

# RESILIENCE TOOLS FOR UNCERTAIN TIMES

## RESILIENCE TOOLS: SLEEP HABITS (PART ONE)

Sleep has always been recognised as one of the key factors for our health and wellbeing. The oft –recommended seven to eight hours of sleep is important for our immune system, cardio-vascular health, and our mental well-being. It’s also massively important for our weight regulation – if you want to lose weight, you will have a much, much harder job in front of you if you also don’t get enough sleep. The recent book, “Why We Sleep” by Matthew Walker, surveys the research over the last twenty years and the weight of evidence now suggests that sleep is possibly even more important than diet and exercise in its impact on our wellbeing.

However, according to research more than half of us get less sleep than we should. What is going wrong?

Electrical lighting may be one of the culprits. Before the development of electricity people used to go to bed earlier. About two to three hours earlier. Midnight was called midnight because it was the middle of the night. Our busy lifestyles may also contribute to the problem.



## A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP STARTS BEFORE YOU GET INTO BED





## “ AMAZING BREAKTHROUGH!

Scientists have discovered a revolutionary new treatment that makes you live longer. It enhances your memory and makes you more creative. It makes you look more attractive. It keeps you slim and lowers food cravings. It protects you from cancer and dementia. It wards off colds and the flu. It lowers your risk of heart attacks and stroke, not to mention diabetes. You'll even feel happier, less depressed, and less anxious. Are you interested?

*Matthew Walker*



**M**any of the things that influence our sleep have nothing to do with what happens when we are in bed! This is a really important to get your head around. Below are eight things that will improve your sleep that have nothing to do with what happens when you lie in bed!

**1** Giving yourself the opportunity to sleep! You can be the best sleeper in the world, but if you don't give yourself the opportunity to sleep it isn't going to happen. Whatever your sleep patterns, try to calculate how you can spend at least 7 to 8 hours of time in bed. Set your alarm at the bedtime you need to go to bed. For many people, sleep levels can improve simply by going to bed earlier! A recent Dutch study identified a problem they called “sleep procrastination”. This problem, which they defined as, “failing to go to bed at the intended time, while no external circumstances prevent a person from doing so” was a highly significant problem that affected both sleep quality and individual wellbeing.

**2** As far as possible, eliminate light and outside noise from your bedroom. And keep your room cool. We sleep better when it's below 18 degrees. This is such an obvious point, but still has a big influence on your sleep quality. Try to approximate your bedroom to a cave. The darker, cooler and quieter it is, the better your sleep will be. (Light is really important – cells at the back of our eyes will detect light even when our eyes are closed! If you can't effectively block out the light in your room, consider a sleep mask.

**3** Be careful with caffeine. Caffeine keeps us awake. We all know this. But what is less well known is the amount of time it remains in your body. If you have a coffee at six o'clock in the evening, there will still be half the caffeine in your body at 12 midnight. You might not feel wide awake and buzzing. But, chemically, the caffeine will still be applying a brake to your body being able to move to sleep.

**4** Be careful with alcohol. Alcohol can be a night cap. It anaesthetises your brain and you eventually lose consciousness and sleep. However, as the body breaks down the alcohol, it gets turned into substances which keep you awake, or reduce your REM sleep. It is one of the most powerful drugs going for disrupting REM sleep. So, most regular drinkers will be having very poor sleep quality. (In fact, regular drinkers often feel knackered during the day, and often turn to alcohol to wake them up. From ‘night cap’ to ‘liverer’). This is a problem that gets particularly evident when people get into their forties, fifties and beyond.

**5** Stop eating a few hours before bedtime – our body is less likely to go into sleep mode when we are digesting food.

**6** Stop exercising a few hours before sleeping. Exercise warms up the body. And the body naturally needs to be slightly cooler for sleep to take place.

