

FESTIVAL OF US

Everything you do, you'll do better with a good nights sleep' *Ariana Huffington*

They say that life is a balancing act; and this is so true when thinking about how we can counter the mental and physical demands of everyday life with effective recharge and the most important recharge mechanism we have is sleep. It is something we do for about a third of our lives, yet something that we pay little attention to and when done badly can have some disastrous effects; reports relating to Chernobyl, Three Mile Island, Exxon Valdez and Bhopal include fatigue or sleep deprivation as a factor.

Physiologically, a lack of truly restorative sleep has been linked with increases in blood pressure, resting heart rate and the hormone cortisol. Cortisol is a hormone that has some benefits as it helps regulate circadian rhythm, assists in the release of some of the bodies internal antioxidants and can boost the level of blood glucose (something that on occasion can be beneficial), however cortisol can also have a number of negative effects on the body. A persistent presence of this hormone can result in challenges to both body and brain. It can lead to a decrease in reproductive function, lowered immunity and protein synthesis, resulting in a decrease in muscle mass, an increase in abdominal fat and raised blood sugar levels.

In terms of our brain function, restorative sleep is fundamental as it will solidify memory, clear out toxins, enhance our cognition, and boost creativity. Whilst behaviourally fatigue can lead to being grumpy, forgetful, inconsistent, withdrawn, agitated and aggressive

So, if quality of restorative sleep is a challenge, what can you do to help?

1) Health-related Behaviours

- Do regular exercise – though try and avoid intense exercise late in the evening as this activity is a stimulant
- Finish eating around 2-3 hours before bedtime. This will vary depending on the size of a meal and also be aware that going to bed hungry is not good either
- Be aware of the effects of alcohol. It may well send you to sleep, but the body has to deal with the toxicity of the substance and therefore the quality of sleep is poor. As a general rule every unit of alcohol leads to one hours worth of poor quality sleep. Makes sense if you think about how you may feel when you wake up after a night out on the town
- Avoid stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine, and sugar

2) Environmental Factors

- Ensure the room is the right temperature for you
- As darkness is needed to trigger the sleep hormone melatonin make sure light sources are eliminated
- Avoid blue light, something that is released by mobile phones, ipads, TV screens, etc as it stimulates the release of dopamine (a hormone that makes us feel alert)
- Have a supportive and comfortable pillow and mattress
- Reduce or turn off any disruptive sounds

3) Sleep-specific Behaviours

- Stick to a regular sleep routine by trying to go to bed and wake up at similar times
- Avoid bringing any electronics into your bedroom – charging your phone outside your bedroom also has the benefit of getting you up in the morning when the alarm goes off!
- Go to bed when you are feeling sleepy – once you stick to a regular sleep routine you will be amazed at how your body learns when it's bedtime, making you feel sleepy at a specific time
- Stay in bed only as long as you are tired or asleep
- If you struggle to switch your mind off then consider creating a note 30 minutes before bedtime. I suggest the note is a list of what you have done today and what you need to do tomorrow. In many ways, this is the parking lot for the things that often whirl through the mind.