

# Understanding and Coping with Poor Sleep



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# Part 1. Understanding Sleep

Sleep is a **natural process** for all humans and animals and is as important for our health as eating, drinking and breathing. We all need sleep but the amount we need differs.

- An adult needs between 7-9 hours per night
- A giraffe around 2 hours per night
- A dolphin around 10 hours
- A tiger around 16 hours

There are many things we do not understand about sleep, but we do know that sleep:

- Helps to **restore and repair our bodies**
- Provides an opportunity for **our brain to clear out and process events**
- Helps to **regulate our emotions**

If we sleep well, we usually wake up feeling refreshed and restored and feel more able to learn and process information. However, if we experience sleep difficulties, we might wake up feeling tired, foggy or grumpy and find it hard to concentrate and learn.

## **The Stages of Sleep**

Although we talk about “sleep” it actually cycles through different stages throughout the night.

- During the first third of the night we have our deepest sleep. It is thought that this is the time when most of the body restoration and repair occurs.
- For the remaining two thirds of the night we cycle through lighter and rapid eye movement (REM) sleep.
- REM sleep helps with emotional processing and this is when we often experience our more vivid and emotional dreams.
- Because our sleep becomes lighter through the night it becomes more likely that we will wake up briefly. This is completely normal and very common.

## How Do We Know When To Sleep?

We have a natural, internal system to help regulate sleep and wakefulness over a 24-hour period. This system is split into two processes: **sleep pressure** and the **body clock**

Over the course of the day we become more sleepy - we build 'sleep pressure'. Once we go to sleep, we start to release this sleepiness and on waking in the morning feel refreshed and ready for the day.

This also syncs with our body clock, which controls the timing of bodily processes over a 24-hour period (our circadian rhythm). Our alertness, driven by the body clock, tends to peak in the middle of the day.

The timing of our body clock is set when light hits our eyes in the morning. Humans have evolved to feel more awake while the sun is shining and feel more ready to sleep when it becomes darker.

## The Adolescent Body Clock

The timing of our body clock can vary.

- We talk about "morning people" for those who are more awake in the morning or "night owls" for those who are more wakeful late evening – this is often something that is **genetically programmed**.
- **Our age** is also important. For example, around puberty the body clock of adolescents shifts forward, so that young people are unable to fall asleep as early as they used to. At bedtime, their bodies may be pushing them to stay up for several more hours. **This shift is natural for teenagers.**

When the body clock is out of sync with the natural cycle of light and darkness, it can make it difficult to wake up early for school, causing young people to feel tired and grumpy in the morning, often because they haven't had enough sleep.

## How much sleep does my child need?

There is no set amount, and it varies according to age:

- Newborn babies may sleep up to 19 hours per day
- A 1-2 year older toddler will usually sleep around 11-14 hours per day.
- 6-13 year olds will usually sleep around 9-11 hours
- An adolescent 8-10 hours but this could be as little as 7 hours or as much as 11 hours

## When Does My Child Have A Sleep Difficulty?

It is **normal to wake up briefly** during the night or to **sometimes sleep badly**. However, occasionally these sleep disturbances can become **more frequent or severe**.

- Your child may regularly find it difficult to get off to sleep
- They may keep waking during the night
- Find it hard to get enough sleep and feel constantly tired

This becomes problematic when it starts to **affect the young person's life**. They might

- Be unable to get up in the morning
- Experience problems with their mood
- Constantly feel tired
- Be unable to concentrate

## Why has my child developed a sleep difficulty?

Understanding the reasons for poor sleep is complicated although three factors seem to be important

### Foundations

Although we are all prone to experiencing poor sleep, there are some people who might be more at risk of developing poor sleep than others. This could be because of their genetics (poor sleep may run in families), because of their circumstances (e.g. a noisy home) or because of their psychological characteristics (e.g. someone who worries a lot).

