Steps to: Sleep success

The power of sleep: Unlocking wellbeing with sleep hygiene

As a student or a teacher in the education system, there is a constant juggle of multiple responsibilities: planning, attending classes, learning and retaining new information, and navigating relationships and social interactions. Amidst this chaotic schedule, what if there was something we could do everyday that would support and enhance our ability to concentrate, to learn, to build relationships and regulate emotions.

What if this was something we all had access to every day? Like sleep.

Yes, sleep. Sleep is one of the single most powerful processes we can give our physical and mental health every day to improve our quality of life and wellbeing. Sleep is our secret superpower. It is a cornerstone of wellbeing. The importance of a good night's rest cannot be overstated, as it directly influences our overall wellbeing and quality of life.

Quality sleep acts as the foundation for a healthy body and mind. During those precious hours of slumber, our bodies undergo a remarkable process of restoration and rejuvenation. As we sleep, our muscles repair, and our immune system strengthens, setting the stage for optimal physical health. Simultaneously, our brains actively consolidate memories, sharpen cognitive function, and support emotional resilience.

The transformative power of sleep extends beyond the physical and mental realms, impacting our performance, creativity, and even our relationships. By embracing a holistic approach to wellbeing, we recognize that sleep holds the key to unlocking our full potential.

One thing we need to understand if we want to improve our sleep is to understand our circadian rhythms. The circadian rhythm is an internal biological process that regulates our sleep-wake cycle. As adolescents go through puberty, their circadian rhythms naturally shift, leading to a preference for later bedtimes and waking up later in the morning. This shift is often referred to as "delayed sleep phase syndrome" and is influenced by hormonal changes in the body.

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The neuroscience of sleep

Sleep is not just "resting"; it is an active, restorative process. Different stages of sleep, from light sleep to deep non-REM sleep and REM sleep, play distinct roles in brain and body function:

- Non-REM Deep Sleep: Essential for physical restoration, tissue repair, and immune function.
- REM Sleep: Supports memory consolidation, learning, emotional processing, and creativity.

During sleep, the prefrontal cortex (responsible for decision-making, self-regulation, and attention) recharges, while the limbic system (emotions and memory) processes experiences from the day. This explains why poor sleep can lead to difficulties with focus, mood, and emotional regulation.

Melatonin: Your sleep hormone

Melatonin is often called the "sleep hormone" because it signals to your body that it's time to sleep. Produced by the pineal gland in response to darkness, melatonin helps regulate your circadian rhythm, making it easier to fall asleep, stay asleep, and wake up feeling refreshed.

Why melatonin matters:

- It supports sleep onset, helping you feel naturally sleepy at the right time.
- It stabilises your sleep-wake cycle, so your body knows when to rest and when to be alert.
- It enhances sleep quality, supporting brain and body restoration.
- It influences hormonal balance, immune function, and even mood regulation.

Supporting your melatonin isn't just about bedtime - it's about your daily habits. Regular routines, sunlight exposure, movement, nutrition, and minimising evening screens all contribute to healthy sleep and improved wellbeing.

Recommendations

According to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, primary school children (6–12 years) should aim for 9–12 hours of sleep per night. Adolescents (12–18 years) need 8–10 hours, and adults (19–64 years) should get 7–9 hours. Despite this, research shows that many of us are not meeting these recommendations - one study found that 72% of participants were getting less than 8 hours of sleep. Sleep is essential for physical health, learning, emotional regulation, and wellbeing, yet it often remains elusive for students, parents, and teachers alike.

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Why?

We know that some of the main barriers to good sleep are: excessive device use and screen exposure in evenings, irregular sleep schedules and poor nutritional choices before bedtime, such as caffeine intake. Unfortunately, the research also shows us that if left unchecked, poor sleep can lead to an increased vulnerability to mental and physical health difficulties.

Understanding sleep hygiene

Researchers have identified a variety of factors that influence both the quality and quantity of sleep. These factors form the foundation of what we call sleep hygiene- the daily habits and environmental conditions that help you fall asleep, stay asleep, and wake up feeling refreshed.

