**HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR SLEEP**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Many people do not sleep well. This set of activities and exercises have been shown to improve the quality of your sleep.

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| **Enhancing the physiology of sleep** |

A sequence of physiological changes in our body and brain help us feel tired and sleepy. For example, levels of melatonin—a monoamine in the brain that promotes drowsiness—increase a few hours before we sleep. The following table describes some activities that partly initiate these physiological changes.

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| Activity | Details |
| If possible, awake at a similar time every morning | Perhaps awake between 7.00 and 7.30 every morning, even on weekends. However, do not be too concerned if one morning you wake up at 9.00 am because of a very late night. |
| Avoid caffeine several hours before you sleep | Avoid coffee—and perhaps tea, cola, or chocolate—6 hours before you sleep. Note that some medication, such as Panadol Extra, also contains caffeine. |
| Avoid nicotine before you sleep | Ideally, do not smoke at all; otherwise, if possible, do not smoke within four hours of sleeping. Nicotine is a stimulant. |
| Avoid alcohol before you sleep | If possible, minimize the consumption of alcohol several hours before you sleep. Although alcohol might seem to relax you, metabolites of this substance also impair sleep quality. |
| Prevent hunger or excessive food and drink before you sleep | A light snack, like some fruit or cereal, and a light drink could be helpful. Excessive food can produce indigestion and disrupt sleep |
| Avoid naps | At the very least, if possible, do not nap after 3 pm and for no more than one hour. |
| Consider a warm bath about 1 to 2 hours before you sleep | As your body cools down after the bath, you are more likely to feel sleepy |
| Exercise frequently but, if possible, not within several hours of retiring to bed | Fitness tends to facilitate sleep; but exercise within a few hours before bed can disrupt sleep |
| Ensure the surroundings are quiet, dark, and a comfortable temperature | The pillow and bed should feel comfortable as well |

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| **Associating the bedroom with sleep** |

Some people watch TV, use their tablet, or even exercise in their bedroom. So, over time, they associate their bedroom with a place in which they feel alert rather than sleepy. Consequently, when they enter the bedroom, they naturally feel more alert, impairing their sleep. The following table describes some activities that help you associate the bedroom with sleep.

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| Activity | Details |
| Use the bed for sleeping and sex only. | If possible, do not watch TV, use the computer, or complete work in the bedroom. |
| If you cannot sleep well, leave the bedroom for a while and return when tired. | You could prepare a drink, listen to relaxing music, or even read something monotonous in another room. The room should be quite dim, however. You might return to bed 30 minutes later. |
| Apply the same ritual for an hour or so before you retire to bed | Each night, you might read a book or watch a video in the lounge and then mediate for 5 minutes—such as breathe deeply and slowly—and then wash your face and so forth in the same order. However, vary the routine slightly over time; otherwise, you might feel uneasy if your routine is disrupted. |
| Rotate the clock so you cannot see this clock from your bed | If you watch the clock too often, your sleep is likely to be disrupted. You also begin to associate the clock with disrupted sleep. |

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| **Challenging unhelpful thoughts about sleep** |

People often immerse in thoughts that disrupt sleep. They might, for example, worry they are not sleeping enough—a thought that impedes sleep. Therefore, you need to identify and address thoughts that could disrupt sleep. The following table offers some helpful hints.

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| Activity | Details |
| If you have not slept well, do not yield to the temptation to change your daytime activities. | Some people, for example, might cancel events if they had not slept well. This behaviour, however, can merely amplify their worries about sleep and exacerbate insomnia. |
| Identify some unhelpful thoughts about sleep | Examples might include   * If I do not sleep well tonight, the whole day will be ruined * If I do not fall asleep very soon, I am likely to be awake all night * If my sleep does not improve, my life is likely to deteriorate |
| Replace unhelpful thoughts with more nuanced alternatives. | Examples might include   * If I do not sleep well tonight, I might feel tired during some hours but might feel fine during the rest of this day * Sometimes, I fall asleep even when I expect to be awake for longer * People can perform remarkably well even when their sleep is disrupted. |
| Recognize that people tend to underestimate the duration in which they slept | If you believe you slept only 2 hours, you probably slept closer to 4 or 5 hours. |

Likewise, do not worry if you cannot complete all, or even most, of these activities. Everyone is unique. You might discover that some activities are helpful and other activities are not as helpful.