

Signature News Winter 2012

This month, Registered Psychologist Teresa Ash (pictured) discusses how important sleep is to our overall wellbeing and offers 10 tips for improving sleep quality.



Shakespeare said it best: "Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care, the death of each day's life, sore labor's bath, balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course, chief nourisher in life's feast."

Each day many of us "severely ravel" the "sleeves" of our lives. We ask a lot of sleep. We expect sleep to work its miracle in the face of frenzied schedules, health challenges, relationship stresses, long working hours, misuse of alcohol and drugs, poor sleeping environments to say nothing of partners who snore, bright street lights, friends who text us at midnight... the list goes on.

Our rushed and time pressured world sees many of us select sleep as the most likely place we can make a cut in term of fitting everything into our day. Can't fit everything in? I'll just work till 1am. Tired in the morning? Coffee, red bull, chocolate recognise your fix?

The cost of unhealthy sleep patterns

The physical, emotional and psychological costs of unhealthy sleep patterns are serious. Sleep has a powerful effect on overall health, from immune system functioning to psychological wellbeing. The research base points to the dangers of sleep deprivation, from reduced motivation and vitality to serious illness. Further, healthy sleep has been empirically proven to be the single most important determinant in predicting how long we live; more influential than diet, exercise or heredity.



How can you improve your quality of sleep? We have 10 tips.

1. Minimise blue light disruption to your sleep

- Keep electronics usage to a minimum or completely eliminate blue light (TVs, alarms, laptops) after dark
- Use candles
- Keep your room as dark as possible and sleeping quarters pitch black
- Install F.lux (free) on your computer to cut down blue light emissions



2. Establish sensible sleep practices

- Develop a sleep routine: a regular sleep routine allows you to train your "biological clock"
- Keep your sleeping times as regular as possible
- Relax before going to bed; quiet walk, relaxation exercises, music, write in a journal
- Go to bed early: sleep seems best if started early: "An hour before midnight is worth two after"

3. Avoid taking your worries to bed. Write down things you have to do – deal with them in the morning. [Seek counselling support](#) for major issues which are disrupting your sleep cycle.

4. Eat to promote good sleep. Eat well so that you are not hungry when you sleep. Eat complex carbohydrates. These prevent hunger by taking longer to digest, and also increase absorption of tryptophan, an amino acid that increases sleepiness.

5. Limit your consumption of caffeine. Avoid caffeine (tea, coffee, cola) for 3-4 hours before sleeping

6. Do not drink alcohol in the last few hours before sleep. Alcohol

helps get you to sleep, but reduces sleep quality.

7. Don't smoke if you are awake at night. If you do, you are training your brain to wake up for its favourite drug.

8. Use a warm bath to protect sleep. A warm bath (or hot shower) before bedtime will raise your core body temperature. As it cools down, this simulates the drop in body temperature that occurs before sleep.

9 Thought switching: If you are a worrier, actively channel your thoughts into peaceful thoughts when you are in bed.

Some of the things you can think about are:

- Go over in your mind some of the things you have enjoyed in the last day or two
- Think about incidences that made you laugh in the last few day
- Think about the things you feel grateful for in your life, and the people you care about ("count your blessings")



10. Try to avoid reliance on sleeping medication or alcohol to get to sleep.

If you are using these on more than an occasional basis seek help to improve your sleep cycle without drugs.

Sleep health and sleep cycle awareness are important. If you are struggling with sleep difficulties, or if you are a shift worker and require specialised advice regarding your sleep patterns, [contact Signature today.](#)

As always your enquiries and questions are welcome.

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