### Triggers

We have evolved to be unable to sleep when we are anxious or stressed – this is important as it keeps us safe (e.g. not falling asleep when we're in danger). When we experience stressful life events, such as exams, a house move, or a new baby, we may find it harder to relax and switch off – this can trigger a bout of poor sleep.

### Lifestyle

When we experience poor sleep, we often try to manage it as best we can. Often that means we change what we do and how we think about sleep. The trouble is that these changes can often keep the poor sleep cycle going.

## What are these lifestyle patterns?

- **Unhelpful daytime routines** – because we feel tired, we might nap or do less during the day but this might reduce how ready we feel for sleep at night-time.
- **No wind down before bed** – we might exercise or play exciting computer games before bed which keep us alert and unable to switch off.
- **No regular night-time routine** – we might go to bed and wake up at different times each day – this confuses our body clock and makes sleep unpredictable.
- **A racing mind** – we might spend time in the evening or during the night worrying and be unable to switch off and sleep because our mind is busy and stressed.
- **Stimulating activities if unable to sleep** – because we are awake, we might do things like spending time on our phone or the internet which wake us up even more.

## Part 2: What can parents do?

Poor sleep is frustrating and can have a negative effect on family life.

- There may be arguments about bedtimes
- Disagreements about what might help to improve sleep
- Parents may feel overwhelmed and unsure what they can do to help their child.
- Relationships may become strained as parents take over or try to be more forceful

**Conflict like this is not helpful** and just makes things worse. It increases stress within the family, makes your child feel more anxious and worried, which in turn may make it harder for them to fall and stay asleep.

### Try not to

- **Get angry**

You may feel frustrated but keep calm. Getting angry doesn't help and brings an increasingly negative focus to sleep, making it more of an issue.

- **Don't try and take over**

Whilst you might be tempted to take over and impose your own rules, this often leads to conflict and worsening relationships. No matter what you do, you can't make your child sleep, you can only help them to do it themselves.

- **Don't expect change to be quick**

Helping your child to shift their body clock may take time so don't be disheartened. Remain positive and notice and comment on the small changes that have occurred.

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## Try to

- **Work together** with your child
- **Put your emotions to one side** and step back from what is going on.
- **Talk with your child** and understand how they are feeling about their sleep. It is often better to do this when everyone is feeling calm so try talking during the day-time.
- Listen to what your child says and **agree a plan together**.
- **Establish small, positive goals** for how they can improve their sleep.

By working together with your child to agree a plan and manageable goals, you will **help them to feel more relaxed**.

## How parents can help

**Tip 1:** Help to develop a **good sleep environment**.

- We sleep at night when it is darker, quieter and cooler than during the day when we are awake.
- Unsurprisingly, light, noise and being too warm can all negatively affect our sleep.
- Check that your child's sleep environment is dark, quiet, and cool.

## Light and Melatonin

- Light affects some of the **chemicals our bodies make**. One of these chemicals, **Melatonin**, affects the sleep/wake cycle and tells us when it's time to go to sleep. Its production is affected by evening and night-time light exposure and this may make it harder to fall asleep.
- Try to **reduce light in the bedroom** and check that curtains and blinds are blocking out any outside light
- Another common source of light comes from phones, laptops and other electronic devices. Not only do these devices produce relatively intense light, they can also be emotionally stimulating, both of which affect how sleepy we feel.

## Reduce Blue Light

The simplest way to reduce exposure to artificial light is to encourage your child to **turn off their** smartphone, TV, and other gadgets well before bedtime. If the young person feels unable to do this completely then **cut down on screen time** at least 2-3 hours before bed.

Another option is to **dim the brightness** on devices. This is often called night or dark mode and emits less light, however, turning off these devices is still the best way to manage.

To remind your child to do this, encourage them to **set an alarm**.

## Noise

A **noisy environment** can disrupt your child's sleep. Noise as they prepare to sleep might distract or stimulate them making it harder to fall asleep. Loud sounds during the night can startle your child and wake them up, particularly in the last half of the night.

