

Foothold

WELLBEING ARTICLE 05

SLEEP BETTER, FEEL BETTER

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we'll briefly discuss the importance of sleep and offer a range of practical tips for improving the quality of your sleep quickly. In future articles, we'll discuss brain-wave entrainment technologies, circadian rhythms, sleep monitoring devices and a variety of indirect methods that can help you enhance the quality of sleep further.

SLEEP IS ESSENTIAL

Sleep is essential to life, and good physical/psychological wellness requires good quality sleep. A lack of sleep negatively affects your productivity, mood and health. So, if you're someone who regularly struggles to get a decent night's rest or suffers from bouts of insomnia, then expect your relationships, eating habits, lifestyle and career to suffer too.



TIPS FOR BETTER SLEEP

The good news is, there's an array of tweaks you can make that will dramatically improve the quality of your sleep and help you fall asleep much quicker. Try the following suggestions and notice the difference it makes in your life;

1. TOMORROW TODAY

Engineers have busy lives and even busier brains. When we juggle a lot of variables on a daily basis, some of the detail can be temporarily forgotten. This is completely normal and affects everyone from time to time. Unfortunately, when our heads hit the pillow at night and our mind starts to let go and drift away...wham! You suddenly remember that things you needed to care of earlier in the day and before you know it, the brain is back online and the fear of forgetting the same item tomorrow keeps you wide awake. To combat this barrier to sleep, I suggest you get a paper pad and pen, or voice recording device (most smartphones have them) and starting mentally reviewing all the things you did earlier that day. Before you know it, any forgotten items will spring to mind and tomorrow's 'To Do List' can be recorded. You can then drift effortlessly asleep knowing tomorrow's list won't be forgotten and that those last-minute brain flashes are a thing of the past.

2. DAILY ACTIVITY

Aside from the health benefits of regular exercise, 25 to 45 minutes of light daily activity will help you get a good night's sleep. So, if you've had an unusually long day or found yourself tied to the desk, make sure you go for a brisk walk or get involved in some evening activity. A word of warning; exercise elevates your metabolism (a good thing generally) and this can make it harder to fall asleep. Therefore, ensure any vigorous activity or exercise finishes at least 1.5hrs before bedtime.

3. LIMIT CAFFEINE

Caffeine stimulates the brain, the central nervous system and is a known diuretic. Caffeine affects people differently, so whilst a colleague might drink four cups of strong coffee each day and still sleep like a baby, one mild cup in the afternoon may interfere with your sleep. The diuretic affect may also necessitate a bathroom visit whilst you'd rather be dreaming. I suggest you check for hidden caffeine in the drinks and food you consume daily, then actively cut or limit such items from 3pm onwards.



4. SAME BEDTIME

The body thrives on routine and has a tendency to predict and therefore prepare us in life. If you consistently go to bed at the same time each night your body will learn to prepare itself for sleep and naturally unwind ahead of time. You will find yourself falling asleep quicker and easier than ever before.

Setting a bedtime reminder can help you stay consistent and most smartphones or smartwatches now include a 'bedtime schedule' that can be programmed. I suggest setting a reminder for an 1hr before bedtime and ensuring you cease any challenging work or activity at that point.

5. ELIMINATE ELECTRONICS & LIGHT

Light affects sleep and we have evolved to sleep at night when it's dark. Most televisions, laptops, tablets and phones emit a concentrated blue light that's shown to reduce levels of a hormone called melatonin. Melatonin is known as the 'sleep hormone' and some medicinal sleeping aids attempt to boost your body's level of this hormone, in support of a good night's rest. So, do yourself a favour and switch off electronic displays an hour before bedtime and keep your room as dark as possible. It may be worth investing in 'black-out' blinds/curtains if you stay in a city or area polluted by artificial street lighting.

6. AVOID HEAVY EVENING MEALS & ALCOHOL

When we consume a large meal or enjoy a glass of wine, we often experience a sleepy warm feeling arise shortly after. This might sound like a good thing, particularly when we're looking to improve our sleep however, you'd be mistaken. The digestion of food and processing of alcohol raises our heart rate and this can negatively affect our sleep cycle.



Therefore, ensure any large or heavy meals are eaten earlier in the evening (before 8pm) so your body has time to adequately digest the food and return to a normal resting heart rate. The same is true with alcohol, allow at least one hour for each unit of alcohol consumed and try limiting the frequency/volume of units throughout the week.

7. KEEP COOL

Depending on where you live, keeping your bedroom cool may present a challenge. However, research indicates that staying cool helps improve our quality of sleep. If you struggle to keep ambient temperatures low, consider changing bed sheets and ensure that the fabrics used are naturally cool and breathable.

When it comes to sleep, the room temperature is less important than a reduction in your own body temperature. That's because the process of cooling naturally encourages sleep, so you may wish incorporate showering as part of your bedtime routine.

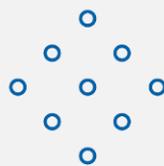
8. BEDROOM = SLEEP (ALMOST)

It's tempting to climb into a warm cosy bed and watch your favourite film, especially during cold and wintry nights. It might also seem convenient to use the bedroom when making a family call or doing a little relaxed homework on the laptop. However, your sleep will certainly improve if you avoid such activities. Remember, the body loves routine and you want to create helpful habits that aid sleep. Keep the bedroom for sleeping and romance only.



NEXT ARTICLE

My next article will return to psychological wellness and focus upon the nature of procrastination. By deepening our understanding of this unnecessary activity, we can begin to overcome it. In the meantime, if you've found this article interesting and would like to discuss it further, please contact us on hello@myfoothold.org or call on +44 (0)20 7344 5498



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