

## Getting a Good Night's Sleep

Sleep tends to get disrupted when there is underlying stress going on – so it's not surprising that at the beginning of a new school year or at exam time, some people start having problems, though, of course, sleep problems can hit at other times too.

It's also well-known that the teenage brain would actually prefer to go to bed in the small hours and get up late – which doesn't fit at all with the normal working day!

So teenage brain + stress + exams isn't a great combination where sleep is concerned.

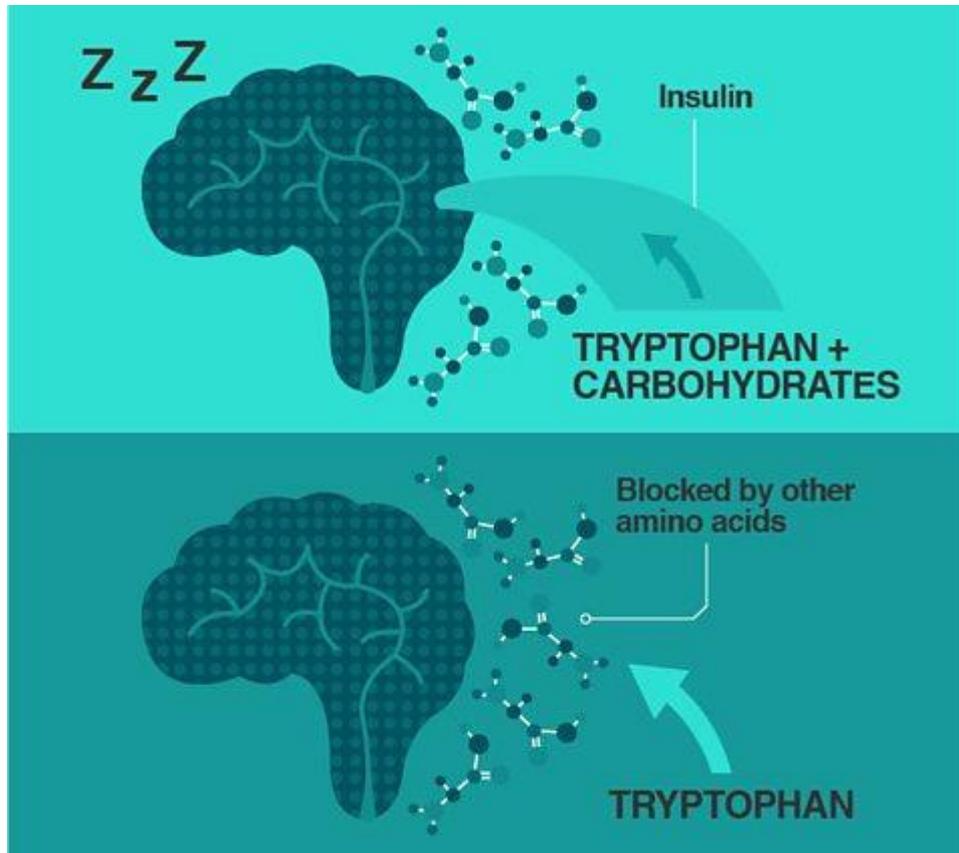
**What can you do about it? Well, quite a lot actually. Here are some tips:**

- Exercise, especially in the fresh air. Keep it going even through revision times.
- Stop school work an hour before you go to bed. Do something you enjoy **BUT**
- Avoid computer screens, TV and phone screens for at least half an hour, preferably an hour before you go to bed. Some devices come with an option to filter blue light so if yours does, use it. It's the blue light that seems to cause the problems. You may be able to get an app to do the job, if your devices don't have that option.
- Read something enjoyable but not too exciting for a short while before bed. Non-fiction is ideal as it's less likely to make you want to read on to find out what happens next!
- Pace yourself. Break up your homework or revision into chunks and have breaks. Avoid getting over-tired – it's harder then to settle to sleep.
- Switch your phone off!!! Your friends will have to manage without you for the moment! Preferably, put it in a completely different room for night-time. Even the light from it charging can disturb you.
- Make your room as dark as possible. Have you got lots of electronic devices emitting light? That can disturb you so turn them off at night.
- Encourage your core body temperature to drop for sleep – so stand in the cool of the garden for 5 minutes before bed or take the dog out for a gentle walk round the block. Or just take yourself! Some people take a warm bath because the core temperature will actually drop straight afterwards. Or you could try a late-night shower. One of my clients sat on his window ledge for a while before bed – but if you do that, make sure you are safe!
- Keep your bedroom cool and reduce your bedding if necessary. If you are finding you are wanting to stick your legs out from your duvet or only half-cover yourself, your duvet is too thick or your room is too warm. Turn the radiator off a couple of hours before bedtime and keep warm with extra clothing if you need to. Sleep with the window open. You need to be able to get snuggled up and cosy without getting too hot. Try a 4.5 tog duvet or even less. Some people prefer blankets. Weighted blankets are particularly recommended for good sleep. Ideally, the room should be cool and you keep warm with our PJs (if you wear them!) and your bedding.

