

# Getting a Better Night's Sleep

Ask yourself, "did I get enough sleep last night?" If the answer is no, don't worry, you're not alone. In fact, you're among the two-thirds of adults throughout all developed nations who fail to obtain the recommended eight hours of sleep a night.

It is estimated that one person in three experiences some sort of sleep problem in any year and that

**15-20% of all adults regularly have trouble sleeping.**

Sleep is, in fact, one of the most critical elements in maintaining wellbeing — so much so that feeling rested and refreshed in the morning is one of the five questions in the WHO-5 wellbeing measure. Despite this, whenever we feel stressed, anxious or depressed, we're very rarely prescribed sleep as a remedy.

Believe it or not, sleep can actually be the simplest, yet most overlooked answer to negating bad thoughts and feelings. It's the ultimate re-setter - the single most effective thing we can do to reset our brain and mental health each day.

## SLEEP - HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

According to the WHO, eight hours of sleep is recommended as a general rule. But the amount of sleep you need is an individual matter - some people only need five or six hour per night.

The amount of sleep you need also varies from one day to the next and as we get older we tend to sleep less. The amount of sleep we need depends on our individual biological and psychological needs - there are no hard and fast rules.

What matters most is not how many hours of sleep you get, but the quality of sleep.



## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DON'T GET ENOUGH QUALITY SLEEP?

Think of the brain as a regular muscle. When we use our legs all day, for example, we rest them by sitting down, otherwise those particular leg muscles begin to perform badly and, in some cases, break or tear. Similarly, if our brain is overworked without a rest (sleep) it simply cannot perform as it should.

Remember, our brain essentially controls everything in our body. So not only are things like our reaction-time or concentration impaired, it's our emotions that are impacted as well.

A study conducted in the US showed that sleep-deprived subjects demonstrated a 60% increase in emotional activity compared to those who were well-rested. Various regions of their brains became heightened, triggering strong emotions such as anger and rage, while other areas became hyperactive.

What the study showcased was that insufficient sleep doesn't make the brain think negatively on a continuous basis, but rather an under-slept brain swings excessively to both happy and negative extremes.

Unfortunately, one swing does not cancel out the other — that's not how emotions work. Instead, extreme sadness can lead to a sense of worthlessness and depression, while hypersensitivity to pleasurable experiences can lead to risk-taking, poor decision making and anxiety.

The pillars that hold up our wellbeing begin to collapse under these conditions. We question our meaning and purpose; we have less energy and our will to connect with nature or exercise diminishes. We're more likely to resort to drugs and alcohol, our eating habits become erratic, our goals are not met, and it becomes harder to practice mindfulness, gratitude and self-compassion.

## FIND OUT MORE

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## GETTING A BETTER NIGHT'S SLEEP

Essentially, we become less mentally sharp, less fit and this can deteriorate our health fast.

The problem with sleep in relation to wellbeing is that it's bi-directional, meaning that a lack of sleep causes lower wellbeing and, in turn, lower wellbeing causes lower amounts of sleep. Furthermore, each can be causations for the other — it doesn't matter which issue arises first.

It's a difficult cycle to break, especially when there's a prolonged external factor causing heightened negative emotions. In fact, nowadays, more and more of us are experiencing this viciously negative spiral.

### HOW DO WE GET MORE SLEEP?

If only getting to sleep was as simple as counting sheep. One sheep... two sheep... three \*yawn\* sheep... four....

It's all well and good saying 'just get more sleep if you feel depressed or anxious', because, as we know, depression and anxiety makes it more difficult to get a good night's sleep.

Think of those times you've tried to sleep when there's a flight to catch, a big presentation or a job interview the following morning. When these stresses are prevalent in our minds it's difficult to get to sleep, stay asleep or feel refreshed in the morning. These isolated scenarios can essentially play as metaphors for an ongoing mental health issue — they're stopping the mind from being sufficiently clear and geared up for sleep.



There are, however, several techniques and practices to try and break the cycle.

1. Meditation, yoga or deep abdominal breathing before bed
2. Write a list of things that need to be done tomorrow and put it to one side — don't think about it when in bed
3. Exercise during the day
4. Avoid looking at a bright screen before trying to get to sleep
5. Avoid caffeine, alcohol or nicotine in the evenings
6. Don't lie in bed awake during the day — associate it with night-time and sleep
7. Take a warm shower before bed
8. Keep the bedroom at a cool temperature
9. Wear earplugs, a mask or purchase 'block out' blinds

Of course, sometimes our sleep issues are more deep-seated, and they need more time and attention. If you are concerned about your sleep, or that of a loved one, remember you can access specific coaching on how to get things back on track. Simply call **1300 687 327 (1300 OUR EAP)** to connect with one of Converge's consultants who understand the science of sleep and can provide some practical tips, tailored to your situation, assisting your return to better sleep.

**If you suspect that there may be physical reasons for poor sleep, discuss this with your GP.**

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