Reducing noise is not always easy but you could help your child to try **ear plugs**, particularly if you live in a noisy neighbourhood, or else using gentle white noise, such as the sound of a fan.

If your child is disturbed by others in the house gaming or playing music, then consider a **curfew** for when this stops. Alternatively, they could continue but only with **headphones**.

## Temperature

When we sleep during the night our body temperature naturally drops. If your room is too warm it can be harder for your body to lose core body temperature and you may find it harder to fall asleep.

If your child's room gets very warm, turn down any radiators, try opening a window for while before bed or use a thin sheet or duvet.

**Tip 2:** Encourage your child to develop a **helpful night-time routine**.

The links we make between our environment, stimuli and activities are important. These can help to make our sleep become predictable and can help to improve our sleep. One good way to do this is to develop and keep to a regular and calming nighttime routine

Ensure that your child has **time to wind down** in the evening to relax in the hour before going to bed, so that their body is prepared for sleep.

## Try

- A relaxing bath, warm shower or a milky drink
- Quiet activities such as reading a book, doing a puzzle, listening to calming music
- Perhaps some relaxation, mindfulness or meditation exercises

## Avoid

- Gaming, socializing, or activities that make them alert or excited should be avoided.
- Physical exercise in the evening since it activates us and can mask our sleepiness.
- Using electronic devices for at least an hour before bed and if possible, leave them outside of the bedroom.
- Caffeinated drinks such as coffee, tea, energy drinks and "Coke". Caffeine is a stimulant so avoid these types of drinks in the evening.

**Tip 3:** Encourage your child to **only use their bed for sleeping**.

Many people spend a great deal of time in bed doing things other than sleeping. For instance, it is common nowadays for people to be on their phone streaming videos or music, social networking or browsing the internet.

Whilst doing these in bed may help some people to unwind and feel more relaxed, spending time in bed **awake** can disrupt the **bed – sleep association**. This means that we associate bed with lots of other activities and not just sleep.

This link is important and **so limiting what we do in bed to just sleeping strengthens the link between bed and sleep**.

For anything else see if there is another space they could use. For example:

- Doing homework with headphones at the kitchen table rather than in bed.
- Watching TV with the rest of family or on their phone with headphones on in the same room as the family, rather than in bed.
- Finding a comfortable chair or bean-bag in their room on which to read, wind down, look at their phone rather than doing so in bed.

Developing the link between bed and sleep will help your child to become better at falling asleep.

**Tip 4:** Agree a **regular rise and bed-time**

In adolescence it is common for the body clock to experience a 'delay', meaning that adolescents often get tired later at night and wake up later the next day.

This can be difficult when your child has to get up for school in the morning, as this delay can mean that they haven't had enough sleep and so will, understandably, be grumpy and tired.

You can help them to **reset their body clock**:

- Agree with your child a regular time that they will go to bed and when they will wake and get out of bed in the morning. This routine helps to set their body clock to a more regular cycle.
- At night-time, don't push your child to go to bed too early when they're not tired. This may result in them lying in bed worrying about getting to sleep and worsening their sleep patterns.
- If they are a naturally late riser, forcing them to get up too early will be unhelpful. Instead, choose a time like a half-term or holiday at which to let them get up naturally and then over the next few days gently move the rise time earlier by 15-30 minutes a morning. Make sure that the young person gets exposure to lots of natural light when they wake up as this will help their sleep move forward.

To help re-set your child's body clock they will need to stop napping during the day. Napping takes away some of the natural sleepiness that arises during the day and which prepares us for a good nights sleep.

If your child takes a nap they may then feel less sleepy in the evening when they go to bed, making it harder for them to sleep.

**Tip 5:** Help your child to **stop worrying about sleep.**

People who have problems sleeping often find their minds are full of worries. They might lie in bed going over in their mind what has happened and worrying about what might happen. worrying about whether they will fall asleep or worrying about why they are not asleep.

