Peer Education Project

Sleep: Finding our confidence with sleep

A Guide for Pupils

Mental Health Foundation

Contents

"When I was in Year 7, I wish I had known that a good sleep pattern early on is so useful, instead of having bad sleep habits now!"

Peer Educator
Peer Education Project

What is sleep?

We sleep every day, yet often we don't think about how important it is and how it can impact everything we do.

There are two complementary processes, called 'process C' and 'process S', that promote good sleep.

C

'Process C' stands for 'circadian', which refers to our internal 24-hour body rhythm. This rhythm occurs through changing levels of 'clock genes' found in almost every cell in the body.

S

'Process S' is sometimes called 'sleep pressure'. It refers to the increased need to sleep that we feel, the longer that we spend awake.

As sleep pressure builds, the 'circadian process' increases the signal to stay awake, because it is the daytime.

However, as night approaches, the 'circadian drive' for being awake reduces, and the stored-up 'sleep pressure' takes over and supports us to sleep.

Interested in why we sleep?
Watch this 9-minute video to find out more.

Why is sleep important for our mental health?

Sleep is important to help our bodies and minds process, heal, and recover from the day.

Our minds and bodies are closely linked, so getting good sleep can help us maintain good physical health. For example, it can help to boost our immune system, manage our hunger, improve our concentration, and prevent some health conditions.

Sleep is also an important factor in maintaining good mental health. Mental health is made up of our thoughts, feelings, mood, and behaviour. We all have mental health, just like we all have physical health.

When our mental health is good, we feel emotionally well, able to look after ourselves, and able to engage with the things that we care about.

When we struggle with our mental health, we can feel unable to cope, which can make it difficult to keep up with our daily tasks.

Why is sleep important for our mental health?

Getting good sleep can help us to cope with the world around us, by improving our ability to manage our:

- feelings,
- emotions,
- behaviour,
- recall memory, and
- concentration.

However, lack of sleep or poor quality sleep can make us feel:

- low,
- anxious,
- irritable,
- confused, or
- unable to manage our emotions or the challenges in life.

What is good sleep?

Although it is not always easy to achieve, good sleep is essential for our mental health and wellbeing.

How much sleep we need changes with age and will vary from person-to-person.

When it comes to good sleep, it isn't just about the number of hours of sleep we get, it is also important that our sleep is good quality.

Good quality sleep means that you fall asleep relatively quickly, don't wake up too often during the night, and that the amount of time spent in bed asleep is high.

Getting good sleep like this can be daunting, but by understanding how sleep works and learning about our own sleep patterns, we can build the confidence to begin improving it.

Top tips for good sleep health

Five principles of sleep

Professor Colin Espie, an expert in Sleep Medicine, recommends that we should:

1. Value our sleep
   It is something vital to our lives, and we need to take sleep seriously.

2. Prioritise our sleep
   We need to put sleep first when making choices about what we want to do.

3. Personalise our sleep
   We need to find the 'sleep window' that works best for us i.e. when and how long you sleep.

4. Trust our sleep
   It is a natural process, and our sleep will get itself into a good pattern.

5. Protect our sleep
   We can do this by avoiding or preventing things that upset it.

Our lifestyle and the environment around us can often impact our sleep health. It is important that we find ways to reduce things that negatively affect our sleep, and focus on what can help each of us to have good sleep health.

Top tips for good sleep health

It is normal to feel unsure or frustrated about sleep, especially if we feel like we have tried lots of things that haven't worked. The important thing is to be patient and give our bodies time to adjust when we try new things – good sleep health develops over time.

Below are some ideas to help you think about how you can get a better night's sleep.

How to prepare for sleep in our daily routine:

Create a wind-down routine before bed – limit screen time, homework or physical activity and find ways that work for you to calm your mind. For example, reading, listening to relaxing music or journaling.

Have drinks before bed that encourage a calming effect on the body and aid sleep, like chamomile tea, rather than sugary, caffeinated drinks.

Eat foods like bananas, cherries and even tomatoes, if you are hungry before bed, which can all help promote sleep.

Make time to exercise or move your body during the day, which can release tension and energy and get your body ready for sleep.

