A Guide to Good Sleep for Clinicians and Healthcare Professionals

Sleepio **NHS**

Introduction

COVID-19 has changed the way we all live and work. For those working in healthcare, especially those on the frontline, this stressful period may present a real challenge to both mental health and to sleep. Sleep is a cornerstone of our health and so protecting it is important. Here, we've developed a brief guide to help you do just that.

1. Develop a wind-down routine

Giving the body and mind enough time to get ready for bed is an important part of healthy sleep. The problem is that when we are running around all day, seeing patients or completing admin tasks, and then we get into bed, our brain doesn't have an opportunity to wind-down and let go of the day. Developing a wind-down routine for the hour or two before bed is a great way to prepare your brain and body for sleep. One technique that people find helpful is to dedicate 15 minutes of their evening, around two hours before you go to sleep, to 'put the day to rest'. This involves taking a pen and paper and tying up any loose ends from the day, making a list of all the things that you need to remember for the next day and making a plan to deal with them.

> Dedicate 15 minutes of your evening to writing down nagging thoughts and tasks so you can relax before bed.

2. Keep the bed and bedroom dedicated to sleep

Most of us are probably spending much more time inside than we would usually do. If you can, protect your bedroom for sleep and keep non-sleep activities outside. This helps our brains to associate being in bed with being asleep - something that is really helpful for healthy sleep. The opposite - spending time in your bedroom not sleeping (e.g. working, worrying, watching online TV) - is likely to weaken that association between bed and sleep, which will make it less easy for the body to predict when sleep is going to take place. We want to make things easy for the brain, so it knows that when you're in bed, it's time for sleep. If you absolutely have to use your bedroom for work, keep it separate from the bed and clear it away at the end of the working day.

> "Keep non-sleep activities (e.g. working, worrying, watching online TV) outside the bedroom, where possible.

For Snoozing Only

3. Protect sleep from competing demands

Most of us have plenty of demands on our attention throughout the day. In clinical settings, these demands can leave us in a near constant state of alertness. When we get home, demands may continue in the form of smartphone notifications from social media or the news, or another work email dropping into the inbox. The trouble is that this feeling of being alert and 'on edge' can stop us relaxing properly, which can in turn impact sleep. This is important to deal with well before sleep, because it can take time to relax completely before nodding off. A simple way to give yourself space in which to wind-down properly is to keep phones and technology outside the bedroom and to put them away well before you begin your evening wind-down to sleep.

> " Keep phones and technology outside of the bedroom well before you begin your wind-down to sleep.

4. Keep active

Nightly sleep and daily activity are like two sides of the same coin. With work far busier than usual and social isolation restrictions in place, many of us are probably experiencing very different activity patterns to those we are used to. Physical activity is beneficial for your physical health and can have positive effects on our sleep. Doing exercise is a helpful way of maintaining alertness and helping you unwind after a stressful day. Although it will vary from person to person, and on the shifts you are working, the general rule of thumb is to limit vigorous physical exercise to the morning and afternoon, if possible, leave the evenings for winding down and readying the body for sleep.

"Build activity into your daily routine.
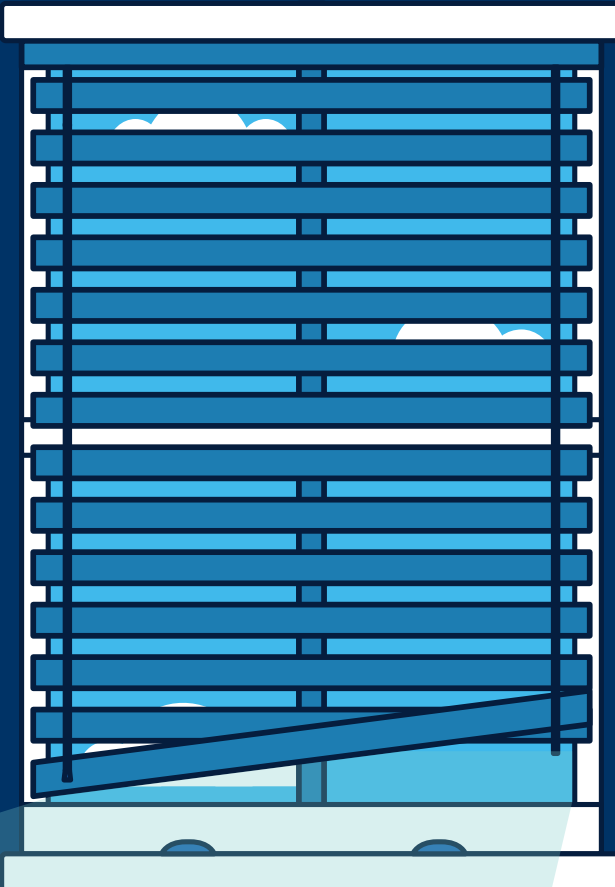
5. Managing your sleep when you're on night or late shift

What you do before, during and after a shift can make a huge difference to your sleepiness and your general mood. We have a detailed article on how to optimise your sleep during shift work but here are some key tips that can be helpful for both night shifts and late shifts:

Before your shift

Most people can cope with up to a 2-3 hour change to their sleep-wake cycle. If you have a few days before you start night shifts, gradually taper your sleep and wake times towards the new schedule. It can also be helpful to take a nap before your shift to reduce sleepiness when you're at work. However, it's important to be aware that if you nap for more than 30-40 minutes, your body will enter deep sleep.

Staying alert while you're at work

When you have the same shift for at least a few days, eat a meal or snack at the same time each day to promote regular body cycles. If you're feeling very tired during a shift, remember that a mid-shift power nap of up to 30-40 minutes is more effective than coffee for improving alertness.

Getting home after your night shift

Daylight is a signal to the body to stay awake. Wear dark glasses on the way home to encourage the production of melatonin and prepare the body for sleep.

Summary

During these difficult and unusual times, prioritising sleep is as important as ever.

Getting these principles into action can be a powerful way to maintain healthy sleep or get it back on track. However, if you have a long-standing sleep problem, don't hesitate to get in touch with your local healthcare provider to access the help you need.

1. Protect your bedroom from non-sleep activity and technology that might disturb sleep; make it your own sleep oasis.

2. Give yourself time to wind-down and relax in the evening, including at least an hour of dim light to allow the body to get ready for sleep.

3. Stay active during the day and keep up some regular and enjoyable physical exercise as part of your routine.

4. Try some of our practical techniques to help manage your sleep during shift work.

Sleepio

Having trouble sleeping?

Sleepio is an online sleep improvement programme based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Over six weekly sessions, you will learn tools and techniques to help get your sleep back on track.

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I'm going to ask you a few short questions to find out your Sleep Score and how we can help.

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