# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW AS A YOUTH LEADER
SLEEPLESSNESS

HEAD STRONG

What is sleeplessness?

Sleep can be a complex subject, but it's an essential part of being human. During our lives we spent approx. 1/3 of our lifetime asleep and it's during that time that our body and mind gets to rest and restore itself, enabling us to function during the daylight hours in the way we need to.

Without good quality sleep we can start to experience a huge impact on our mental, physical and emotional health. To understand why this happens we need to better understand the role sleep has in our lives and what happens in our bodies when we rest.

During sleep our body not only restores its energy levels ready to face another day, but our body actually repairs itself by regrowing cells. Even our brain uses this time of rest to reorganize itself, to regulate our emotions, convert short-term memories into long-term memories, even erase data that we just don't need. Sleep is a time of healing for our bodies. So when we are struggling to sleep and experiencing periods of chronic sleep deprivation, our bodies find it much harder to cope. For some it may be that they go to sleep initially but go on to have restless nights where they wake up frequently or wake up and are unable to get back to sleep.
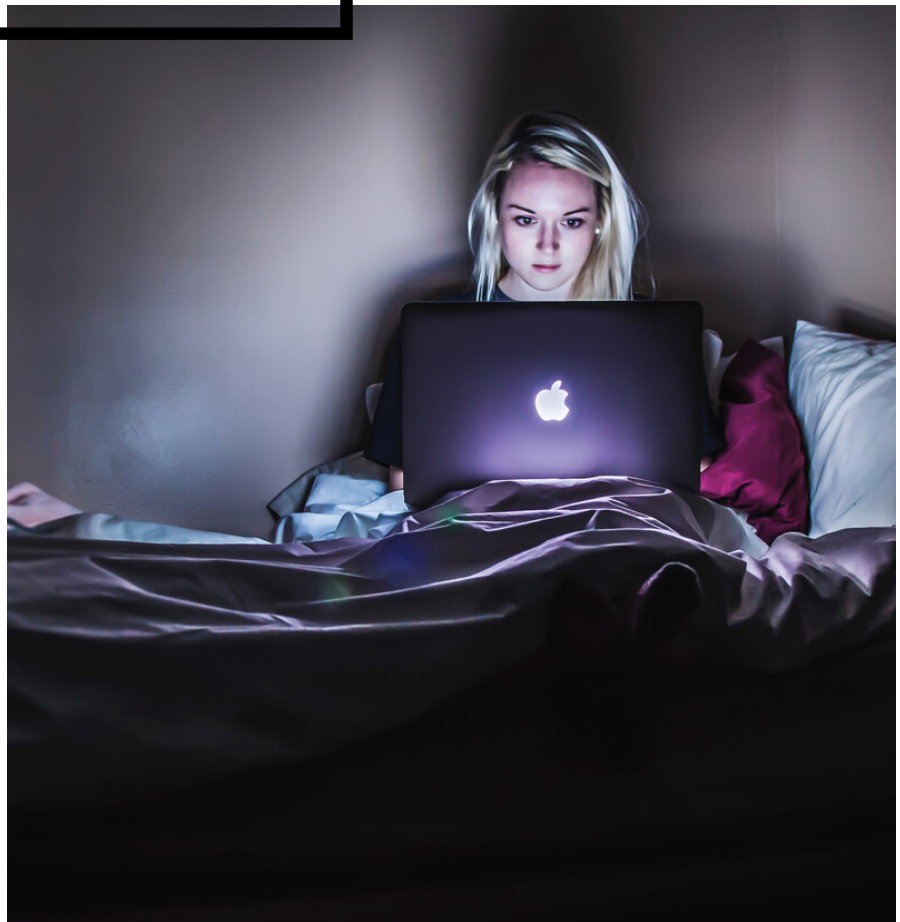
A lack of sleep can result in us experiencing the following:

- Difficulty focusing or concentrating
- Low mood
- More extreme or reactive emotions
- Weakened immune system so increase in illness
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Fatigue during the day

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But what makes us sleepy at night?

Well, our bodies have an inbuilt 24-hour body clock that helps regulate our sleep and waking hours, this makes us gradually more tired throughout the day and when the daylight starts to fade releases a hormone called melatonin into our systems that makes us feel tired and ready to sleep during the darker hours. In the morning after resting, our bodies release a burst of cortisol that gives us a new boost of energy to get up and face another day.

This in-built body clock is amazing when working as it should, but our 24-hour sleep/awake cycle can be interrupted and confused by lots of things. For example, if we're spending lots of time on our devices, particularly late in the evening, there's blue light on those devices (like iPads and mobile phones), and that light interferes with the release of the sleepy hormone melatonin, therefore not making our bodies feel ready to wind down for rest.