- Try making your bed more like a snuggly burrow! It can help to put a couple of pillows lengthways down the bed behind your back and, if you want to, dig out your favourite teddy or soft toy to cuddle. Making quite an enclosed space to sleep in can take us back to what it was like in the womb and can make us feel very safe and secure, thus encouraging us to relax and sleep. Just don't get overheated!
- Avoid working in your bedroom if possible. Your brain needs to know that your bedroom is for sleep. If you can't, have 2 clear zones, one for work and one for sleep. **NEVER** do your work lying on your bed.
- Try to stick to the same bedtime and getting up time every day. This is very hard when you are a teenager as you are probably having to get up earlier than you naturally want to. But it's worth a try! If you tend to manage without much sleep during the week and then sleep in at the weekend, you can end up feeling much the same as when you're jet-lagged, most of the time!
- Are you going to bed too early? It's possible! If you just don't feel sleepy, you are unlikely to fall asleep! You may need to talk to your parents if they are sending you to bed before you are ready. You may have to persuade them to let you do something relaxing and pleasant – like reading or drawing – in your room, if they want some peace and quiet!
- Try a body scan just before bed to help settle you. This is a form of mindfulness meditation. Here's a link to some good free meditations: <http://franticworld.com/free-meditations-from-mindfulness/> There are loads of other meditations on the Mindfulness section of Firefly. Meditation is almost as restful as sleep!
- Avoid caffeine from 4pm onwards. That includes tea, coke and chocolate – it's not just in coffee!
- Avoid alcohol. It seems like it will help but it doesn't! When the depressant effect wears off, you are likely to wake up.
- De-stress. If stress is the problem, find the cause and deal with it. That's isn't necessarily easy – so you may need to talk to a trusted adult or get in touch with the school counsellors. If it's about not getting the grades you want, it's important to realise that there will be other options. The majority of people in the world do not have a string of A\*s and they are not necessarily unhappy or destitute! If you are worried about disappointing your parents, remember it is their choice to send you to a fee-paying school. Of course you should do your best but if you don't do as well as you hoped, remember that your parents are adults – if you do badly, it's their job to get over it and to support and help you.
- Deal with worries and fears. If you are lying awake worrying or feeling frightened, check out the Firefly sections on Anxiety and Exam stress. If there is stuff going on for you that is really scary, it's important to talk to a trusted adult such as a school counsellor.

## Sleep and Food.

What you eat and when can impact on your sleep.



Top: combining tryptophan with carbs in a meal helps tryptophan to reach the brain.

Bottom: Without the help of carbs tryptophan is more likely to be blocked by amino acids and not reach the brain.

Should we consume carbs or protein for a good night's sleep? The answer seems to be both.

### Tuck yourself in with tryptophan

Tryptophan is an amino acid that's believed to induce sleep. This is because it is a precursor to the sleep-inducing chemicals serotonin and melatonin, in the brain. Tryptophan is present in small amounts in most protein foods and in higher amounts in yoghurt, milk, oats, bananas, dates, poultry, eggs and peanuts.

For tryptophan to be effective, it has to cross the blood-brain barrier (the brain's security system). To do this it has to compete with other amino acids. Research suggests that combining tryptophan-rich foods with carbohydrates gives tryptophan an advantage.

Carbohydrates stimulate the release of insulin, which helps to clear other amino acids from the bloodstream and helps tryptophan reach the brain.

More research is needed in this area, and the amount of tryptophan in foods is still relatively small and may only have a modest effect.

