

Tips for teachers and parents – getting a good night’s sleep

Many people struggle to get a good night’s sleep at the best of times, let alone amid earthquakes and aftershocks. Many of the tips in this sheet may seem out of reach when it’s not ‘situation normal’. These are exceptional times, but working on your sleep is one of the best things you can do for you and your children.

Getting enough sleep

How much sleep we need differs from person to person. You will need to experiment a little to find the sleep strategies that work best for you. Most healthy adults need around eight hours of sleep each night and women generally need a little more. The following tips are for ‘typical’ adults but not necessarily for children or people with medical problems.

Improving your ability to get to sleep

Remember when you were a child, you had a set time and a routine to go to bed? Your parents knew that this was one of the ways to ensure that you had enough sleep. Try to keep to a reasonably regular sleep schedule. You will feel much more refreshed and energised if you keep a regular and consistent sleep schedule.

1. *Set a regular bedtime.* Go to bed at approximately the same time every night, including weekends. If you are really tired, try going to bed slightly earlier.
2. *Wake up at the same time every day.* When you are getting enough sleep, you should be able to wake without relying on the alarm clock, because your body has developed a sleep pattern. Try to maintain your regular wake time, even on weekends – though up to an hour extra should not disrupt your normal sleep cycle.
3. *Nap to make up for lost sleep rather than sleeping in.* For some people it is better to try a daytime nap rather than sleeping in late. This way you can recover from lost sleep without disrupting your normal sleep cycle. If naps work for you, have them in the early afternoon, and try limiting them to thirty minutes.
4. *Fight after-dinner drowsiness.* If you give in to after dinner drowsiness, you may wake up during the night and then have trouble getting back to sleep. Rather than flopping on the couch or your favourite chair, try doing something to avoid falling asleep, such as washing the dishes, calling a friend, or getting clothes ready for the next day.
5. *Make your bedroom ‘sleep friendly’.* Ensuring your bedroom is sleep friendly can help you sleep better. If you have a television in your bedroom, turn it off. In particular, don’t watch the late evening news, especially after an event that has led to disrupted sleep as it is likely that the event will feature in the news and stimulate your focus on the event rather than helping you relax.

Even the most relaxing programme or movie can interfere with the body's clock due to the continuous flickering light coming from the TV or computer screen.

If you are used to falling asleep to the TV, try soft music or a fan as an alternative. If your favourite show is on late, record it and watch at an earlier time on another day.

6. *Keep noise down.* People differ in their sensitivity to noise, but as a general rule, you'll sleep better when your bedroom is quiet. If you can't avoid or eliminate noise from barking dogs, loud neighbours, traffic, or other people in your household, try masking it with a fan, recordings of soothing sounds, or white noise. White noise can be particularly effective in blocking out other sounds and helping you sleep. You can buy a special sound machine or generate your own white noise by setting your radio between stations. Earplugs may also help.

7. *Keep your room dark and cool.* When it's time to sleep, make sure that your environment is dark. Even dim lights – especially those from TV or computer screens – can confuse the body clock. Heavy curtains or shades can help block light from windows, or you can try an eye mask to cover your eyes. If your bedroom is too hot or too cold this can interfere with your sleep. Most people sleep best in a room which is around 18°C and has adequate ventilation.

8. *Make sure your bed is comfortable.* Is your bed big enough? It is helpful to have enough room to stretch and turn comfortably, even if you are sharing with a partner. Your mattress and bedding are also important. If you often wake up with a sore back or an aching neck, you may need to consider a new mattress or try a different pillow. Experiment with different mattress toppers, and pillows that provide more support.

9. *Reserve your bed for sleeping.* If you associate your bed with events like catching up on work or emails or texting, it will be harder to wind down and get to sleep. Use your bed only for sleep, sex and reading if this helps you unwind. Your body needs to associate bed with sleep.

