Sleep Hygiene

Tending your nightly return to rest

If you are receiving this handout, it is because I believe too little sleep, or restless sleep, may be adding to your distress. Sleep is where the body repairs itself and the heart and mind sort through the day. When it goes missing, everything else gets harder. Sleep responds to care, and small, steady changes can make a real difference.

What Sleep Loss Does

Sleep deprivation has long been used as a method of torture and interrogation, because it wears down a person's defenses and drains their inner resources. A gentler version of the same wearing down happens to any of us after weeks of short nights. Ongoing sleep loss can:

- **Raise stress hormones.** Short sleep keeps cortisol high in the evening, when it should be falling, so the body stays braced and the next night gets harder.
- **Amplify emotions.** After a sleepless night, the brain's alarm center reacts about 60 percent more strongly to upsetting things, while the calming, reasoning brain has less say.
- **Increase pain**, so aches and old injuries hurt more.
- **Weaken immunity and unsettle appetite.** People who sleep under six hours are about four times more likely to catch a cold when exposed to it, and short sleep stirs up cravings for sweets.
- **Cloud memory, focus, judgment and reaction time.** Being awake for 17 to 19 hours can impair driving as much as a blood alcohol level of 0.05 percent.
- **Strain long-term health**, raising the risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes and depression.

Most adults need seven to nine hours a night. Your own need is the amount that leaves you rested, so experiment until you find it.

Light and Your Inner Clock

- **Get morning light.** Ten to thirty minutes of daylight soon after waking sets your inner clock so sleepiness comes on time at night. Cloudy days count.
- **Dim the evening.** Bright light at night, especially the blue-rich light of screens and LED bulbs, tells the brain it is daytime and holds back melatonin, the hormone that opens the door to sleep.
- **Ease off screens an hour before bed.** If you do use them, lower the brightness and turn on the warm night setting (Night Shift on Apple devices). What you watch matters too: the news or an email inbox can wake the mind as much as the light does.

- **Keep the bedroom dark** with blackout curtains or an eye mask, and use a dim, warm nightlight for bathroom trips.

Rhythm and Routine

- **Wake at the same time every day**, weekends included, even after a rough night. A steady wake time is the strongest anchor for sleep.
- **Go to bed when you feel sleepy**, allowing enough time for at least seven hours.
- **Create a wind-down hour.** A warm bath, gentle stretching, soft music, prayer or meditation, a book under a low lamp. Repeat the same rhythm each night so your body learns the signal.
- **Set worries down on paper.** Write tomorrow's list and anything weighing on you before bed, so your mind can let go of holding it.
- **Make bedtime a small ritual.** Step outside for a moment before bed and let the evening air cool your face. Look for the moon, a single star or the dark shapes of trees against the sky. If the weather isn't conducive to outdoor explorations, perhaps lite a candle. Offer thanks for one gift the day brought, and hand whatever is unfinished to the night, the Greater Something or whoever watches over you, to hold until morning.
- **Keep naps short and early**: 20 to 30 minutes, before mid-afternoon.

Your Sleep Space

- Keep the room cool, around 60 to 67°F, and well aired.
- Use earplugs or steady background sound, such as a fan, if noise wakes you.
- Reserve your bed for sleep and intimacy, so your body links bed with rest.
- Make it comfortable. Some people find a weighted blanket soothing.
- Turn the clock away. Watching the minutes pass stirs up worry.

Food, Drink and Movement

- **Caffeine** lingers: half of it can remain in your body five or six hours later. Enjoy it in the morning and stop by early afternoon. Tea, cola, chocolate and some pain relievers count.
- **Alcohol** may help you drift off, then breaks up sleep in the second half of the night. Avoid it within three hours of bed. Nicotine and cannabis can also disturb sleep.
- **Finish larger meals** two to three hours before bed. A small snack is fine if hunger keeps you awake: yogurt, oats, nuts, a banana or tart cherries are gentle choices.
- **Sip less in the evening** so your bladder lets you rest.
- **Move your body daily.** Regular exercise deepens sleep. Save vigorous workouts for earlier in the day.

Scent for Sleep

Smell travels straight to the brain's emotional centers, which is one reason a familiar scent can soothe so quickly. Small studies suggest some essential oils can calm the nervous system and ease the way into sleep.

- **Lavender**, the best studied, may slow the heart rate, ease anxiety and improve sleep quality.
- **Bergamot**, a fragrant citrus, has lowered heart rate and stress in several small studies.
- **Ylang ylang**, **clary sage** and **jasmine** have shown relaxing effects in early research, and **yuzu** or other soft citrus scents may ease tension. Bright lemon can be energizing for some people, so try it during the day first.
- Diffuse a scent for half an hour before bed, or put a drop or two on a cotton ball near your pillow. Dilute oils in a carrier oil before they touch your skin.
- Essential oils are not regulated, so buy from a trusted source. Keep them away from pets, especially cats, and stop if a scent bothers you.

When Sleep Won't Come

- If you have been awake for about 20 minutes, get up and go somewhere dim and comfortable. Read something gentle or listen to soft music until sleepiness returns, then go back to bed.
- Let go of the effort. Sleep tends to come when we stop chasing it, so trade the struggle for slow breathing and kind words to yourself.
- Call on support. Imagine the earth beneath your bed holding your full weight, or remember the sound of rain on a roof or waves sliding back from the shore. Invite a spirit animal, or the version of you who sleeps easily, to curl up beside you in the dark.
- Be gentle with a bad night. Keep your usual wake time and trust your body to catch up over the next few nights.

When to Reach Out

If you snore loudly, gasp or stop breathing in your sleep, feel an urge to move your legs at rest, or continue to struggle after a few weeks of steady changes, talk with your doctor. Sleep apnea and other sleep disorders are common and treatable. For ongoing insomnia, cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) is the recommended first approach, and its benefits tend to last.

Sleep is one of the kindest gifts you can give yourself, and each night offers another chance to receive it.