

Module 18 Resources

A Life Built for Sleep

Waking up is a habit: Over time, you can train your brain to wake up at the same time each day. This is an under-rated critical step to ensuring good sleep quality and feeling sleepy at bedtime. So many people we meet in our clinic are habituated to late bedtimes...which makes the morning very challenging and an early wake time nearly impossible. Adjust your bedtime slowly over a few weeks by making your bedtime 15 to 30 minutes earlier every few days. Healing the modern brain requires a bedtime between 9 and 10pm on most nights.

Early morning sun exposure: Getting some full spectrum sun exposure early in the morning can do wonders for your sleep. But why? It turns out that our circadian rhythms are greatly impacted by light exposure, specifically full spectrum sunlight. Our cells seem to set their clocks when the sun is low in the sky (low lateral light). Getting sunlight within 30 to 60 minutes of waking up will help anchor your circadian rhythm in the morning so that when it comes time to sleep at night, your body and brain are ready. The idea of setting our cellular clocks is exciting. Learn more about this from Andrew Huberman, a neuroscientist with a focus on the visual system and an excellent podcast.

Exercise in the morning or midday: Getting 20 to 30 minutes of exercise during the day can set you up for a great night of sleep later in the evening. Make sure not to exercise too close to bedtime to avoid being overstimulated when it is time to rest. Bonus points if you're able to exercise in nature.

Stop caffeine at 2pm: Have your last cup of coffee no later than noon to 2pm (or 8 to 10 hours before sleep). This will give your body enough time to metabolize the caffeine so that it doesn't interfere with your sleep.

Consume these nutrients: Throughout the day consume a diet rich in magnesium, iron, and B-vitamins (especially B12 and folate). Sleep depends on melatonin, which depends on dietary tryptophan. Food sources are cod, asparagus, turkey, beef, and nuts and seeds. Eating a traditional diet with minimal processed foods will give your brain the nutrients it needs to function its best and help facilitate restorative sleep. Reference module 12 for some good sources of these nutrients.

Don't over nap: Naps can be wonderful but napping for too long can interfere with your ability to fall and stay asleep in the evening. A quick 20 to 30 minute nap is ideal for an extra burst of energy during the day and it can have a profound effect on our creativity and high-level reasoning ability. But try and keep your naps to under 90 minutes and make sure to nap far enough away from your bedtime. Mid afternoon is best.

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Eat dinner early: Digestion takes time and when we sleep, the gut is less active. Try to avoid eating a large meal just before bed, as this will kick your metabolism into high gear, which can make it harder to get to sleep. However, you also don't want to go to bed hungry. To avoid going to bed too full, I usually advise eating dinner 2 to 3 hours before bed, as this will give you plenty of time to digest your meal. If you are hungry before bed, have a small snack, but nothing too substantial. Some slices of cheese, a handful of nuts, a piece of fruit, or a couple bites of some leftovers are good options here. Avoid foods that can trigger acid reflux like red wine, spearmint, fried foods, onions and tomatoes.

Exposure No more than one drink of alcohol per day (no alcohol is best): Let's face it, many of our social activities are built around alcohol. We meet up with friends and colleagues for drinks, we have a drink while watching our favorite shows, etc. My challenge to you is to experiment with cutting out alcohol for a couple weeks to see if your sleep and mental health improve.

Exposure Have a bedtime routine: Creating a bedtime routine that works for you is critical. This should be something, or a combination of things, that signals to your brain that it is time to sleep. Chamomile tea, a warm shower or bath, 30 minutes of reading with dim light or a candle, and gratitude journaling are all good options to explore.

Minimize sleep demons: See Module 17 to learn about things that can disrupt sleep in the hours before bed.

Get extra help: If you're still struggling with getting to sleep and staying asleep then see the resources in Module 16 for some resources to help you get better sleep.