

Tool 11: Sleep

If you haven't done it already, become aware of your energy levels and performance on days after a bad night's sleep. Good quality sleep is, essential for maximising your energy and performing at your best both of which help in combating stress.

More than a third of all adults in the UK have sleeping problems. If you think you are one of them then don't just accept it. There are many things you can do to improve the quality of your sleep, some of which are covered below.

Eat early to ensure good quality sleep

Are you eating and drinking less than 2 hours before you go to bed? It can take food up to 2 hours to fully digest, so if you do eat late you risk indigestion.

Drinking before you go to bed can also disturb your sleep, particularly if you drink coffee or tea as they act as a stimulant. However, some people do find that an early evening drink such as chamomile tea can help them sleep later on. Alcohol will also affect your sleep quality. It may help you fall asleep but it will also dehydrate you, causing you to wake early with a dry mouth and throat.

Empty your mind

Is your mind too active? Are you thinking about tomorrow's demands and challenges? If they are, try writing down all your plans for the following day before you go to bed to free your mind for sleep.

This is a simple but very effective technique. Anxiety always reduces when we increase our perception of control. The act of writing things down also means we don't have to worry about forgetting to do them. It also unclutters your mind and slows it down. It is better to avoid having things around that may trigger thoughts which could keep you awake. For example, keep work-related items (especially colleagues!) out of the bedroom.

Acquire relaxation skills

Everyone knows that you can't 'force' yourself to go to sleep any more than you can 'force' yourself to remember things. A very pleasant way to drift off to sleep is to practice physical and mental relaxation. In an earlier tool we discussed 'diaphragmatic breathing' as a way of calming yourself down in stressful situations.

This also works very well if you want to get to sleep. If you combine it with a visualisation of a peaceful scene it can be an enjoyable way of drifting off to sleep. Remember, relaxation and visualisation are acquired skills; so the more you practice them the easier they become. You can use your relaxation skills tape to help you relax whenever you want.

Nightly rituals

Nightly rituals, whatever they are, can also send a strong message to your unconscious that you are ready for sleep. Examples include listening to soothing music, having a bath or reading a novel in bed.

The above is certainly not an exhaustive list, but the main message is that you find, through trial and error, what works for you. And remember, we all need different amounts of sleep, so don't worry if you are not sleeping as much as your partner. They may need more than you do.