Top tips for good sleep health

Reduce screen time before bed. Screens at bedtime can make it harder to fall asleep because they suppress the production of the sleep hormone, melatonin, which we get from dim and dark spaces. You could still use your phone or device to listen to music, a podcast or a guided meditation to help you get to sleep, but try to reduce how much you spend looking at a screen before bed.

Create and use a sleep diary that records the timing, quality, and quantity of your sleep. This would give a more realistic idea about the type of sleep you get, and can be used to help you plan how to get better quality sleep.

If you are interested, check out apps, like Sleep Cycle, which help to improve your sleep by using an intelligent alarm clock and tracker to analyse your sleep patterns and wake you up at your lightest point of sleep.
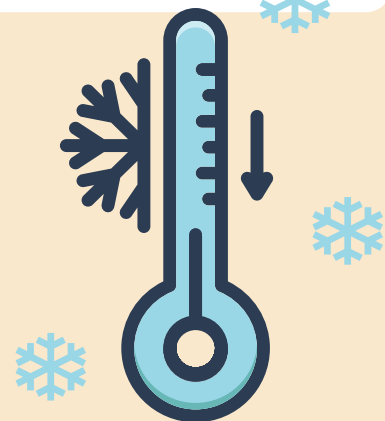
Top tips for good sleep health

How to prepare for sleep in our sleep environment:

Keep your sleeping space as dimmed as possible at night time. Darkness releases a hormone called melatonin, which relaxes the body and helps you sleep. You could get some blackout curtains or even an eye mask for sleeping.
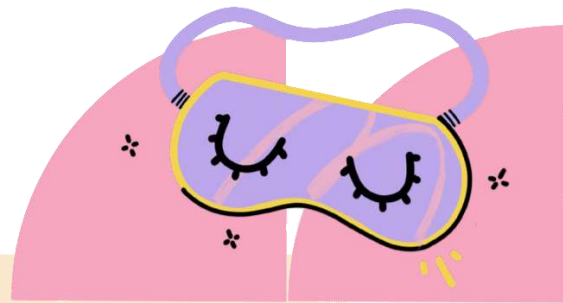
If possible, try not to use your bed for doing school work and keep it just for sleeping. Maybe think about your bedroom in 'zones', keeping one zone just for sleeping and others for work or play.

Try to keep the temperature of your bedroom cool and the space clutter free, this creates a good environment for sleeping.

Top tips for good sleep health

A quiet space promotes good sleep. You might share a room, have family members that go to sleep later than you, pets that might keep you awake, or a lot of noise outside in the area you live, so consider using ear plugs or finding other ways to block out any noise.

If you wake in the night, try not to 'clock watch'. This can encourage the mind to believe that this is the time you should be waking up and can create an unhelpful pattern.

Keep a pen and paper next to your bed to write down anything that is on your mind before you go to sleep. This may help you to stop worrying about things that are keeping you awake, knowing you can return to them in the morning if it is important.

Find out more

Sleep Scotland's Teen Zone is a great hub with resources and guidance around how to sleep better.

Anna Freud Centre has a great page on sleep and self-care with a useful video and links to other helpful resources.

Watch these top tip videos by the Teen Sleep Hub.

The Sleep Council have some Nodcasts which are relaxing sounds you can listen to which might help you fall asleep, such as waves, birdsong and rain.

The NHS have a simple PDF Sleep Diary which you could print off and use or just copy in to your own notebook or paper, alongside a useful 10 Rules for Improved Sleep Hygiene list.

Sleep Cycle is an app designed to help you wake up refreshed. It tracks your sleeping patterns and wakes you up during your lightest sleep phase, helping -to establish a regular pattern.

The Mix shared some answers to common questions about sleep health from sleep experts

The ADHD Foundation have a great one page checklist for good sleep hygiene which you can print or copy for yourself.

Young Scot, in partnership with Sleep Scotland, developed a helpful information page on How to Improve Your Sleep Routine with links to some other great resources.

SLEEP DIARY

What time did I go to bed?

How long did it take to fall asleep?

Did I wake up during the night? If yes, why?

When did I wake up today?

How do I feel today?

How many hours of sleep did I get? Does it match how many hours you wanted? If not, do you know why?

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