How to Get a Good Night’s Sleep

How sleepy do you feel during the day?
How often do you yawn or actually fall asleep doing homework or even in class?
How frequently do you want to nap or feel you need some caffeine as a boost?

Many college students have excessive demands, stress, and anxiety. One of the most common and earliest symptoms of stress is trouble with sleep. Either you can’t get to sleep in the first place because you can’t stop thinking or you wake up in the middle of the night and can’t get back to sleep, or both. You may toss and turn, trying to clear your mind, telling yourself what a big day you have tomorrow, how important it is to be rested...all to no avail. Usually, the more you try to get back to sleep, the more awake you are.

Getting enough sleep is an essential ingredient of good health. It helps us to stay healthy and to restore our physical and psychological resources. Much like hunger, sleep is a basic and periodic biological drive. Just as hunger is our brain’s way of signaling to us that we have gone for a period without food and are in need of fuel, sleepiness is the brain’s way of telling us that we have been awake too long. There are some individual differences in what constitutes how much sleep a person needs. Our need for sleep also changes as we age and is known to diminish as we get older. Generally, however, people need to sleep about one hour for every two hours awake. This means that most people need around eight hours of sleep a night. Inadequate sleep can significantly depress our mood, performance, motivation, energy and sense of well-being. It can also be very dangerous, such as driving while drowsy.

So you know that sleep is beneficial, and that normal sleep patterns enhance learning and retention of studied material. You know that if you sleep well, you’ll feel more able to deal with your pressures. You’d like to get more sleep – but you have so many pressures it’s hard to get the sleep you need. The following are some suggestions for you on how to improve both the quality and amount of your sleep.

1. **Focus on the pleasant state of relaxation, not on falling asleep.** Do not try too hard to sleep; you can’t force yourself to go to sleep. The more you try to get to sleep, the more you create tension and anxiety which wake you up. Some people find it effective to focus on their breathing as they lie in bed, letting the mind follow the breath as it moves into the body and then following it back out all the way and letting the body just sink into the mattress each time.

2. **If you’re unable to fall asleep after a while, get out of bed and do something else** -- something you like doing or that you might feel good about getting done. Return to bed when you’re feeling sleepy.

3. **Work on accepting those nights when you don’t sleep as well.** Catastrophizing about how bad your day is going to be because you’ll be so exhausted if you don’t get back to sleep doesn’t help. It may help to turn your clock face against the wall so that you’re not calculating how much sleep you will (or won’t) be able to get. You can still function the next day, even if you had only a couple of hours of sleep. The less you fight, resist, or fear sleeplessness, the more it will tend to go away.
4. Wind down before going to bed. Exercise during the day; it is best to finish exercise at least 3 hours before bedtime. Avoid heavy meals before bedtime or going to bed hungry. Avoid any alcohol consumption or use of other substances in the evening. Reduce or eliminate caffeine and nicotine use. If you must have coffee, have it only in the morning, or switch to caffeine-free coffee, tea and soda.

5. Develop a sleep ritual: a relaxing activity you do every night before you get into bed. A warm shower or bath may help you to relax.

6. Strengthen the association of the bed and the bedroom as a cue for sleep. Eliminate non-sleep activities in bed, such as work or reading, unless these activities are part of your sleep ritual.

7. Develop a consistent sleep rhythm. Go to bed and get up at regular times, even if you’re tired in the morning. Do not nap during the day (unless you are one of those people who benefits from a brief nap). For those of you who like to go out on the weekend, try to extend your wake hours by no more than a couple of hours. The more off cycle you get, the harder it is to get back on cycle and feel both rested and alert.

8. Pay attention to your environment. Keep your room at a comfortable temperature (between 60 and 70 degrees). Be sure your mattress and pillow are comfortable to you. Reduce noise through the use of ear plugs or a white-noise machine or tapes of soothing sounds. If you feel unsafe, it may be helpful to secure your home with extra locks, or keep a phone by the bed.

9. If you are someone who experiences a large number of intrusive thoughts when you are trying to sleep, try setting up a time to think during your daytime hours. Pick a half hour when you can focus on the types of random thoughts that come to you during the time you are trying to fall asleep. When these thoughts come to your mind as you are trying to fall asleep, dismiss them and remind yourself that you will deal with them during your thinking time. After a good night’s rest, you will resolve those concerns better. Meditation can also be helpful. Look carefully at that is so pressing that it is keeping you from peaceful sleep.

10. If you suspect that emotional problems are causing sleeplessness, consult a psychotherapist. Depression and anxiety disorders commonly produce insomnia. Expressing your feelings and getting support often will help you sleep. If you have frequent interruption of deep restorative sleep, early morning headaches, and excessive daytime sleepiness that is interfering with your concentration and performance, ask your doctor about sleep apnea.

11. Use sleep imbalance as a vehicle for further growth. If you are having a lot of trouble sleeping, your body may be trying to tell you something about the way you are conducting your life. Usually it is just a signal that you are going through a stressful time in your life and you can expect that if and when it is resolved, your sleeping pattern will improve by itself. Listen carefully to your mind and your body and let them teach you what you need to know. Find out how you might use the twenty-four hours you have each day in the way that works best for you.