

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Making Your Dream of Better Sleep Come True

For many people, the notion of waking up feeling well-rested is just a vision from a dream. If you're struggling to get the appropriate amount of rest, you're not alone. In fact, several North American studies suggest sleep troubles are on the rise. But you don't have to take poor sleep lying down: the tips below can help you discover simple solutions that'll get your sleep cycle back on track.

Make your bedroom a sleep zone. Does your bedroom look more like a high-tech electronics store than a serene retreat? Surrounding yourself with TVs, computers, video games, etc., before slumber can all, literally, leave you feeling "wired" or stressed, making it nearly impossible for you to switch off and fall asleep. Remove sleep disrupters and work on creating a sleep-centred room that is comfortable, cool, quiet and dark. If you work shifts and usually sleep during daylight hours, then invest in some blackout curtains, an eye mask and something to generate white noise (e.g., a fan). Is your partner's snoring sabotaging your snooze? Try wearing ear plugs or sleeping in a separate room. Better still, encourage your mate to consult a physician to ensure he or she is not suffering from sleep apnea—a potentially dangerous sleep disorder that slows or stops breathing for 10 seconds or more at a time.

Stay on schedule. Staying up until the wee hours of the night and sleeping in until noon on weekends might seem like a great idea at the time, but it can seriously disrupt your body's sleep schedule—especially when it's time to go back to your weekday, early-to-bed, early-to-rise routine. Whenever possible keep your snooze schedule relatively consistent: try not to go to bed more than an hour past your weekday bed time and limit sleep-ins to an extra hour in the morning.

Exercise (but do it early). As if improved health, weight loss/maintenance and a boost in mood weren't reasons enough to get moving, several studies also suggest regular exercise earlier in the day promotes better sleep at night. Ensure you finish your workout two to three hours before you hit the sack though, as exercising too close to bedtime can actually "wake up" your body and make falling asleep more difficult.

Steer clear of stimulants and sleep disturbers. Consuming stimulants such as caffeine (found in coffee, tea, colas and chocolate) too close to bed time may cause you to toss and turn or clock-watch in the middle of the night. Depending on your sensitivity, you may need to avoid caffeinated food and drinks anywhere from two to 12 hours before your bedtime. And while you may think that glass of wine or beer will help you fall asleep, alcohol can actually spoil your slumber, so it's best to pass on the nightcap.

Create relaxing rituals that encourage you to unwind before bed. Whether it's soaking in a warm bath, reading a few chapters of a novel or meditation, creating a consistent pre-bed routine can help you shed some of the day's stress (that can keep you up at night) and encourage your body and mind to unwind.

Get to the root of the problem. Insomnia or poor sleep can be a complicated issue caused by a series of factors. Medication, a physical condition—such as chronic pain, pregnancy, menopause and restless leg syndrome—as well as emotional or mental concerns—like depression, anxiety and stress—can all interfere with your ability to snooze. With over 85 different sleep disorders in existence, it's wise to seek the support of a medical professional. Signs of a sleep disorder may include:

- Frequent trouble falling asleep and/or trouble staying asleep throughout the night
- Difficulty completing or focusing on day-to-day tasks at home, work or school

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- Feeling exhausted even after seven or eight hours of sleep
- Frequent forgetfulness
- Mood swings
- Falling asleep while driving

If one or more of these symptoms sound familiar, consult your health professional immediately.

Poor sleep doesn’t have to be a fact of life. By taking a few simple steps, understanding the source of your sleep disturbances and getting the support of a medical professional when necessary, it is possible to make that dream of great sleep a reality.