



Mental Wellbeing

We continue our series of articles by Dr Libby Artingstall and Dr Sile McDaid, Co-Founders and Directors of Team Mental Health.

A Wake-up Call to Sleep

Sleep is part of the natural rhythm of life and is an essential part of survival. It is a vital component to supporting good mental and physical health. We know that an average adult should have between 7– 9 hours sleep every night.¹

UK adults are some of the worst sleepers in Europe with a third reporting they suffer from disrupted sleep.² Poor sleep is associated with many physical health problems including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, Alzheimer's dementia and cancer. Sleep disturbance has also been linked to all major mental health problems including depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidality.^{3,4,5,6}

"The World Health Organisation has now declared a sleep loss epidemic throughout industrialised nations."³

Sleep deprivation can have a significant impact on work performance and is estimated to cost the UK economy up to £30 billion each year with up to 200,000 working days being lost annually.⁷ Legislation sets out that "Employers have a legal duty to manage risks from fatigue and sleep deprivation, irrespective of any of their workers' willingness to work extra hours or preference for certain shift patterns."⁸ It's important that employees recognise that they also have a responsibility to take reasonable care of their own health and safety.⁸

There are two major types of sleep: Rapid Eye Movement (REM) and Non-Rapid Eye Movement (NREM), which is composed of 3 stages. A normal pattern of sleep usually involves entering NREM, which is the deepest and most restorative sleep, followed by REM, in which the brain remains active and dreaming occurs. In very simple terms, during NREM sleep we are protecting our physical health and during REM sleep, it is our mental health that is protected. Typically, a night's sleep consists of four to five REM/NREM cycles with occasional brief episodes of wakefulness.^{3,4,9,10}

Our ability to sleep well can be influenced by three key factors:

- Circadian rhythm (our 24-hour internal clock regulating our sleep / wake cycle)
- Melatonin (a naturally occurring hormone which synchronises with our circadian rhythm)
- Adenosine (a chemical released as we expend energy and associated with wakefulness)^{11,12}

There are certain steps we can take to influence these factors in the right way to optimise our sleep patterns.

Top tips for getting good sleep:

- Ensure a good sleep routine with a set bedtime and wake-up time, even on weekends.
- Make sure your bedroom is calm and your bed comfortable
- Keep your bedroom cool (18.3 degrees C is the optimal temp)³
- Take time to relax and 'switch off' before bed time
- Avoid having screens (televisions, laptops, tablets and smart phones) in the bedroom, and if this isn't possible use 'night-time mode'

- Try and get exposure to natural light in the mornings and avoid bright lights in the evenings
- Take regular exercise throughout the week but avoid strenuous exercise 3 hours before bed
- Limit your caffeine intake (recommendations maximum 400mg / day for adults)¹³ and avoid caffeine for 6 hours before bed
- Be sensible about the amount of alcohol you drink
- Avoid larger and heavy meals before bed

Organisational top tips to protect your employees:

- Embrace sleep as part of your organisation's mental health and wellbeing strategy
- Educate on the importance of sleep
- Support employees to maintain a healthy work/life balance
- If work-related stress is identified, engage in risk assessment and management processes
- Encourage staff to use their annual leave entitlement
- Collaborate with employees so they are able to access professional support if they are in need

The new evidence that has emerged in recent years importantly highlights that sleep is not a luxury, it is a non-negotiable necessity to a healthy and long life. We all need to be educated about sleep and to make it a priority in ourselves and our workforce.

References

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