

## Patient Services - Psychology in Healthcare

# Optimising sleep for staff in the time of COVID-19

## Introduction

Worry, uncertainty and stress all jeopardise our sleep and may contribute to short-term insomnia.

Sleep makes significant contributions to physical resilience (e.g. immune function) and psychological wellbeing (positive mood, resistance to stress). During this difficult time, it is important to maintain a healthy sleep pattern.

Remember that insomnia, in its short-term form, is a normal biological reaction to stress. In most cases your sleep should return to normal when the stress goes away or you begin to cope with the stress.

Here are some simple tips to help you deal with your short-term insomnia and help prevent it from becoming a longer term problem.

## Put the day to bed before you go to bed

During this hectic time, sleep may be pushed to the bottom of your priority list and your mind may continue to race when you want to sleep. Our advice is as follows:

- Make a plan to try to wind-down 1-2 hours before bedtime
- Do not use any devices such as your phone or lap top, close down your email and set aside some time to do something relaxing. For example, read a favourite book, watch a show you enjoy or treat yourself to a warm bath
- Do not be tempted to watch or read about the news!
- A perfect way to break up the day from the night is to complete a daily diary. You might find it helpful to note down some of the things that have gone well today. You might not know what kinds of challenges tomorrow will bring and this is ok, many of us will feel exactly the same. Jot down a to-do list for tomorrow, for example remember to call a friend or a relative, walk the dog or buy some milk – no task is too big or too small! Not only does this put the day to rest but also clears out the mind and gives you a sense of control.

## Dealing with your thoughts

The harder we try to sleep or think about it the more likely we are going to stay awake

- Try something which is mentally challenging but contains no emotion (e.g. counting backwards from 1000 in 7's).
- Word games or visualisations based on categories (e.g. food, animals, capital cities) are also good distractors
- Keep a pen and paper beside the bed for when you find yourself running through problems in the night. Jot them down to be dealt with tomorrow by your “future self”.
- Remember - “if not tonight then tomorrow”. You may not sleep well tonight, but by following your normal schedule the next day (even if feeling tired), your body will have built it's “appetite” for sleep again for bedtime.

## **Use the bed for sleep only**

The longer we spend in bed awake the more likely we get anxious, frustrated and angry (which is not the best combination for sleeping)

- If you are in bed not asleep and start to feel anxious or frustrated, get out of bed and return when you feel sleepy. Do something to help you wind down (e.g. listening to music, doing some colouring/jigsaw, reading a few pages of a book).
- At bedtime avoid working, reading or responding to emails, taking difficult phone calls, screen time, watching or reading the news.

## **Maintain a routine where possible**

Maintaining a consistent routine might be difficult at the moment depending on your working patterns and environment, but try your best to do the following:-

- Set yourself a regular wake time where possible
- Try not to sleep-in, go to bed later, or nap on your days off – this will ensure that you maintain your body's “appetite” for sleep
- Remember to eat when you can. It is most important to eat within one hour of waking up to help support your circadian rhythm. This is basically a 24-hour internal clock that running in the background of your brain which switches between sleepiness and alertness at regular intervals. It's also known as your sleep/wake cycle.

## **Check your environment**

Understandably, your sleep environment may not be the one you are used to during this time. Although a cool, quiet and dark place is best, you may not have control over this at the moment. Where you are able to:

- try to reduce noise – use ear plugs if needed
- try and make the space as dark as possible. If this is difficult, wear an eye mask
- reduce “clutter” - remove anything that does not promote sleep (e.g. electricals, clocks, snacks).

## **Get as much natural light as possible**

Natural light helps to regulate the chemicals in our brains, which are responsible for our sleep-wake cycle. It is likely that you are spending increasingly more time indoors at the moment. To help keep your circadian rhythm strong:-

- try spending your breaks outside or even close to a window
- try and spend your daily dose of exercise outdoors

## Reduce stimulation

Consider these activities/substances that can impact positively and negatively on sleep:

- Try to avoid smoking in the two hours before bed
- Caffeine can be a useful tool to help keep you alert during the day, but avoid caffeine in the four hours before bed
- Limit alcohol as much as possible – it impacts on the quality of your sleep, leaving you feeling unrested when you wake up
- Try not to eat a heavy meal in the two hours before bed - but don't go to bed hungry either!
- Limit how much fluid you drink in the four hours before you go to bed. It will only lead to toilet trips through the night
- Try to make some time to get your daily dose of physical activity as this has a direct impact on the quality of your sleep. However, try not to exercise too close to bedtime as it raises heart rate and body temperature.

## For further information

### Contact details

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### Useful websites

Sleep Council Website: <http://www.sleepcouncil.org.uk/>  
Freephone leaflet line: 0800 018 7923

Sleepio® are currently offering free access to their App for NHS staff until 31 December 2020: <http://sleepio.com/nhs-staff>

If you would like further information about health conditions and treatment options, you may wish to have a look at the NHS website at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

If you would like to find accessibility information for our hospitals, please visit <https://www.accessable.co.uk>

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