10. *Relaxing routines make it easier to get to sleep.* If you make a consistent effort to relax and unwind before bed, you will sleep easier and more deeply. A peaceful bedtime routine sends a powerful signal to your brain that it's time to wind down and let go of the day's stresses.

Relaxing bedtime rituals to try

- Read a light, entertaining book or magazine or listen to a talking book.
- Take a warm bath or a spa – but early enough or not so hot that you are still over-heated when you go to bed.
- Listen to soft music.
- Enjoy a light snack (eg, a small sandwich with chicken or peanut butter, or a small bowl of whole-grain, low sugar cereal perhaps with low fat milk or yoghurt, or a banana and a cup of hot chamomile tea).
- Do some easy stretches or gentle yoga.
- Have your partner give you a relaxing massage.
- Before you go to bed, write a list of things you need to do the next day. This will stop you trying to remember them.

Things to avoid which make it harder to go to sleep or get a good night's sleep

1. Try not to eat late. Try to make dinnertime earlier in the evening. Aim to finish your evening meal two or three hours before your normal bedtime.
2. Avoid heavy, rich foods within two hours of bed. Fatty foods take a lot of work for your stomach to digest and may keep you up.
3. Avoid alcohol before bed. While it may make you fall asleep more easily, alcohol reduces your sleep quality, waking you up during the night. Have a drink with your meal but not in the two hours before bed.
4. Cut down on caffeine. Caffeine (coffee, tea, colas and chocolate) remain in the body on average from three to five hours, but they can affect some people up to 12 hours later. Even if you do not think caffeine affects you, it may be disrupting and changing the quality of your sleep. Avoiding caffeine within 6-8 hours of going to bed can help improve sleep quality.
5. Avoid drinking too many liquids in the evening. This can cause frequent bathroom trips during the night. Caffeinated drinks act as diuretics and will only make things worse.
6. Avoid vigorous exercise late in the day. This actually stimulates the body, raising its temperature. That's the opposite of what you want near bedtime, because a cooler body temperature promotes sleep. Try to exercise in the morning or late afternoon.
7. Avoid arousing activities immediately before bedtime. This might include working, paying bills, or family problem-solving.
8. Avoid exposure to bright light before bedtime. Bright light signals to the neurons that help control the sleep-wake cycle that it is time to wake up, not go to sleep.
9. Do not engage in activities that cause you anxiety and prevent you from sleeping. If you associate a particular activity or item with anxiety about sleeping, omit it from your bedtime routine.
10. Don't smoke. Nicotine is a stimulant which disrupts sleep. Smokers can experience nicotine withdrawal as the night progresses, which will make it harder to sleep.
11. Learn some relaxation techniques to help you get to sleep. There are a number of relaxation techniques which you can try before you go to bed or even once you are in bed that can help you to wind down, calm your mind, and prepare for sleep.

Simple relaxation techniques

- *Deep breathing.* Close your eyes. Start by letting out a big breath through your mouth and then breathe in through your nose counting slowly to four. Hold the breath while you count slowly to four and then let out as much as you can. Repeat the cycle – making each in-breath deeper than the last. When breathing, place one hand just below your ribs and the other on the top of your chest. You should feel the breath filling your diaphragm which means that you are breathing deeply. This will help if you are feeling anxious.

- *Progressive muscle relaxation.* Starting at your toes, tense all the muscles as tightly as you can, then completely relax. Work your way up from your feet to the top of your head. As you tense your muscles, breathe in. Hold the breath and the muscle tension. Release the muscle tension and expel as much breath as possible through your mouth.
- *Visualising a peaceful, restful place.* Close your eyes and imagine a place or activity that is calming and peaceful for you. Concentrate on how relaxed this place or activity makes you feel.

Medical or natural remedy assistance to help you get to sleep

If you think that you need medical intervention to help you sleep, see your doctor. Because sleeping tablets become addictive, you should use them only as a short-term stop-gap. Remember that you can't mix sleeping tablets with alcohol. Talk to your local pharmacy, natural health store or a naturopath about non-prescription and natural sleep assistance. Many people find lavender-based gels or creams helpful, or put lavender drops on their pillow. You may also find a relaxation CD works for you.