**7** Switch off the electronically lit gadgets an hour before bed. This will include smartphones, tablet computers, and even to a lesser degree televisions. The gadgets stimulate the brain and keep you awake. But even more importantly, the light emitted by the devices resembles daylight, and will send a message to your brain that it is daytime. Lots of research suggests that these light sources have an impact on how long it takes to get to sleep, your time in deep-sleep, and how rested you feel the next morning. But you don't notice this happening.

**8** Writing before bed. Research at US universities suggest that people spending five minutes on their to-do list for tomorrow get to sleep faster than those who write for five minutes about their completed tasks. Doing your to-do list can help prepare your mind for sleep – research in other areas suggest that having a plan is a good way of stopping



“ Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.  
*Benjamin Franklin* ”



## HABITS THAT CAN IMPROVE SLEEP

### KEEPING REGULAR

This is one of the most important bits of advice of all. It sounds incredibly boring, and unfortunately won't be possible to implement if you are doing shift work. The aim is simply to try to have a regular bedtime and getting-up time. People who do this tend to have a better regulated body-clock. (Every cell in your body will have circadian processes that regulate your body and sleep cycle!) The body clock becomes more powerful when it works to a regular sequence. According to data from Fitbit, people with regular times for going to bed and getting-up can experience about 40 minutes more sleep per night! Certainly worth trying out.

In our busy schedules few people can achieve perfect regularity. But we can all work at getting a little bit better in this respect. If you want more sleep you should be aiming to practice this important life habit. But, please note that if you do try to implement this you will initially find that you may get less sleep. For example, you may have lain awake for a few hours and fancy a lie-in to catch up with the missed sleep. However, if you are going to try to follow the routine you will be better off getting up at the same time irrespective of how much sleep you've had. It's a fact that many people with insomnia may initially get less sleep in trying to introduce some of these measures. But it is worth it in the longer run!

## KEEPING THE BED ROOM FOR SLEEP ONLY

Many people with sleep problems tend to do a lot of non-sleeping activities in bed. Hence, they do things like reading, working on a laptop, watching TV, doing crosswords. They do a lot of activities that aren't about sleeping. But we know that our brain works very powerful around associations. And what need to do is rebuild the association between being in bed, and being asleep. So, this is something else you might want to consider. In fact, one other activity can be allowed in the bedroom. Yes, you've guessed it. It's sexual activity. This is probably because it is traditionally an activity that people do in bed, and it can be a precursor to sleep. So, sleep and sex should be the only things you do in bed. Everything else should be banned!

## HIDE THE CLOCK

This is tricky, but many people with sleep problems can get into a real battle with the time. As they lie awake, trying to force themselves to sleep, they are often repeatedly checking on the time. And the time then puts pressure on you to sleep in the remaining time available. The more pressure you feel, the less likely you are to sleep. The best advice for insomniacs is to remove the clocks (or turn them to face the wall if you need them for an alarm). This can seem strange when you wake up in the night, and you wonder how much time you have left before you need to get up. But, the research would suggest that it's best not to know.

Remember, changing your sleep is a long term goal. There are no quick fixes. It's about trying to gradually tinker with things that may not be supporting a good night's sleep.



“ A good laugh and a long sleep are the two best cures for anything. ”  
*Irish Proverb*

## SLEEP RESOURCES

It is really worth exploring resources to get some better sleep. Research suggests that people following up on this kind of advice can get about 75% improvement in sleep quantity and quality.

**BEST ONLINE RESOURCE :** A really good free programme that can give you individualised plans for increasing your sleep can be found at [clearerthinking.org](http://clearerthinking.org) . They have a really good programme called “40 Winks: Better Sleep Made Easily”. You build a programme and it will email regular reminders.

**BEST BOOK:** I recommend “The Sleep Book” by Guy Meadows. It's short, easy to read and has some great advice.

In Part 2 of this guidance I will discuss some of the things we can do to improve sleep when we are lying in our bed. Mainly this is to do with how we calm our busy minds when our head is on the pillow. It's also about trying to have get less wound up about not sleeping.

**Kevin Simpson, Chartered Clinical Psychologist,** has been delivering a number of resilience training sessions to police personnel in Cornwall, Devon and Dorset.