

The Importance of Sleep



At Blythe Valley Park, we are always keen to explore the subject of mental health, and how different factors in our lives can affect our mental health. Our Wellness at Work campaign researches these subjects, and we aim to provide tips and advice for our occupiers based what we find. We are now exploring the subject of sleep, and why sleep so important for our mental and physical health.

We all know that feeling after you've had a bad night sleep – you may feel groggy and keep yawning the next day, and it can even put us in a bad mood! Well, this is because sleep and mental health are strongly connected. Having poor sleep can increase our likelihood of having poor mental health, and poor mental health can make it harder for us to sleep.

Poor sleep may be one of the first symptoms of an anxiety disorder, but then trying to fall asleep when you're worried about something can be so difficult, and some people find it hard to stay asleep when worried and stressed – so this can become a bit of a vicious cycle!

Don't panic if you are struggling to fall asleep, there are plenty of tips available to help you get back to a healthy sleep regime. The Mental Health Foundation use the acronym HEAL for tips on a good night sleep:

Health – If you're experiencing issues with mental or physical health, then it's important to address these issues and get help from your GP, friends, family or a therapist. Once you begin to tackle the cause of the sleep problems (whether this be mental or physical), then you will often find your sleep improves.

Environment – Try to ensure that your bedroom environment is only associated with sleep. For example, try to avoid watching TV in your bedroom, or eating in bed, and even try avoiding looking at your phone before bedtime. If your bedroom is a sanctuary, only used for sleep, then bedtime should become a more relaxing experience, and hopefully it will become easier to fall asleep when you're not distracted by other things.

Other factors in your environment may affect your sleep, such as noise, light and temperature. Keeping a sleep diary noting down when you are experiencing poorer sleep may be helpful to recognise which factors are damaging your sleep patterns more than others.

Attitude – The times when it is most difficult to go to sleep are usually the times when we feel worried, have thoughts racing around our minds, or when we have a big event coming up. In the hours before bed, it's useful to use this time to 'wind down' and try to let go of some of those concerns and stresses. Perhaps try a mindfulness practice or have a warm bath or shower – these techniques can help to clear our minds, and prepare us for a more restful nights sleep.

If you still struggle to sleep, it can be useful to get up and make yourself a warm drink (not caffeinated!), perhaps a warm milk. Once you feel sleepier, you can then attempt to fall asleep again. Things you shouldn't do when you can't sleep is to look at a phone screen or TV, as the 'blue light' these devices emit can stimulate your brain, making it harder to fall back to sleep.

Lifestyle – Have you ever considered how the foods and drinks you have before bed can affect how easily you fall asleep? Sugary food late at night and caffeinated drinks, such as tea, coffee, or even fizzy drinks can stimulate your brain, and therefore your brain will not be ready to go to sleep when you want it to. Alcoholic drinks should also be avoided – they can make you feel more tired temporarily, but your actual quality of sleep is not as good when you've had an alcoholic drink.

Exercise during the day can help to make you feel more tired when it comes to bedtime. However, exercising late in the evening can release adrenaline, which can make you feel awake which is counterproductive!

Sleep doesn't only affect our mental health, it can also improve our physical health and how our brain functions. A study undertaken by Laura Lewis at Boston University discovered that "during non-REM sleep, large, slow waves of cerebrospinal fluid were washing over the brain". Lewis found that this cerebrospinal fluid flushes away toxins in our brains while we sleep; and therefore, preventing the toxins from accumulating in our brains. Sleep is not just something we do to relax and unwind, it is necessary in order for our brains to function properly and to be healthy! Laura Lewis' research is also looking into how our cerebrospinal fluid could help prevent neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's.

References

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