Getting to sleep

If you do not fall asleep within about 30 minutes after turning out the light, get up, go to another room, and do something that is not too arousing (for example, read a magazine, listen to some gentle music, do some ironing). Stay up as long as you wish, and then return to your bedroom to sleep. The goal is to associate your bed with falling asleep. It's normal to wake briefly during the night. In fact, a good sleeper won't even remember it.

Getting back to sleep after waking up

Stay relaxed. The key to getting back to sleep is continuing to cue your body for sleep. Some relaxation techniques, such as visualisation and meditation, can be done without even getting out of bed. The time-honoured technique of counting sheep works by engaging the brain in a repetitive, non-stimulating activity, which helps to calm the body.

Do a quiet, non-stimulating activity. If you've been awake for more than 15 minutes, try getting out of bed and doing a quiet activity. Keep the lights dim so as not to cue your body clock that it's time to wake up. A light snack or herbal tea might help relax you, but be careful not to eat so much that your body begins to expect a meal at that time of the day.

Don't stress about it. Hard as it may be, try not to stress over an inability to fall asleep again, because that very stress and anxiety encourages your body to stay awake. Remind yourself that although it's not a replacement for sleep, rest and relaxation can still help rejuvenate your body. Concentrate on relaxation, not sleep.

Don't look at the clock. If looking at a bedroom clock makes you anxious about how much time you have before you must get up, move the clock out of sight.

Write things down. Keep a pad and pen or pencil beside your bed. If you are thinking of things you have to do the next day, write them down on the pad. Your mind will know that it has this as a reminder and will stop trying to remember the things on the list.

Get stress and anxiety in check. Stress and worry, or issues that have arisen during the day can make it very difficult to sleep well.

- *Learn how to manage your thoughts.* It helps if you can learn to stop yourself from worrying, especially about things outside your control. For example, you can learn to evaluate your worries to see if they're truly realistic and learn to replace irrational fears with more productive thoughts.
- *Set aside an earlier time to do your worrying.* Most of the thinking and worrying that we do in bed needs to be done – it just doesn't need to be done in bed. Therefore, make sure that you devote some time earlier in the day (for example, 5-15 minutes) for thinking and worrying. This should end at least a couple of hours before you go to bed. Then, when the thoughts come when you are in bed, say to yourself gently, "Stop, I thought about this today. I will think about it again tomorrow. Now is the time to sleep." This will not work every time, but even if it only works half the time, that is a lot better than not at all.
- *Learn some stress management techniques.* If the stress of managing work, family, or school is keeping you awake, learning how to manage your time effectively, handle stress in a productive way, and maintain a calm, positive outlook, will help you to sleep better.

Learning to live with the aftershocks

If you're having difficulty coping with aftershocks, these tips might help how you think about them.

- Revise and think about your safety plan, emergency kit and all the things you have done to ensure your safety and that of your family and friends.
- Continue to talk to your neighbours and plan how you will respond if your neighbourhood is disrupted again.
- Think about how you would like to respond to the next aftershock and visualise this. Practise being calm on the outside. It will help you be calm on the inside. Use your breathing and relaxation techniques.
- Talk to yourself. Tell yourself that you can cope with these. You 'managed' the big one in February and everything since, and you have a safety plan.
- Don't tell yourself that you're silly or any other derogatory term. If you wouldn't say it to a friend of yours, or one of your children, then don't say it to yourself!
- Get angry. When you are angry, you are not scared. Get angry with the aftershocks and tell yourself that you are taking back control of your life from the earthquake. You are in charge of your life, not the aftershocks.
- And finally, remind yourself that you are a legend for managing 2900+ aftershocks and you have the skills and experience to do this and help others to get through.