So that's why it can be key for people to limit access to their devices in the evening. Or if you're using a screen, you can apply filters to your device so it filters out the blue light and reduces the impact of that blue light on the release of melatonin.

Also, our diet during the day can interrupt our natural sleep cycle, so if people drink lots of sugary or caffeinated drinks (particularly in the afternoon), that can have a negative impact on our sleep. Swapping to non-caffeinated drinks or water after lunchtime can help reduce the impact on our bodies.

Anxiety and sleep

Sleeplessness is a common symptom of anxiety and falling asleep at times of heightened stress in our lives (like exams) can be a real challenge. Excessive worry can make it not only harder to fall asleep but also to stay asleep as many people often wake up again worrying. Frustratingly, sleep deprivation can also make anxiety worse during the day and for young people experiencing this, it's key that we help them to establish a good bedtime routine and put into place some good techniques to calm themselves down during the evening.

If we're under a lot of stress, we need to think of ways, wherever possible, of reducing those stress levels because that will have a positive impact on our ability to sleep.
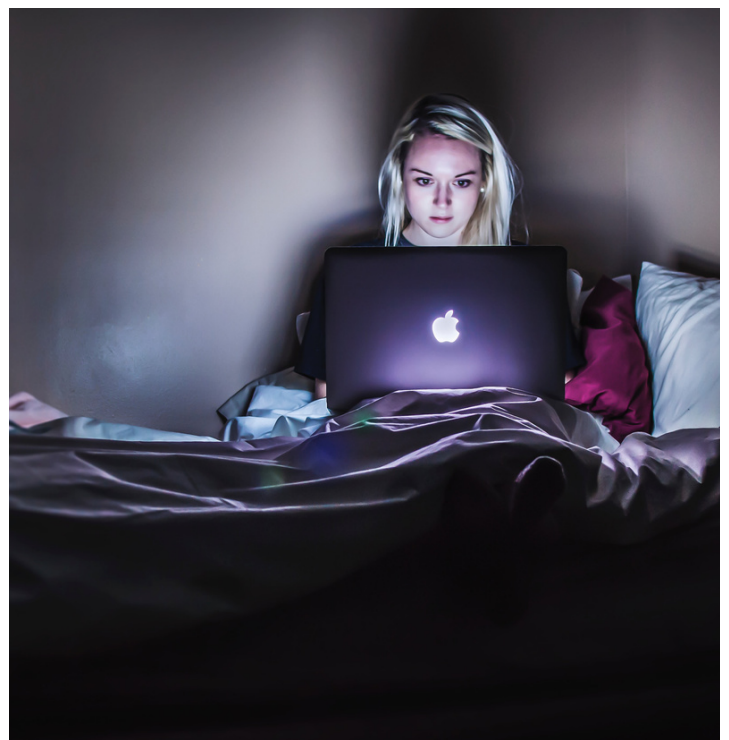
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How to help- here's a few ideas you can pass on

Establish a good routine
Think carefully about the few hours leading up to bedtime and what you do during that time as this is the lead up to your body falling asleep. Many people find it helpful to get a good routine in place so perhaps they eat dinner at the same time each day (the earlier the better as your body is not busy digesting too late), then go on to watch something, have a bath, then read a book before finally switching the light off at a set time. Make sure you limit your screen time, especially in the hour before bed so that you allow your body to flood your system with melatonin and get ready for rest.

Sleep hygiene
This is more than just making sure we have clean sheets on the bed, it's about the environment we create in our bedrooms that can help our bodies relax and fall asleep. Make sure the room is dark, remove as much light as possible and maybe even charge your phone in another room overnight so it can't disturb you. Check the temperature- that it's not too hot or cold and you have some good ventilation by keeping a window slightly open.

During the daytime
Try and get lots of natural sunlight as this helps your 24-hour body clock to recognise daytime from nighttime. Also exercising during the daytime can really help your body feel more tired and ready for a rest in the evening.

Think about ways you can relax
For some people it's reading, for others perhaps its journaling your thoughts down on paper or practicing a breathing app to calm yourself, whatever works for you, try and incorporate more of it into your evenings. There's lots of great apps out there that can help.

How to help- long term
If you've tried those things and it's still not getting the job done, that's the time at which it's worth seeing a doctor. And it might be that you're under stress or that there are things going on, like working very late or studying hard in the evenings that just need a bit of tweaking. So it's nothing to be alarmed by but definitely worth seeking help if you've tried basic measures and that's not helping.