### **Some other things to be aware of:**

- You could combine warm milk with carbs (eg. cereal or porridge) as it contains melatonin and tryptophan. The Chinese recommend rice for sleep so try rice pudding as a bed time snack!
- Chocolate contains caffeine so it might be better to have a malted milk hot drink at bedtime, rather than hot chocolate.
- Alcohol can lead to insomnia and waking in the middle of the night, even though it can send you off to sleep quickly. It also reduces your REM (rapid eye movement) sleep from about 7 episodes per night to about 2. This is one reason that you will wake feeling less refreshed after a night of drinking – it adds to the hangover effect.
- Water. If you are dehydrated, you will wake in the night thirsty – so stay hydrated all day.
- Camomile, Valerian and Passionflower all contain chemicals which are calming and can help sleep so herbal teas which contain one or more of these can help.
- Spicy foods. These raise the core body temperature and for sleep, you need to lower it. So, if you're going to eat chilli or curry, make sure you do so early in the evening, rather than later. A late night with curry and beer is a recipe for a really bad night!
- Sugar. High consumption is associated with anxiety and disturbed sleep. If you have a very sweet snack late in the evening, you can expect a 'quick fix' energy boost so you are more likely to have trouble settling to sleep. If you fancy biscuits late at night, try reaching for oatcakes instead, maybe with some peanut butter!
- Cheese has been associated with nightmares since the 17<sup>th</sup> century but there appears to be very little evidence for this belief.

### **When should you eat?**

Changing the timings of your meals could help you sleep better.

### **Reset your body clock**

Recent research suggests that the time of day you eat may affect your sleep. We all have an internal body clock that tracks the time of day and, it seems, a 'feeding clock' that tracks meal times.

The research shows that when a mouse eats at irregular times its body clock gets out of sync. When food is limited, the feeding clock overrides the body clock, keeping the mouse awake until it locates food. Studies with mice are not necessarily indicative of humans, but it is interesting to note that sleep patterns may be affected by eating patterns.

### **Get into a routine**

Sleep is all about routine. Forming regular eating patterns will make it easier to fall asleep in the evening. It is a good idea to eat dinner four hours before going to sleep and establish a ritual such as drinking a sleepy tea before bed.

### **Are you a lark or an owl?**

Research suggests that whether you're a morning or an evening person is determined by your sleep chronotype. The time of day you eat is predictive of your sleep chronotype: larks almost always eat breakfast within half an hour of waking, whereas owls are more likely to skip breakfast and eat late in the evenings.

### **If you really can't sleep:**

- Try some gentle brain games. The idea with these is to give your brain something just interesting enough to keep you occupied, without being exciting enough to keep you awake!
- Here are some examples:
- Count backwards from a high number
- Count in 2s backwards
- Count in 3s forwards or backwards
- Some people find it helps to imagine they are counting going down stairs, and at the bottom is sleep.
- Go through the alphabet, thinking of girls' and boys' names, one for each letter. Repeat if necessary. You can do the same with places names or foods or almost any category that is big enough!
- Start with any word. What word comes into your head next? And next? Just keep going.
- Start with any word. Think of a word that begins with its last letter – and
- Tell yourself a well-known story in your head. Eg a fairy tale
- Imagine yourself going on a journey that you take often and which you enjoy.
- Silently repeat prayers or poems that you know very well.
- Try the body scan and other meditations, lying in bed. Remember they are almost as refreshing as sleep and when you do fall asleep, your quality of sleep will be better, having done one or more.
- If you've been lying awake for twenty minutes or more and it's feeling hopeless, get up. You need your brain to associate bed with sleeping, not with lying awake! Do something that won't overstimulate you but you will enjoy. Reading a good book (not schoolwork) is good. So is having a bath, drawing, piano playing with headphones, gentle yoga or pilates. If it's OK with your parents, take a quiet walk outside. And I'm sure you have some other ideas for relaxing activities – but do avoid video games! Maybe have a small snack and a comforting drink – one that you associate with feeling relaxed and at ease – but not alcohol!!! Then go back to bed when you start feeling sleepy again.

- This breathing exercise – the 4 – 7 – 8 practice – can be really helpful. Go to this link to find it explained – and see if you can spot the cute dog in the background! 😊  
You'll need to practise this one though!
  - <http://www.drweil.com/drw/u/VDR00160/Dr-Weils-Breathing-Exercises-4-7-8-Breath.html>
- Avoid worrying about not sleeping. You will survive! It's not pleasant, but for all sorts of reasons people have to manage without much sleep at certain times eg. when they have small babies, when they are in a combat zone. Short-term, it doesn't impair functioning significantly and you don't need to catch up by the same number of hours as you have lost.
- If it works for you, consider watching some ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) videos. You will easily find some on Youtube. It's a case of trying things out to see what you like. The downside is that you will be looking at a screen (though you can just listen). The upside is that many people find them really relaxing. Sleep well! 😊
- There are also lots of sleep inducing tracks on Youtube such as whale song and the sound of rain. Try things out – see what helps you.

If you find something else that helps you to sleep well, do let me know.

[M.harper@warwickschool.org](mailto:M.harper@warwickschool.org) I am always looking for ideas to help other people.

Meg Harper, Head of Counselling

(Copyright)