

LifeSkills: How to improve your sleep

by Marie-Hélène Pelletier, M.Ps.

Have you thought of this? Think of your body as a child you're training to fall asleep when you go to bed. When you teach a child to do something, you demonstrate that behavior step-by-step, then check to see he or she follows your instructions. The more constancy you put into teaching your body good sleeping habits, the more it will pay off. Let's see what you can apply to your specific situation.

Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day. Going to bed when you're tired is logical. But, considering that sleep is a cycle and you want to strengthen your body's association of bed with sleep (so you get to sleep easily), it's useful to stabilize your sleeping/waking cycle. You will probably end up going to bed when you're tired, but by setting a bedtime and a waking-time—you can regulate your sleeping/waking pattern.

Take at least 5 minutes to wind down and relax. If you go to bed as soon as you get home, your chances of falling asleep right away are low. Don't ask your body to fall asleep immediately. Going to sleep requires a transition, be that a bath, flopping down in front of the TV, or simply leaning on the kitchen counter while you leaf through a magazine and sip a mug of warm, almond-flavored milk. Prepare during the day for the night to come.

Avoid coffee, go for a walk, and don't nap.

Try to keep these rules:

1. Avoid coffee.

No more than one coffee per day. No coffee after lunch.

2. Walk

Walk each time you can during the day. Go for a ten-minute walk several days a week. Make sure you plan each ten-minute walk! Change into appropriate clothes for the weather, then get your body moving, no excuses allowed, as if it were an important appointment.

3. Don't nap No nap during the day! If you go to bed and are not asleep after 20 minutes or so, get up. Staying in bed while you're not asleep teaches your body to associate your bed with the waking state. So, go to another room and do something that will get your attention but is not too stimulating. This might be reading flyers or watching the weather forecast on TV. When you feel drowsy, go back to bed.

Most people experience sleep problems from time to time. The following strategies have helped others get a more satisfying sleep. Remember, sleeping and waking form a cycle. To improve your sleep, you'll need to regulate that cycle.

Avoid reading, eating, watching TV, working, or worrying in bed and in your bedroom. By doing so, you will help to break the association between the waking state and your bed. Do not lie in bed and worry! By staying there, you allow your body to associate worrying with lying in bed. It's very likely that the next time you go to bed, you'll worry again. So the next time all those thoughts keep you awake, get up and leave your bedroom.

Some people find it useful to note down their concerns and leave the paper outside the bedroom. When they go back to bed, the only thing they allow themselves to think is, "My concerns are written down out there. I will deal with them tomorrow." If a new anxiety comes, they get up once again and write it down along with the others. When you teach a child to do something, it is unlikely that he or she will learn it the first time and never go back to old habits. The same is true when it comes to training your body to change its sleeping patterns. Persevere in applying the strategies you find work for you. However, if your symptoms don't diminish after several weeks of real effort, you need to seek professional help.

Poor sleep can have medical causes. Therefore, if you continue to have difficulties sleeping, ask your family doctor to evaluate your health.