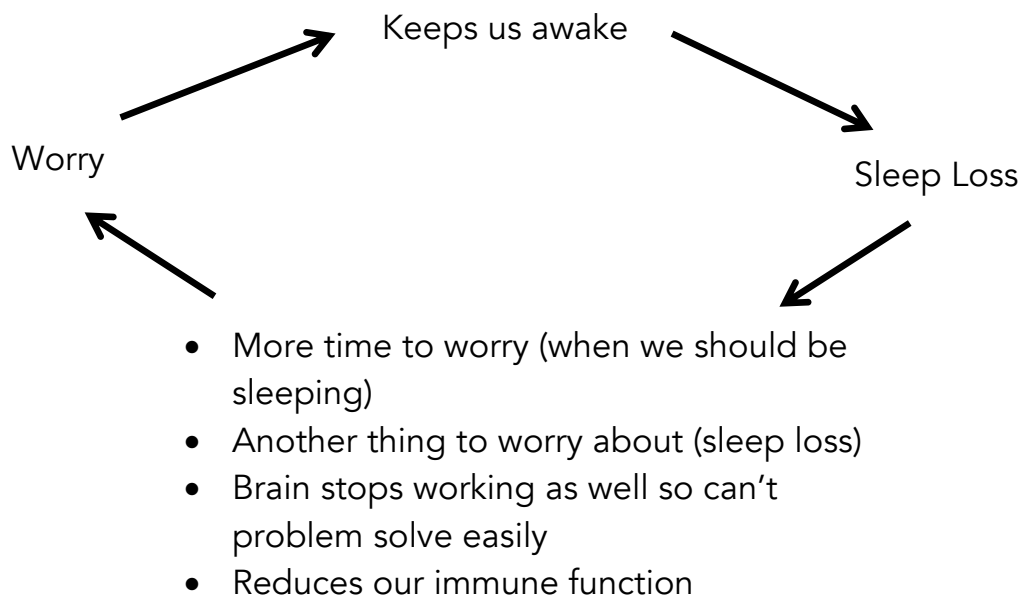# Staying on Top of Sleep

One of the biggest contributors to sleep loss is worry, and unfortunately there is quite a lot to worry about right now. The problem is that when we aren't sleeping well this increases our worry further, for a number of reasons.

Keeps us awake

Worry

Sleep Loss

- More time to worry (when we should be sleeping)
- Another thing to worry about (sleep loss)
- Brain stops working as well so can't problem solve easily
- Reduces our immune function

So, one good way to stay on top of sleep is to **reduce the amount of worrying we do** (see our guide on *'The Worry Time Technique'* for one useful way of doing this).

We can also try to tackle the sleep directly though (which in turn might help us to reduce our worry).

## How to maintain good sleep hygiene during lockdown/isolation?

### 1. Bed = Sleep

**Bed is for sleep only**
It is really important that we associate our bed, and the space that we sleep in with sleep, and not with other things. Avoid doing anything in bed that isn't relaxing and won't help you prepare for sleep. This includes:
- Working
- Taking difficult phone calls with people you're worried about/really miss
- Reading the news!!
- Working out budgets/searching for work
- Eating meals
- Watching scary or upsetting films
- Complaining/arguing (if you share a bed)
- Screen time*

*Except perhaps for watching soothing programmes/films with the screen switched to 'night-mode' where it will block the blue lights that trick our brain into thinking the sun is out and we should be awake.

If you share a house, this means that you might need to set up a work/jobs area in your room, or elsewhere in your house. You could:
- Ask your housemates if you can use the kitchen table and have a pile of things that you set up at the beginning of each working day and pack away again at the end.
- Invest in a small desk for the corner of your room
- Prop cushions against the wall to make a seat and use another cushion or a few big books to prop your laptop up to work from
- Do a room swap with your housemate so that your room remains your 'sleep space' for you

## Make the environment conducive to sleep

For example:

- Keep your bedroom tidy and clean, so that it is associated with order and calm
- Have some nice scents in there or play relaxing music in the evenings
- Minimise noise from outside with draft excluders or even ear plugs if you live in a big/noisy house
- Make sure your room stays dark while you are sleeping (if people tend to put lights on outside get black-out blinds, make cardboard covers for your windows, or get/make an eye mask)
- Make sure your room is the right temperature overnight- most people prefer the room to be slightly cooler overnight than during the day

## Don't stay in bed fretting about not sleeping

Finally, because we want to associate bed with sleeping and not restlessness or worry, if you have been in bed for over 30 minutes and have still not fallen asleep, get out of bed to do something else that will help you to wind down and prepare for sleep. You could:

- Listen to some music in a chair/sat on the floor with cushions
- Do some colouring or a jigsaw
- Read a few pages of a book (not one that is scary or action-packed)

## 2. Eat Breakfast in direct sunlight

### Start the day with sunlight

The chemicals in our brain that are in charge of our sleep/wake cycles depend on sunlight to regulate their rhythm. Getting a blast of sunlight first thing in the morning is really important for keeping these rhythms in check.

It doesn't have to be a sunny day for this to work. Just be somewhere where you are getting lots of natural light, such as on a step outside your front or back door, in your garden if you're lucky enough to have one, or even just in front of a big window on the South East side of the house (the side the sun rises).

