



## Sleep Well Guide



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This guide takes you through several questions to help you assess what may be holding you back from getting a great night's sleep. Much of the science behind this is stimulus control which is about the psychological connections made between our environment, actions and feelings. As you go through each of the points below, take some paper and write down steps that you need to take in relation to each question. This will give you action steps to be well on your way to improving your sleep.

### ☾ **Are you using your bedroom for things other than sleeping?**

If you can, keep your bedroom for just sleeping, dressing and being physically intimate. This tells your brain and body that when you are in this space, the objective is sleep, making it easier to achieve as this connection strengthens over time. Also, keeping your bed for pretty much just sleeping is best as your body will associate it with sleep and feel tired as soon as you lie down.

### ☾ **Do you have a sound bedtime routine?**

This can sound silly to adults as it is something often associated with children; however it is still a necessary part of us taking responsibility for parenting ourselves into our adult lives and fostering good habits. A presleep routine signals to the brain that it is time to get ready for sleep. It is important to unwind at the same time each night and to do your chosen activities in the same order as it strengthens the message that sleep is coming. Write out your bedtime routine e.g. have a non-caffeinated drink, read 2 or 3 chapters of a novel, prep your lunch for the next day if you leave for work, load the dishwasher, 5 mins of meditation, 5 mins of gentle yoga, get your outfit ready for tomorrow, brush teeth. You should then be going to sleep at the same time each night which will set your "biological clock".

### ☾ **Is your bedroom actually comfortable, quiet and fit for sleeping in?**

I'm a massive advocate of understanding how our environment makes us feel. Do you actually feel restful, peaceful or sleepy when you set into your bedroom, or do you feel overwhelmed, overstimulated and stressed? Our bedroom should be comfortable, quiet and you should be able to make it as dark as you can so that no light could be bothering you at night. Some people find that keeping their bedroom tidy and clean helps a lot because it removes unnecessary stimulation from the environment because even though you may not be consciously thinking about picking up that top on the floor, you bet your subconscious noted it. Have fun experimenting with your environment and making it and your bed as inviting for sleep as possible. This may involve investing in better quality and hypoallergenic bedlinens, mattress, curtains, rugs, mood lighting, calming scents, organisation, bigger bed, eyemask, ear plugs etc.

### ☾ **Do you wake in the night either too warm or hot?**

Excessively warm or cool environments disturb sleep. There is a certain point during the sleep cycle our body temperature reaches it's lowest (usually about 3am), if you wake here too cold then maybe a blanket or warmer PJs would help.

### ☾ **Do you nap too long in the day?**

It stands to reason that napping during the day can make sleep more difficult at night. Sometimes we have to assess honestly whether it is better to have a 20-40 minute power nap, go to bed earlier or stick to our designated bedtime. Power naps can work wonders but actually going to sleep for over an hour can be harmful to sleep hygiene, especially if the "nap" is later in the day. Some people will find it necessary to nap somewhere other than their bed as they cannot *just* nap otherwise. I personally find napping on top of the bed with a blanket over me is sufficient.

### ☾ **Do you always set an alarm?**

On days I do not have to be up at a certain time to achieve what I need to do before an appointment, I unset any alarms\*. This is because I am allowing myself to sleep for as long as I need. Oftentimes I still wake up at a similar time to any alarm but sometimes it is longer or shorter. Letting our bodies and mind have what they need sometimes can allow them to reset. If we have lacked sleep for a while, we can get into what is called a sleep-debt and not setting an alarm can allow us to recover. I also find that not setting an alarm unnecessarily means that I respond better to my alarm when I do need to set it (some people resent their alarm a little less than ;]). \*Some people prefer to set their alarm and get up the same time each day regardless.

### ☾ **Do you struggle to get to sleep due to ruminating on things or a whirring mind?**

Plan time earlier in the evening for problem-solving, planning, list-making etc. If a worry pops up, remind yourself you have already allocated time to work on it and let it go. Consider seeking help for anxiety, stress or depression if worrying is an issue for you at this time as it can cause shallow sleep. Also, try relaxation techniques such as *progressive-muscle-relaxation*, *deep-breathing*, *guided meditations* for sleep, simply thinking calmly of all of the things you are *grateful* for and picturing them in your mind's eye, or *visualising* yourself reaching a goal and go to sleep imagining that is your reality – be it holidaying, being in a fulfilling job, having fun with loved ones etc.

### ☾ **Do you use your screens before bed?**

This is problematic due to the blue light affecting the hormone melatonin cycle which prepares the body chemically for sleep. I find the best practice here is to have a sun-tracker on your devices so that the screen dims and controls the amount of blue light emitted according to the sun. This reflects then the natural cycle of melatonin despite the season. Some people will find it necessary to be very strict and turn all screens off at a certain time and keep them out of their bedroom due to being too emotionally stimulated by whatever they are seeing on their screens. Be honest with yourself here – what do you need to do to maximise your success in sleeping well?

