you support feels tired, sit down and relax but try to avoid sleeping until bedtime.

Over excitement near bedtime or late evening exercise.

Going to bed full, hungry or thirsty. Indigestion can interfere with sleep so avoiding heavy meals can help.

Electronics before bedtime. This can be tough for all of us. It can be really tempting to fiddle on your phone, particularly when you can’t sleep, but the blue light they emit can delay the release of melatonin and make the brain feel more alert. Try and encourage the person you support to charge it away from their bed. If you think this will be hard to do, use “night mode” which reduces the amount of blue light.

Caffeine drinks later in the day. Also avoid caffeine later in the day as this can take up to 8 hours to wear off. Remember this can also found in chocolate, coke and even decaf coffee (which has about 15-30% of the caffeine of a regular coffee)

Finally

There can always be factors beyond your control. If you think the person may be in pain, seek medical advice. If sleep problems are affecting your quality of life, or the quality of life of someone you're supporting, do ask for help.

You might want to consider supporting someone you are caring for to make something like these:

Things that help me to have a good nights sleep



No coffee after lunchtime



Dark curtains



Bath



Book



Relaxing sounds



Relaxing activities before bed are really important. They help us get ready for sleep. This is what helps me to relax.

- I make sure not to drink coffee or fizzy drinks after lunchtime as this keeps me awake.
- I find light difficult so I have black out blinds in my bedroom.
- Before bed, I have a long bath and read my book.
- I turn on "night mode" and put my phone on silent.
- I don't want my phone to wake me up.
- I then listen to 'headspace'. This is an app which helps me to sleep. It tells me a story and plays relaxing sounds.

Your activities may be different to mine. You may want to make your own sleep page and talk through what helps you to relax with your carer.