### Get up earlier and go to bed earlier

If you get up closer to when the sun rises and go to bed closer to when it sets, your natural rhythms will start to align themselves with light and dark better so you'll feel more awake during the day and sleepier in the evening.

This is also why it's important to limit screen time and/or have screens on 'night-mode' after 6pm, as the blue lights in our phone and iPad screens are similar to the blue light waves in sunlight that stimulate our brain to stay awake.

### Keep regular meal times

Finally, keeping a regular pattern with our meal times is really important to maintain good sleep patterns. Try to eat 3 meals a day, at the same sort of time each day. The most important of these is breakfast.

...So, one of the best things you can do for your sleep is to eat breakfast every day in direct sunlight- this will kick start your **regular meal routine**, get your **early blast of sunlight**, and mean that you have to **get out of bed** at least an hour or two before lunchtime!

## 3. No naps!

When we're sleeping badly we often get tired during the day and it can be very tempting to nap, but DON'T. If you nap during the day you won't be tired at night. You will totally confuse your sleep/wake cycle and make it really hard to get back into a good sleep routine. This goes for lying in late because you didn't get off to sleep until late at night also. Make yourself get up for breakfast anyway. You'll feel tired that day, but you are much more likely to sleep well the night after and return to good sleep patterns than if you lie in or nap.

If you start to feel really sleepy during the day or are nodding off at your laptop/while reading or watching TV, do something active and energetic to combat it. Do star jumps, hold a plank position for a while, or go for a run. Alternatively you could use the opportunity to get some chores done- perhaps tidy your bedroom so it's more relaxing to be in at bedtime.

## 4. Look after your physical health

It's really important to stay on top of our sleep during this time to maintain good immune function and good mental health. However, sleep is also affected both by our mental and physical habits.

To improve sleep we should:
- **Get some exercise once a day:** This could be a brisk walk, some yoga, a jog, a home exercise video etc. Doing this in the afternoon will often help tire you out and make it easier to start relaxing and winding down for bed in the evening
- **Avoid drinking alcohol:** Alcohol is a depressant so makes us feel sleepy at the time, but the process of our bodies removing it from our system afterwards can stop us from falling into deep sleep
- **Only drink caffeine before 3:30pm:** Caffeine makes us feel awake, so avoid it in the afternoons and evenings.
- **Not have a big meal too late in the evening:** Either have a big lunch and a light dinner or eat your dinner earlier in the evening
- **Not to go to bed hungry**: Have a light snack and a warm (non-caffeinated) drink before bed to ensure you don't wake up with thirst or hunger

## 5. Don't engage with your thoughts

Night time is not time for thinking, be it to worry, problem solve, to work something out, or to plan. Here are a few things you can do to try to stop your brain whirring:
- **Write a to-do list** for the next day before you go to bed- know that everything is written down and ready to go so you don't need to keep it in mind or worry about it now
- **Make yourself as comfortable as possible** and then focus your attention on these small comforts; a hot water bottle, your favourite pyjamas, the smell of fresh linen. Try the 'self-compassionate touch' technique that you can read about in our guide on *'Self-Compassion in Self-Isolation'*.

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- **Think of 3 things today that you are grateful for**. Try to keep your mind on these, rather than things that are problematic and need something doing about them.
- **Use Imagery.** Try imagining yourself somewhere where you feel completely at peace. You might imagine people, or a place you have been in the past. Vividly imagine what it feels like to be there- the temperature, the sensations.
- **Slow your breathing down-** really focus on what each breath feels like in different parts of your body (your chest, your abdomen, your shoulders, your wind-pipes, your nostrils etc.). Try counting down from 30 with each breath. Every time your mind wonders or you forget what number you are on, just return to 30 and start again.
- When difficult thoughts do slip in, remind yourself that if they're important they still be there tomorrow. You can think about them then, when you're more alert and able to make sense of things better.

## 6. What about bad dreams?

We can be as good as we like with sleep hygiene, and worry time, but if we are waking up every night with nightmares this can be really disruptive to our sleep patterns.

1. If you have a recurring bad dream, try **imagining a different positive ending** to it. Rehearse this ending in your mind several times before you go to sleep. This can help people to access this ending in the dream itself.

2. Be prepared to **recover from the bad dream** as quickly as possible:
   - Keep a spray bottle on your bedside table as water in the face can help to ground us and bring us back into the present, as well as cooling us down if we're hot and anxious
   - Keep something with a relaxing smell, like essential oils or a candle, next to your bed. Use the smell to bring you back into the present.
   - Check back in with reality- remind yourself where you are, what has been happening over the last few days and what your current situation is like. It can help to move around, to speak out loud and to turn a light on to check your surroundings, or even go to the window to see what is happening outside.

- Keep an object like a stress ball to squeeze and to throw to bring your attention back into the moment.
- Slow your breathing down if you are hot and breathing fast, and practice some self-compassion if you have woken up upset or crying (*see our guide for Self-Compassion in Self-Isolation*).
- Imagine nicer things, like your favourite place or person, and fill your mind up with images of these before you go back to sleep.

3. **Practice re-orientating** yourself to reality in your mind. Imagine waking up from a dream and going through the steps above.