Worries like these create anxiety which will arouse your child and make it even more difficult to sleep.

You can help your child to deal with their racing mind by encouraging them to:

- **Download their head** and to write down all their worries during their evening, around 2 or 3 hours before bed. Try to get these worries out earlier in the evening so that they are not racing around their heads when they are in bed. If they start to worry, encourage them to focus on the here and now, not the past or the future.
- Try to **build a relaxing activity into your child's nighttime routine**. Find the things they find relaxing such as relaxation or breathing exercises, calming music, mindfulness, meditation, reading or puzzles and do them 30 minutes before they try to go to sleep.
- **Reduce time lying in bed awake**. Don't push your child to go to bed too early when they're not tired. This will give them more time to worry about getting to sleep and will make it harder for them to sleep. It is better to go to bed later, when they are tired so that they are more likely to fall asleep quicker.

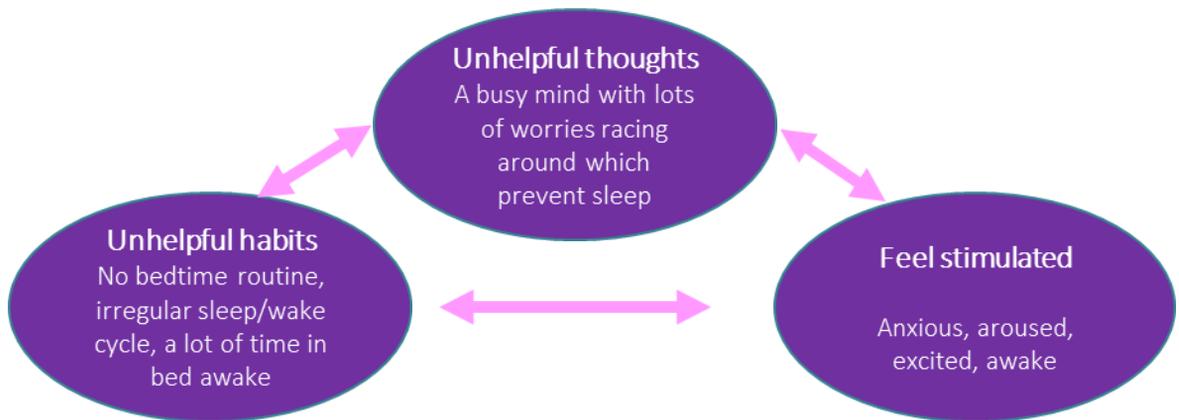
## Part 3. Practical Ideas to Improve Your Child's Sleep

The recommended treatment for people who have difficulty falling or staying asleep (insomnia) is **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Insomnia or CBTi**.

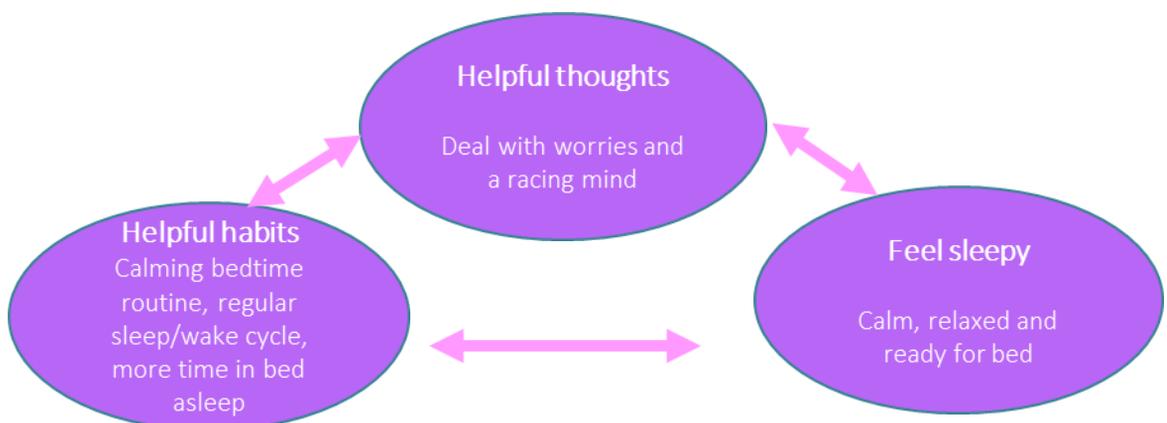
CBTi looks at the **things that are keeping poor sleep stuck**. These might be about the way they **think** (e.g. worrying a lot about sleep) or how they **behave** (e.g. getting into bed too early or trying too hard to get to sleep).

