Developing Good Sleep Habits

Many people struggle with both the quantity and the quality of sleep they get each night. Your sleep habits can impact all areas of your life, so it is important to find a routine that works for you. Most of us realize that sleep is important, but do we realize just how important it is? In his 2019 TED Talk, sleep scientist Matt Walker, PhD put it succinctly: "The shorter your sleep, the shorter your life."

In 1900, the average American adult slept nine hours per night. Today, it's less than seven (National Institutes of Health). When one does not get enough quality sleep, there are many physical, emotional, and neurological effects, including a compromised immune system, increased irritability, difficulty learning new information, and many more. Here are some techniques to help you improve your sleep routine to ensure you feel well rested each morning.

Be Mindful of How Substances Affect Sleep

If you have difficulty getting a good night's sleep or never wake up feeling well rested, then consider how various substances could be affecting your sleep. Many people believe caffeine helps them power through the day and that a glass of wine is beneficial for winding down at night. However, both caffeine and alcohol can decrease the amount of restorative deep sleep you get.

Another substance to consider is sugar, particularly processed sugar, which can cause hyperactivity. It can ultimately create a vicious cycle: you consume sugary foods, you don't sleep well, and then you wake up hungry for more sugar. Author Shawn Stevenson said, "A tired brain is a hungry brain." Try cutting out or down on sugar throughout the day and don't eat for two hours before bedtime.

Get into a Sleep Routine

An important aspect of developing good sleep habits is figuring out a routine that works for you, or establishing regularity, as Walker refers to it. Try to wake up and go to sleep at the same time every day, even on the weekends. Another aspect to incorporate into your sleep routine is keeping your environment on the cooler side. Most of us can relate to tossing and turning in bed on a hot summer's night or when the AC isn't working. A cooler room is much more conducive to a good night's sleep because our core body temperature needs to decrease by a few degrees in order to fall and stay soundly asleep.

Try Stretching

Light stretching before bed can also help settle down your body and mind. Try doing some easy stretches for 10 or 15 minutes. It helps put you in a relaxed state so you can fall asleep faster and can also improve your quality of sleep.

Write Down Reminders

Some people have a hard time turning off their brains when they are trying to fall asleep. If you notice you are thinking about all the things you need to do tomorrow or keep thinking about what happened today, try writing in a notepad before going to bed. Write down any reminders for yourself so that you can let your mind forget about it until tomorrow.

Minimize Screen Time Before Bed

Do you have a tendency to look at your phone or watch a show before going to bed? Harvard researchers looked at the effect of blue light exposure near bedtime and found that it interferes with melatonin production and affects our circadian rhythm. Try putting screens away a few hours before going to bed, or at least turn the brightness down. If having a device curfew doesn't work for you, try wearing blue light blocking glasses at night or configuring automatic nighttime settings on your devices.

Meditate to Calm Your Mind

Another technique to help calm your mind is meditation. Try sitting in a comfortable position and closing your eyes. Focus on your breath. At first, try sitting still for a few breaths and each night, add a few more breaths until you have worked up to at least a few minutes.

Try Sleep Apps or Music

There are numerous mobile applications geared toward improving sleep, as well as different types of music that can help you relax. Sound machines can be helpful too because they drown out background noises or can even help quiet down your own thoughts.

Make Sure You're Comfortable

Your pillow and mattress can make a big difference in the quality of sleep you get. Experiment with different pillows until you find the right one for you. If your mattress isn't comfortable, consider budgeting to purchase a new one in the near future. You could also consider a mattress topper, which is an economical way of upgrading your mattress without having to buy a new one.

Consult with Your Doctor

If you are having trouble improving your sleep patterns on your own, consult with your doctor for medical advice to properly treat sleep conditions.