### ☾ **Do you consume a caffeinated beverage too soon before bed?**

The guidelines of when is the best time to last consume caffeine in the day do change periodically and will depend on the time you set for sleep, however, it is best to track this yourself because caffeine does stay in the system for a certain time. Monitor by noting your wake time in the morning, the caffeine you have throughout the day and the time. You can then see whether this is affecting your sleep by noting when you managed to fall asleep approximately. I find I can have my last caffeine drink in the summer at midday and the darker months I can extend that to 4pm. Commit to figuring out your personal relationship with caffeine to find the harmonious point. You may also like to extend this investigation to nicotine (a stimulant) and alcohol as they are shown to affect sleep cycles as well, usually by causing awakenings during the night.

### ☾ **Are you getting in any or enough physical exercise?**

You may have experienced an occasion where you've had a really active day, maybe you walked a load and you don't even really remember falling asleep after you lay down... exercise can lead to deep sleep and it certainly improves your chances of sleep. Avoid strenuous exercise 3 hours before bed though otherwise you may still be too stimulated to sleep (unless you know this doesn't affect you adversely). Also note this exercise will affect how you metabolise caffeine!

### ☾ **Are you eating well?**

A healthy diet will of course improve your chance and quality of sleep too so do your research and assess what you may need to consume more or less of to improve your diet. This will involve looking into the vitamins and minerals that affect sleep and whether you consume them regularly. Avoid heavy eating and sugary things 2 hours before sleep as this can lead to restlessness. It may

be worth monitoring this too to see if anything does or does not agree with you and affects your sleep or how tired you feel.

### ☾ **Have you labelled yourself as an insomniac or simply person who cannot sleep?**

The stories that we tell ourselves and the boxes that we put ourselves in are very powerful because they create a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more you tell yourself you can't sleep, the more difficult it is. Change your story, even if it doesn't feel true right now – it will be. Challenge the story you're telling yourself and it becomes easier to change. Look for evidence to the contrary and challenge – when was the last time you did sleep well? Have you had a period in life where sleep was easier?

### ☾ **Do you clock watch?**

This is fatal for most and can definitely lead to more anxiety and frustration. If this is you, turn the clock away or omit from your room if necessary.

### ☾ **Do you force yourself to sleep?**

If you do not fall asleep within 20 minutes of turning out your light, get up and go into another room otherwise you can cause more stress to yourself. Engage in a quiet and calming activity in not too bright lighting, such as washing up, reading another chapter of a book, drawing, colouring, or writing in a journal until you are sleepy. Repeat if you wake up in the night do not return to sleep within 15 minutes. If you do find yourself still struggling to fall asleep or waking up throughout the night after persisting with the tips above for at least 3 weeks and ruling out a medical condition with your GP, it may be worth trying a technique called *sleep-restriction*.

Other things to note:

- ☾ I use a sunlight lamp/alarm for the mornings to gradually introduce more light into the room which I find necessary to help me wake up in the Winter. It also works to set it to sundown so the light in the bedroom gradually dims and helps reinforce to my brain that it is sleep time.
- ☾ You will need to monitor to find your own level of sleep to feel rested e.g. mine is 7 hours.
- ☾ You may wake often in the night to go to the bathroom; could having your last drink earlier help with this? It may also be psychosomatic or due to a medical reason – consult a GP if in doubt.
- ☾ Additional reading on *sleep-restriction*: Colin Espie – *Overcoming Insomnia and Sleep problems*.
- ☾ Note medications you use – some contain caffeine or side effects that affect sleep.
- ☾ If after three weeks of implementing all of these steps and you have not felt an improvement in your sleep and how you feel, then *please* consult your GP/medical practitioner as there are several medical reasons sleep can be poor despite your best efforts.

You should now have a rather comprehensive list of action points that you can work through to improve your sleep. It will likely be necessary to do further research or consult other professionals, i.e. dietitians or a sleep coach if you work changing shift times. It should also be noticed that there is a complex interplay between many of the factors which affect sleep, (caffeine, exercise, diet, season) so you will need to tailor everything to your own bodies needs. Many of the points you will need to be really firm with yourself on and really commit to them for your own wellbeing. Devise a way to hold yourself accountable and reward yourself when you achieve an action *consistently* for a set time because it will take a few weeks to know whether something helps for you. This also helps to build up good habits around your sleep.

Good sleep sets us up for the best success in the day – whatever that looks and feels like to you.

If you feel that you are still struggling to sleep or sleep well due to mental health reasons or an issue that could be helped with counselling, then please message me or contact me as we can set up a free chat to see whether we would be good to work together on the issue.

Good Luck on Your Sleep Journey

- Sophie Wild Robin

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