CBTi **focuses on the here and now** and helps to **find practical solutions** to change these unhelpful thoughts or behaviours that might be causing poor sleep

The aim is to move from the poor sleep trap



To a more helpful cycle that improves sleep



## The Worksheets

Alongside this video are some information sheets that can help you and your child learn to improve their sleep. These will take you through the following 5 steps to improving your sleep:

1. **Sleep diary** – check your child’s sleeping pattern
2. **Helpful sleep habits** – develop habits that will help your child to sleep
3. **Relaxing at bedtime** – help your child develop different methods to relax and feel calm
4. **Coping with a busy mind** – discover different ways to deal with worries
5. **Reset the body clock** – help your child reset their natural wake/sleep cycle

### Step 1: Understand Sleep

The first step is to learn more about your child’s sleep. Work with them to keep a diary for a week and check if:

- there is a regular bed and waking time
- your child is sleepy when they go to bed
- they are waking during the night
- how long they are sleeping
- whether they feel refreshed

A *sleep diary* is included in the accompanying resources

	Day 1	Day 2
What time did you go to bed?		
How long did it take to go to sleep?		
How many times did you wake in the night?		
What time did you finally wake up		
What time did you get up		
How would you rate your sleep 1 2 3 4 5 Poor Good		

### Step 2: Check the bedroom

The second step is to make sure that the place your child sleeps encourages sleep. If the bedroom is too light, noisy or too warm it can disrupt our sleep.

- **Reduce light** – make sure bright lights in the house are turned off, that curtains or blinds stop the light coming in or, if this is difficult, ask your child to try using an eye-mask.
- **Reduce blue light** - turn off their smartphone, TV, and other gadgets well before bedtime. If not possible dim the light (night or dark mode) and leave devices outside the bedroom
- **Reduce noise** - if noisy ask your child to try ear plugs. If others in the household are gaming or playing loud music impose a **noise curfew** or provide them with **headphones** to use instead.
- **Reduce the heat** – turn down radiators, open the window, or try a light sheet or duvet

## Step 3: Develop Helpful Habits

We sometimes develop unhelpful lifestyle patterns or habits that can disrupt our sleep/wake cycle. When we go to bed, we may feel awake and not ready to sleep. Review with your child their lifestyle patterns to **identify any that might interfere with their sleep**.

An information sheet, *helpful sleep habits*, summarises some of the ideas that will help your child to sleep

### Helpful habits during the day

- **Exercise** can be helpful, but it is important that this is undertaken during the day, not late in the evening. Exercising at night can activate us and mask sleepiness, making it harder for us to fall asleep.
- **Avoid caffeine:** Caffeine is a stimulant which takes a long time to leave your bloodstream. Avoid caffeinated drinks, and if not possible, avoid them in the evening.
- **Avoid napping:** Napping is not helpful and takes away some of the natural sleepiness that builds during the day that helps us to sleep at night.

### Helpful habits before bed

Encourage your child to develop a helpful routine in the hour before bed that prepares them for sleep. This makes sleep predictable and helps the body prepare for sleep.

