A guide to protecting your sleep during the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 has changed the way we all live and work. For many, this now means working or studying at home, periods of not working, homeschooling, and staying inside more. Changes like this can be stressful and can disturb our sleep. Sleep is a cornerstone of our health and so it's really important to protect it! Here is a brief guide to help you do just that.

1. **Keep sleep regular with a regular rise time and routine**

Regular routines are great for sleep. The trouble is that we can easily get out of a routine, particularly when spending long periods at home. The daily 'tick' of our body clock is known as our *circadian rhythm*. It affects pretty much all aspects of how our bodies run, including our sleep. The main signal keeping the clock on time is light, something that we get each morning when we wake up. Keeping a regular wake up time each morning, and so getting a regular dose of light, is a good way to keep our sleep periods regular. That applies even to weekends as the body can't tell the difference. We do lots of other things throughout the day that also act as 'time-stamps' or *zeitgeibers* (literally, 'time-givers'). These time stamps include mealtimes and physical exercise. Keeping a regular rhythm helps to keep sleep timings predictable for the body and makes it easier for us to get a good night's sleep.

2. **Keep the bed and bedroom dedicated to sleep**

Most of us are probably spending much more time inside than we would usually do. This might mean that we start using the bedroom for things like watching television or working. If you can, protect your space for sleep and keep non-sleep activities outside of the bedroom. 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 television, eating etc.) 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 give the brain an easy time of it so that it knows that when you're in bed, it's just for sleeping. If you absolutely **have** to use your bedroom for work or studying, make sure that you keep it separate from the bed and clear it away at the end of the working day.

3. **Develop a wind-down routine to help sleep**

When we are "go-go-go" all day and then get into bed, our brain doesn't have an opportunity to wind-down. This may lead to unwanted thoughts preventing us from falling asleep. Developing a wind-down routine for the hour or two before bed is a great way to prepare your brain and body for sleep. Ideally the wind-down routine should be done in dim light conditions, should not include electronics (so close those laptops), and should include activities that are relaxing and so are more likely to promote sleep. One technique that people find helpful is to dedicate 15 minutes of their evening, maybe 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 (e.g. who to call, what to remember to do first thing etc) and making a plan for dealing with them. Then leave the paper, along with all the mental content, somewhere safe and obvious and come back to it in the morning.

4. **Protect sleep from competing demands**

Most of us have plenty of demands on our attention throughout the day. These can include things like smartphone notifications from social media or the news, or another email dropping into the inbox. As well as entertaining us, these kinds of attention grabbers can keep us in a near constant state of alertness. The trouble is that this feeling of being 'on edge' can stop us relaxing properly, which can in turn impact sleep. This is important to deal with because it takes time to relax completely before sleep, as part of your evening 'wind-down' to sleep. A simple way to give yourself space in which to wind-down properly is to

keep phones and technology well away from the bedroom and to put them away well before you begin your evening wind-down to sleep.

5. Keeping active to promote good sleep

Nightly sleep and daily activity are like two sides of the same coin. With social isolation and working from home, many of us are now probably doing less daily physical activity than usual. Although important for general health, activity levels are also important because they may have effects on our sleep. Of course, there are several simple strategies to managing this but building activity into your routine will help it stick. One idea might be to mimic the journey into work or school each day by taking a morning stroll and spending brief breaks during the day doing some enjoyable physical activity, such as aerobics or yoga in the living room. Not only is this likely to be helpful for physical fitness, it's also a helpful way of maintaining alertness and banishing the lethargy that comes from an inactive day. Although it will vary from person to person, the general rule of thumb is to limit vigorous physical exercise to the morning and afternoon, leaving the evenings for winding down and readying the body for sleep.

6. Keeping sleep for the night-time

As humans, we've evolved to be active during the day and to sleep at night. Where we're awake and active during the day, we build up something that is known as '*sleep-pressure*'. This is the delightful sleepiness that builds across the day and helps us drift off when we get to bedtime. When working from home and being less physically active, we may spend more time resting or even nap during the day. The trouble with this is that it can leave us without enough sleep pressure at bedtime to help us to drift off to sleep. Keeping sleep for nighttime and not napping during the day is the best way to ensure that your sleep pressure is topped up when it comes to bedtime!

7. Keep sleep the same on weekdays and weekends.

Sleep prefers a consistent rhythm, which means getting up and going to sleep at a similar time each day. Remember, the body can't tell the difference between a weekday and a weekend. If you find yourself having a long lie in on the weekend, it's likely that you're not getting enough sleep during the week. Making sure that you're giving yourself enough time to get the sleep you need during the week and keeping it the same on both weekends and weekdays helps the body to manage and predict sleep periods, making good sleep easier to come by.

8. Sleep to your natural rhythm where possible and move sleep gradually

Many children and young people, as well as plenty of adults, will have a sleep period that is 'delayed' relative to the working or school day. This might mean being unable to get to sleep until much later at night and sleeping in until later in the morning. This is the kind of sleep pattern experienced by people who might be described as 'night owls' rather than 'morning larks'. During the pandemic, when there might be less need to get up early for school or work, sleeping to your natural 'phase' or rhythm might be helpful. When you do have to start waking earlier once again, moving your sleep period forward by waking up around 15 minutes earlier each morning and getting plenty of morning sunlight should help to make the transition easier. Limiting bright light in the evening and at night should also help.

Summary

During these difficult and unusual times, prioritising sleep for you and your family is as important as ever. Keeping a regular routine, both in terms of your activity and sleeping patterns is important, and helps make sleep predictable for the body clock. Protect your bedroom from non-sleep activity and technology that might disturb sleep; make it your own sleep oasis. 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. Stay active during the day and

keep up some regular and enjoyable physical exercise as part of your routine. Keep sleep for the night-time and don't nap during the day; give your body plenty of time to build up the sleep pressure it needs before bed. Finally, keep your sleep the same throughout the week - remember, the body can't tell the difference between a weekday and a weekend.

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 GP to get the help you need.