At its core, sleep hygiene involves creating the right conditions for your body and brain to optimise sleep and synchronise your circadian rhythm. “Optimising” sleep means not just getting enough hours, but also ensuring you move through the different stages of sleep-light sleep, deep non-REM sleep, and REM sleep– so your body and brain can fully restore and rejuvenate.

Everyone’s sleep hygiene needs are slightly different. Exploring your personal routine is a journey, and it may take time to discover what works best for you. Be patient, stay consistent, and make gradual adjustments as needed.

Work through our sleep hygiene tips below and experiment with your sleep routine to figure out what you find the most effective. You can also use our sleep success poster and sleep hygiene checklist worksheet to remind yourself of the core areas of sleep hygiene and make a plan for improving your sleep strategy!



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To get you started, here are our top tips for improving your sleep hygiene.

Create a 24-hour routine:
The circadian rhythm is a natural, internal process that regulates our sleep-wake cycle and repeats roughly every 24 hours. It signals our body to be awake and alert during the daytime and promotes sleepiness and restorative sleep during the night. Our bodies thrive on routine and cues. By following a regular sleep routine, such as going to bed and waking up at consistent times each day, we send a signal to our body that it's time to prepare for sleep. This helps synchronize our internal clock and facilitates the release of melatonin in anticipation of bedtime.

Light exposure:
Exposure to light, especially natural daylight, influences melatonin production. A sleep routine that incorporates exposure to natural light during the day and dim lighting in the evening helps regulate melatonin release. Vitamin D also plays a role in regulating the body's internal clock. Exposure to natural sunlight, a primary source of vitamin D, helps synchronize the circadian rhythm and promote a regular sleep-wake cycle. When our internal clock is properly aligned, it promotes better sleep quality and can help reduce sleep disturbances.

Create a pre-bed routine:
Establishing a consistent sleep routine plays a crucial role in regulating the release of melatonin, a hormone that helps control our sleep-wake cycle. Develop a relaxing routine before bed to signal your body that it's time to unwind. Engage in activities that promote relaxation and help transition your mind and body into a state of calm, making it easier to fall asleep. You may want to experiment with things such as:

- Reading a book
- Having a warm bath or shower
- Practicing Mindfulness or gratitude reflection
- Regulating your senses

Avoid caffeine and excess sugar close to bedtime:
Caffeine is a stimulant so by definition speeds up the messages between the brain and body making you feel more alert and awake which is not conducive to sleep onset. Avoiding excess sugar before bed is also a good way to help you body wind down naturally.

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Avoid device use:
Exposure to device blue light suppresses the release of melatonin, a hormone that influences sleep onset. Even dim light can interfere with melatonin release. Establish a "screen curfew" at least an hour before bed to allow your mind to relax.

Sleep space:
It is very important that your sleeping space and bedroom is comfortable for sleeping. We need to reduce disruptive sensory input and introduce calming sensory input. You may want to consider your preferences for:

- temperature of your room
- scents and smells
- amount of light/darkness
- sounds or silence
- physical comforts such as pillows and blankets

Consistency:
By implementing sleep hygiene practices that includes: consistent bedtimes, exposure to natural light, a pre-bed routine, avoidance of stimulating factors and a comfortable sleep space, you can help regulate your body's melatonin release. This, in turn, promotes a more synchronised sleep-wake cycle, improves sleep quality and quantity of sleep hours, and contributes to overall wellbeing. It's important to remember that individual responses to sleep routines may vary, so it's essential to find a routine that works best for you and supports your unique sleep needs.

By embracing good sleep hygiene practices, we can create a solid foundation for our overall wellbeing and more specifically for students, a foundation for academic success and socio-emotional development.

Prioritising sleep may seem challenging amidst a fast paced world, but the rewards are worth the effort. Quality sleep is not a luxury but a necessity for our wellbeing and ability to reach our potential each day.

