

# Improve Your Sleep!

Sleep is not optional! Humans have evolved to function best when we get between 7 and 9hrs of sleep within a 24hr period. However, the amount of sleep you need does change throughout your lifetime. For example, an infant and a teenager typically need the most sleep and the older we get the less sleep we need. The purpose of sleep is extremely important to human health. Sleep not only aids in memory storage, but also allows your body and mind to recharge, leaving you refreshed and alert when you wake up. Healthy sleep helps the body remain healthy and stave off diseases. Without enough sleep, the brain cannot function properly. Research suggests that the first step in attempting to fix a sleep problem should be following behavior modification and sleep hygiene guidelines.

- ✓ **Maintain a regular sleep schedule** – Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day (+/- 20min) even on weekends and holidays. This can reset your body's internal circadian rhythms.
- ✓ **Avoid naps throughout the day** – Napping decreases the need for easy sleep onset and can cause sleep fragmentation. Sleep cycles are most restorative if uninterrupted. If you must nap, keep it to less than an hour and avoid napping after 1500.
- ✓ **Follow a bedtime ritual** – Prepare your mind and body for sleep. Include time for relaxation into this routine... take a bath, listen to music, journal, practice diaphragmatic breathing, meditation, or have a hot cup of decaffeinated tea.
- ✓ **Avoid caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol several hours before bed** – Stimulants and depressants both disrupt sleep architecture and result in poor quality sleep. Over time, this can leave you feeling emotionally drained and worn out.
- ✓ **Create an inviting sleep environment** – Think sanctuary! Create a dark, cool, safe, and quiet area for sleep.
- ✓ **Exercise, but not before bed** – Exercise is mostly good for sleep, but avoid it at least few hours before bed. Rigorous exercise circulates endorphins throughout your body which can cause difficulty initiating sleep.
- ✓ **Stay away from screens before bed** – Remove TVs, computers, and tablets from your bedroom and avoid the temptation to frequently check your phone. Circadian rhythms are affected by different light frequencies. Blue light activates awakening and is the kind of light that our screens typically radiate.
- ✓ **Only use your bed for sleep and sex** – Avoid, watching TV, reading, eating, chatting, or working in your bed. When you do these activities in bed, your brain starts to associate your bedroom with them. That means that when you try to fall asleep at night, your brain won't cooperate. It wants to be awake.
- ✓ **Follow stimulus control** – If you can't fall asleep within approximately 20min, get out of bed. This is a great time to meditate or simply go get a drink of water. Stay away from activities that will stimulate your brain. Then, go back to sleep when you are tired. Repeat this until you fall asleep. The goal is to reduce the amount of time lying awake in bed.
- ✓ **Avoid sleeping pills or use them sparingly** – When we can't sleep, a lot of us first turn to over the counter medications. However, sleep medications oftentimes disrupt our natural circadian rhythm and can cause problems if over used.
- ✓ **Shift work – Your day to day schedule is critical** – As much as possible, keep consistent with the sequence of events in your daily schedule after you change shifts. For example, after waking up if you first exercise, then keep these events in order after you change shifts.

Be as consistent as you can with these sleep hygiene and behavior modification guidelines. If you're still struggling after several months of trying them, seek professional assistance from a mental health provider or your PCM.