- **Avoid exciting gaming**, or scary films that might stimulate, excite or make your child feel anxious.
- Try some **quiet relaxing activities** such as listening to music, reading, doing a puzzle or drawing
- **Unwind** and have a hot shower, relaxing bath or warm milky drink.
- Encourage your child to **try some relaxation exercises**, mindfulness or meditation and perhaps you can do this with them

The information sheet, *relaxing at bedtime*, provides some ideas of different ways to wind down and relax.

### Helpful habits in bed

- Help to develop a strong **link between bed and sleep**. Discourage them from doing anything else in their bed other than sleeping
- Limit the amount of time your child spends in bed awake. Make sure they **feel sleepy when they go to bed** so don't make bedtime too early
- If they are still awake after 15 minutes encourage them to **get out of bed** and engage in a quiet activity. This could be listening to calming music, doing a puzzle, or reading a book. After 15 minutes return to bed and try again.

## Step 4: Deal With Worries and the Busy Mind

People who find it difficult to sleep often complain of a busy mind. They lie in bed with lots of worries racing around their mind. They worry about:

- what has happened
- what will happen
- their sleep - “I should be asleep by now” “I must try harder to sleep” “What if I don’t fall asleep tonight”

Thoughts like these create anxiety. The more we worry and put pressure on ourselves to sleep, the more awake we become and the less likely it is that we will fall asleep.

### Dealing With A Busy Mind

The information sheet, *coping with a busy mind*, can help your child to deal with their worries

- Each evening encourage your child to take 10 minutes to **get their worries out of their head** and to write them down. Go through the list with your child and help them find solutions to those worries they can do something about. For example, if they are worried they will forget something for school help them pack their school bag and leave it ready by the door. This may mean less worries for your child when they go to bed.
- The more attention you give your worries the bigger they seem to become. To stop this happening help your child learn to **divert their attention** to something else. Help your child to create a calming picture in their mind. This could be a real or an imaginary place that they find restful. Help them to create a strong picture and include any sounds, smells, textures to make it as real as possible. Whenever your child becomes aware of their racing mind switch attention and really concentrate on their calming picture.

This won’t work straight away but the more they practice the easier it will be to divert their attention.

## Step 5: Reset the Body Clock

Adolescents often experience a ‘delay’ in their body clock. This is developmentally normal and means that their body clock is just set slightly later, so that they get tired later at night and wake up later the next day.

If they are a naturally late riser, forcing them to get up too early will likely be unhelpful and will often result in extreme difficulties for the young person that can include mood problems, daytime sleepiness and poor concentration. **Remember, this is generally developmentally normal during adolescence and is not a sign of a young person being lazy.**

If this becomes problematic the information sheet, *reset the body clock*, may help.

The aim is to help your child reset their clock so that they are ready to sleep and wake up earlier. This will be hard for your child so it is very important that you **work together with them and do this gently.**

- Keep a **sleep diary** for a week to get a sense of their sleep pattern. This will help to identify how much time they spend asleep.
- Choose a time like a half-term or holiday and let them get up naturally (i.e. when they wake up without an alarm) and then over the next few days **gently move the rise time** earlier by 15-30 minutes a morning. Make sure that the young person gets exposure to lots of natural light when they wake up as this will help their sleep move forward. A SAD lamp can also be used and should be used following the manufacturer's instructions.
- Once the sleep moves earlier, it is important to **maintain a regular rise time** and to keep relatively strictly to this schedule. The key thing to balance is that the young person is getting sufficient sleep.

Make sure that your child has also established the helpful habits at step 2 and **stick with this plan** for the next 2 weeks. To start with they will probably feel tired and may be grumpy. This is normal. After a week they may start to settle into their new routine and spend less time in bed awake and more time asleep.

If your child is experiencing a **large delay in their sleep** timings and find this too challenging it can be helpful to **talk with your GP** and see what help might be available.

## Good Luck

We hope that these ideas will be helpful and that they give you some ideas how you can help your child improve their sleep

Find the ideas that work for your child

This will be hard work but by working together as a team you will be able to support your child and help them to be successful