

Sleep Hygiene

Good sleep relies on the development/sustainment of rhythms and cycles in the body. We need to aim for long term changes that support our body's natural hormonal, circadian, nervous system, and blood sugar cycles (among others). This requires a multisystem/holistic approach and consistent efforts over weeks and months (rather than just days). The techniques below have been extensively researched and serve as suggestions to implement, but tweaking these to suit your home life, personal situation and preferences is important.

Physical Environment

Aim for a calm night-time environment. Limit the use of bright lights at night, play calming music, ensure it is very dark in your bedroom, ensure you expose yourself to daylight as soon as possible after you wake up. This assists with melatonin production at night.

Movement

Exercise during the day (but no later than 5pm), is excellent to assist with sleep. Gentle stretching/restorative movement before bed is also beneficial as it assists with regulating the nervous system.

Screens

Limit the use of screens at night time – particularly for the hour before bed. The type of light emitted from these devices interrupts the natural hormonal rhythms of the body. If you must use devices, aim to wear blue light glasses. Remove your phone from your bedroom.

Nutrition

Limit caffeine intake in the afternoon (tea, coffee, chocolate, etc). Ensure that you're eating well balanced meals, limiting sugar and processed carbohydrates. Include protein consistently throughout the day. This will help to stabilise blood sugar levels and support the nervous system.

Rituals

Create a night-time ritual for the hour before bed. This might include; a cup of herbal tea, listening to music, a bath, and gentle stretches. Play around with rituals that are soothing for you and aim to reproduce this every night.

Mindset

Become aware of what is impacting your sleep. Do you clock watch? If so, remove the clock or turn it around. Do you feel stressed about falling asleep? This means that the sympathetic nervous system is activated, and it will not be possible to sleep in this state. You may need to engage in neural activities that encourage nervous system regulation.

Routine

Night-time routines signal to the body that it is time to wind down. Day time routines/stress levels impact night time sleep. Minimising stress and maintaining healthy day time routines can assist with better sleep. Watch out for day naps (however, they can be useful when used correctly, especially if you feel 'wired but tired' of an evening). Aim to go to bed and wake at the same time each day. Be sure to go to bed when you feel sleepy (sleepiness comes in waves).

Nervous System Regulation

A dysregulated nervous system means that we are stuck in 'fight/flight' or a 'collapse' nervous system state (or oscillating between the two). Practicing skills/exercises that support the nervous system to move out of these states, back to a neuroception of safety is vital for sleep. This takes time and requires consistent efforts to use movement, mindfulness practices, grounding strategies and more.

Bedroom Use

Aim to keep the bed for sleep and intimacy. Try to avoid using the bed/bedroom for other activities as this creates cues for the body that are confusing. Give yourself 30/40 minutes to get to sleep. If unsuccessful, get up and do something boring (no light or stimulation) and wait for your next sleep wave.

Additional Support

There are many medications which are used to treat poor sleep, but these tend to be only effective in the short-term. They can be great for breaking a poor sleep pattern (short term use), but ongoing use of sleeping pills may lead to dependence and interfere with developing good sleep habits independent of medication, thereby prolonging sleep difficulties. Be sure to talk to your health professional about what is right for you. Supplements can also assist with calming the nervous system – be sure to discuss any contraindications with your health provider first.