

# SLEEPING WELL

Thanks to technology, we are now living in a world that provides activity and stimulation 24 hours a day; it can sometimes seem like an inconvenience to take time out to rest. Sleep remains something we have a tendency to take for granted.

While science doesn't yet fully understand how sleep works, you don't need to be a scientist to have an idea of its importance. It doesn't matter if it was because of social activities (preferably ours and not a neighbour's), a restless mind, or that "one last level" which turned into an all-night gaming session that kept us awake; we often notice that our level of functioning has been impaired after a night without sleep.

Living with this (often self inflicted) sort of "mental hangover" seems to be a fact of life for many in their teenage years, but it's something we seem to grow more sensitive to as we get older. As the pressures of life increase with age, so too does the importance of performing to the maximum of our ability.

To use a metaphor, sleep is like a tree. Early on in life we pick its fruit without paying too much attention to maintaining it, but eventually the tree may suffer and struggle to feed us. We later see sleep as something that should be nurtured rather than exploited.

How can we place a greater emphasis on healthy sleep?

Caffeine can have a negative effect on sleep onset and quality, so it's a good idea to restrict your intake during the day, and refrain from drinking any coffee or caffeine-containing beverages for at least four hours prior to bedtime.

Computer screens emit a spectrum of light similar to daylight which may delay your brain's sleep impulse. Therefore, it's a good idea to stop using a computer about an hour before bed.

One important way we can help improve our sleep is to follow a routine, getting up at the same time every morning, and retiring to bed at the same time each night. Try to restrict your sleep to these times, without taking naps during the day or sleeping in on weekends. This helps to "program your body's clock" so you get used to sleeping and waking at the same time each day.

Similarly, it's a good idea to try to program your mind to associate your bed and bedroom with relaxation and sleep, which means avoiding using it for activities that may cause you stress.

If mental chatter is a contributing factor to your inability to sleep, then mindfulness exercises may be able to help you to channel it out.

One great exercise is to focus on

your breathing, slowly inhaling and exhaling using your full lung capacity and diaphragm, and concentrating on nothing else but the sensation of each breath you take. This is a way to both clear the mind and relax the body.

Unfortunately, technology hasn't created a "magic bullet" when it comes to getting a good night's sleep; as much as we may wish it would be so, it's not a matter of just getting a prescription for sleeping pills.

## CHECKLIST FOR A GOOD SLEEP:

- Invest in a good quality mattress.
- Have blackout curtains in your bedroom.
- Keep your bedroom at a comfortable temperature.
- Establish as quiet an environment as possible.
- Wait to go to bed until you're tired.
- Don't try and force yourself to go to sleep.
- Try not to go to bed stressed or worried.

Some people find it easier to sleep with some sort of soft background noise. If you have an iPod or iPhone, one App that is available is called Sleep Pillow, which is capable of playing a number of ambient soundtracks.



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