

TOP 10 TIPS IF YOU'RE STRUGGLING WITH SLEEP

Words by Will Van Der Hart



I have only intermittently struggled with sleep but as I have coached others through periods of sleeplessness over the years, I have gathered a lot of simple supportive tools to help restore sleep. These are the ten that I have found to be most helpful, both personally and through other people's experience. (These are not meant to be an alternative to clinical advice so don't hesitate to talk to your GP if you are struggling with sleep. Some people will need to use a sleep aid, either over the counter or prescribed and others may benefit from some of the apps available.) These tools can be used in conjunction with the above but also can work well on their own.

Catch yourself worrying about sleep during the day

Many people begin to ruminate about not sleeping early in the day and this invariably builds towards the evening time. It is important to identify and re-appraise these thoughts before you actually try to wind down to sleep. Instead of worrying if I will sleep or not, I use the phrase, "It doesn't matter if I sleep or not, I am going to rest well." This takes the pressure off of 'having to sleep' which can have the opposite effect.

Avoid caffeine for as long as you are struggling with sleep

This is really important as even small amounts of caffeine can be the difference between getting to sleep or not. I used to drink lots of coffee, but when I had my most difficult experience of anxiety in 2005 my GP advised me to give up until I could sleep better. I haven't had a cup of coffee since! You might choose to swap to decaffeinated or herbal options at least for a few weeks.

Get yourself physically tired before trying to sleep

If you are struggling with anxiety and sleeplessness you probably feel exhausted, but your body will probably not match your mind. If it is appropriate for your overall health condition, undertaking enough physical activity each day to be physically tired can make a big difference. Remember not to exercise just before bed as this can actually make you more wakeful.

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Eat early

If you are struggling with sleep it can be comforting to eat sugary foods like chocolate late in the evening. Digesting and sleeping aren't a great combination and can keep you awake. The best principle is to eat a minimum of 3 hrs before you lie down to sleep. Whilst it's also important to stay hydrated, don't drink too much in the last hour before lying down otherwise you can keep sensing the urgency to go to the loo which again interrupts the wind down process.

Get your bedroom ready

The optimal temperature to sleep is 18 degrees C and if a bedroom is too hot or too cold it can interfere with both getting to sleep and staying asleep. Try adjusting your heating, ventilation and bedclothes to get the right combination for you. It can also help to use black out curtains or blinds in the summer if light is an issue to you. Try to make your room as fresh, fragrant and comfortable as possible so that you feel really comfortable and relaxed in the space.

Keep all screens outside of the bedroom

The blue light that phones and tablets create actually suppress the creation of the hormone melatonin which we need to sleep. If you are struggling to sleep the first thing people reach for is their phone, to start scrolling the news feeds. This invariably creates the problem; it doesn't solve it. If you want to sleep well it is essential to change your relationship with your phone, including turning off all ringtones and notifications before you go to bed.

Create a sleep routine

Going to sleep should start well before you lie down. The winddown routine is a process that give your body clues to relax into sleep mode. The key principle is to begin the routine at around the same time every night. Many people find that a hot bath with lavender oil or bath salts is a good way to begin, others do a bit of gentle stretching on the bedroom floor before they actually get into bed. This is also a good time it includes your evening prayers.

Use a Sleep Primer

Once you are in bed lie on your back, close your eyes. Take a deep inbreath and then let it out slowly to a count of 14. Repeat this once more before opening your eyes and pick up a book to read. My reading rule is that you choose books that don't get your pulse racing. In fact, I regularly suggest that you choose sedentary, travel or exploration books that evoke neutral but appealing images. Think 'Walking the foothills of Nepal' or 'Trout fishing in Montana.' Stick with the book to the point at which you feel like you cannot keep your eyes open.

Begin the 'Progressive Tense and Release Muscle Relaxation Exercise

Lie on your back with hands by your sides. Take a long inbreath and release slowly. Beginning with your toes, scrunch up/tense, hold for 4 seconds and then release. Progress all the way up your body; calves, thighs, tummy, shoulders etc, all the way to your face. Once you have tensed and released every muscle you can manage take a final deep inbreath and release slowly.

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Visualise

It is really important to enter into visualisation exercised fully, not half observing whether you are asleep yet. It is actually much more helpful to give up all thoughts of sleep, just trust the process. Before you begin, adopt your preferred sleeping position. There are two different sorts of visualisations that people find helpful: scene visualisations and journey visualisations. I suggest you begin with two scenes and if you lose focus begin a journey. Examples are below but it's always best to choose your own. Try to keep using the same visualisations for best effect.

Scene 1: You are lying on an inflatable li-lo floating on a blue pool. It is a sunny day you are dipping your toes in the water. You feel relaxed and can hear the buzz of insects on the dry grass.

Scene 2: You are enveloped in a deep, soft hammock, swinging between two apple trees. You can smell the vague scent of the apple blossom. It is dark but you feel warm and comfortable in the evening light.

Journey 1: You are walking in a sandy path between gently swaying pine trees in a wood. As you walk you look around you, noticing your environment and enjoying the cool breeze.

Journey 2: You are skiing along a gentle slope; it is quiet, and you can just hear the sound of your skis sliding in the snow. You keep looking up at the sunny mountain peaks.

If you continue to struggle or if you wake again:

If you wake again or have been visualising for more than 30 minutes and feel more awake or frustrated, turn the light back on and go back to Step 7. Begin the routine again but exchange the bath for a milky drink or light stretch. Once you have reset and got back into bed and begin to read your book until you feel unable to continue. Skip Step 9 and go straight back into visualisation again until you drop off.

