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Sleep(less) in the Time of a Pandemic

Most of us spend one third of our lifetime sleeping. That does seem like a lot... But there are reasons for it. Sleep has several important functions, including conserving energy, so that we can be productive when we are awake and restoring the body, from all the energy we spent during the waking hours.

Unfortunately, sleep doesn't come easy to everyone. Some people struggle falling asleep, some have difficulty staying asleep, including tossing and turning all night only to be awakened by the alarm as soon as they have finally fallen asleep. Others have difficulty waking up and feel exhausted even after several hours of sleep. Almost all of us experience trouble with sleep at some point in our lives.

At this particularly stressful time in the world, sleep disruption is likely and may even be accompanied by weird or bad dreams. The anxiety that is commonly experienced during periods of uncertainty can significantly impact our sleep. In turn, lack of sleep can cause us to be less focused and productive, decrease our frustration tolerance, impact our mood, make us more anxious and even more susceptible to illness. Although it may seem that we don't have much control over our sleep, there is a lot that we can do to facilitate and improve our sleep.

To turn on or turn off the news...

Although it is important to stay informed by reading and/or watching the news, it is crucial that we set boundaries. It is understandable to want to keep checking in, as it may give us a sense of control, especially since the news is constantly changing. However, it is not necessary to stay informed up until the time we go to bed. The news, information, and social media consumption can be anxiety-provoking, which may cause us to worry more, ruminate, and stay wide awake. Therefore, be intentional when you check in with the news, turn off notifications during certain times (or altogether right now!), and decide when you want to find out about any current updates throughout the day.

Relaxing bedtime ritual

It is also helpful to establish a bedtime routine that allows you to relax, leave the day behind, and shift the focus to nurture and take care of yourself. We spend most of the day being connected to the world, to our work, to our loved ones. It's crucial that we also check in with ourselves and see how we are doing and what we may need before we end the day. The bedtime routine can entail taking a bath or hot shower, making yourself a (non-caffeinated!) herbal tea, which you could sip while reading a book, or making a puzzle, journaling, meditating, or connecting with a loved one. It is important to stay away from screens at least one hour before

bedtime so that you are not signaling to your brain to stay awake, when you are preparing to go to sleep! Additionally, keep in mind that caffeine, cigarettes, and alcohol can disrupt sleep. Therefore, even though a glass of wine can feel relaxing, a few too many may actually interfere with your sleep!

Tossing and turning...

If you have consistently struggled with falling asleep, it is important to establish a sleep schedule, which allows you to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day, including on weekends, in order to help regulate your body's internal clock. Moreover, you may want to avoid taking naps during the day, at least until you have addressed your sleep problems.

If it's still a challenge to fall asleep, don't stay in bed tossing and turning and looking at your clock getting more and more frustrated. Get up, as you don't want to associate the bed as a source of frustration (the bed should only be used for sleep, rest, and sex), and do something relaxing, or read something boring, not too thrilling, and then when you start feeling tired again, go back to sleep. If you still can't fall asleep, repeat the steps. Writing down your thoughts and "dumping" them in a notebook and physically closing that notebook, can also help you ease some of the worries.

Gratitude practice

Starting a gratitude journal can also help us counter a lot of the negativity that we are currently experiencing. Practicing gratitude during this time can seem especially challenging; however, if you haven't already, this is the moment to start! Evolutionarily speaking, the brain focused on the negative so that we could prepare ourselves for different threats. However, it is important to cultivate gratitude as it can increase positive emotions, which can lead to decreased blood pressure and stress hormones, and elevate mood. Gratitude practice can also increase optimism, pro-social behavior, and yes, what this article is about: better sleep!

Evaluating the environment

Think about things you can control in your bedroom that can help your sleep. These can include temperature, lighting, noise, but also what you can see as you are getting into bed. If you are working from home and your bedroom has also become your office, try to rearrange things so that your bed is separated from your work-station as much as possible. You don't want to be thinking about work while you are trying to fall asleep! Additionally, if you live with someone, check in with them and talk about your routines, which may have been disrupted due to the current situation. Discuss what works and doesn't for each of you and compromise on something that works best for everyone.

Waking up

Waking up is related to falling asleep. Understandably, how we sleep influences how we wake up. However, we can still have an impact on how we wake up, even if we have not had a good night sleep. Having a morning routine can help you set the tone for the rest of the day and be able to confront it differently. Just like you check the oil for your car so that it lubricates the engine and absorbs heat so that it runs smoother, morning routines can do that for our physical, mental, and emotional health. Just as you don't want to fall asleep listening to the news, don't wake up to the sound of the news. Allow yourself to ease into the day before tuning into the word. Think about incorporating some exercise, as movement can help the body wake up. Additionally, among other benefits, regular exercise can help us sleep better. Although the gyms are closed, many of us are not commuting to and from work, and we have to practice social distancing, find ways to exercise at home or go outside and engage in the allowed recreational activities while staying safe (for Washington, DC: coronavirus.dc.gov/stayhome). If exercise is difficult, even stretching can be helpful! You can also go outside and walk around the block (while still practicing social distancing) and "commute" back to your home to start the workday.

Additional things you can incorporate into your morning routine can be: having breakfast, meditating, journaling, showering, and getting dressed (yes, don't stay in your pjs even if you are working from home! and yes, even if you are only dressing up from the waist up because of video conferencing, don't keep your pj bottoms on!). You can be as creative with your routines or as simple as you want to be. Try different things and keep up with it, as it can take a while to form a new habit. Moreover, keep in mind that the routine doesn't have to look the same every time, but you can have different tools in your tool belt that you can choose for a given time. Therefore, one morning you may feel more energized and want to go for a run, have breakfast, and write in your journal, or another morning, you just want to have coffee and take some deep breaths. That is ok, be kind with yourself as this is a particularly challenging time.

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