A Guide to Good Sleep During Difficult Times

Sleepio NHS OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Introduction

COVID-19 has changed the way we all live and work. For many people, this stressful period may present a real challenge to mental health and to sleep in particular. Sleep is a cornerstone of our health, so protecting it is important. Here, we've developed a brief guide to help you do just that.

1. Keep sleep regular with a regular rise time and routine

Regular routines are great for sleep. The trouble is that we can easily get out of routine during periods of stress. The daily 'tick' of our body clock is known as our circadian rhythm. It affects pretty much all aspects of how our bodies run, including our sleep. The main signal keeping the clock on time is light, something that we get each morning when we wake up. Keeping a regular wake up time each morning, and so getting a regular dose of light, is a good way to keep our sleep periods regular. That applies even to weekends as the body can't tell the difference. We do lots of other things throughout the day that also act as 'time-stamps' or zeitgeibers (literally, 'time-givers'). These time stamps include mealtimes and physical exercise. Keeping a regular rhythm helps to keep sleep timings predictable for the body and makes it easier for us to get a good night's sleep.

> " Keep a regular routine where possible, e.g. exercise and meal times.

2. Keep the bed and bedroom dedicated to sleep

Most of us are probably spending much more time inside than we would usually do. This might mean that we start using the bedroom for things like watching television or working. If you can, protect your bedroom for sleep and keep non-sleep activities outside. This helps our brains to associate being in bed with being asleep - something that is really helpful for healthy sleep. The opposite - spending time in your bedroom not sleeping (e.g. working, worrying, watching television, eating) - is likely to weaken that association between bed and sleep, which will make it less easy for the body to predict when sleep is going to take place. We want to make things easy for the brain, so it knows that when you're in bed, it's time for sleep.

> " If you have to use your bedroom for work, keep it separate from your bed and clear it away at the end of the working day.

For Snoozing Only

3. Develop a wind-down routine

Giving the body and mind enough time to get ready for bed is an important part of healthy sleep. The problem is, when we are 'go-go-go' all day and then get into bed, our brain doesn't have an opportunity to wind-down and let go of the day. Developing a wind-down routine for the hour or two before bed is a great way to prepare your brain and body for sleep. One technique that people find helpful is to dedicate 15 minutes of their evening, around two hours before you go to sleep, to 'put the day to rest'. This involves taking a pen and paper and tying up any loose ends from the day, making a list of all the things that you need to remember for the next day and making a plan to deal with them.

Then leave the paper, along with all the mental content, somewhere safe and obvious. You can come back to it in the morning.

> " Spend 15 minutes at the end of the day to 'put the day at rest' by writing down nagging thoughts and tasks so you can relax before bed.

to-do tomorrow:

- water the tulips
- call the landlord
- pick up dry cleaning
-

4. Protect sleep from competing demands

With many of us working from home, it is likely that there are plenty of demands on our attention throughout the day. Perhaps you have kids at home whilst you are working, or you're checking your phone more often than usual for news updates, or you're finding it hard to switch off from work at the end of the day. The trouble is that this feeling of being alert and 'on edge' can stop us relaxing properly, which can in turn impact sleep. This is important to deal with well before sleep because it can take time to relax completely before nodding off.

A simple way to give yourself space in which to wind-down properly is to keep phones, technology and work emails away from the bedroom and put them away well before you begin your evening wind-down to sleep.

" Keep phones and technology well away from the bedroom.

5. Keep active

Nightly sleep and daily activity are like two sides of the same coin. With social isolation and working from home, many of us are probably experiencing very different activity patterns to those we are used to. Although important for general health, activity levels are also important because they have effects on our sleep. If you're struggling to maintain activity, then building activity into your routine may help it stick. When working from home, one idea might be to mimic the journey into work each day by taking a morning stroll and spending brief breaks during the day doing some enjoyable physical activity, such as aerobics or yoga.

Although it will vary from person to person, the general rule of thumb is to limit vigorous physical exercise to the morning and afternoon, leaving the evenings for winding down and readying the body for sleep.

"Try and limit vigorous activity to the morning and afternoon, where possible.
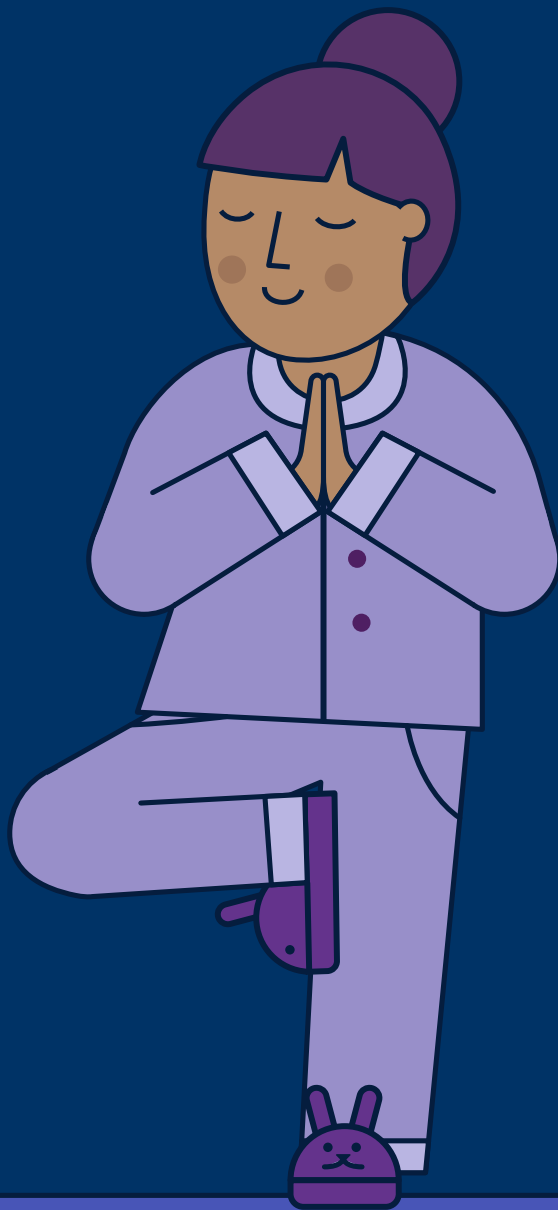
6. Keep sleep for the night-time

As humans, we've evolved to be active during the day and to sleep at night. Where we're awake and active during the day, we build up something that is known as 'sleep-pressure'. This is the delightful sleepiness that builds throughout the day and helps us drift off when we get to bedtime. When working from home and being less physically active, we may spend more time resting or even napping during the day. The trouble is that this can leave us without enough sleep pressure at bedtime to help us drift off to sleep. Keeping sleep for night and not napping during the day is the best way to ensure that your sleep pressure is topped up when it comes to bedtime!

> " Try not to nap during the day to help build up your 'sleep pressure' for bedtime.
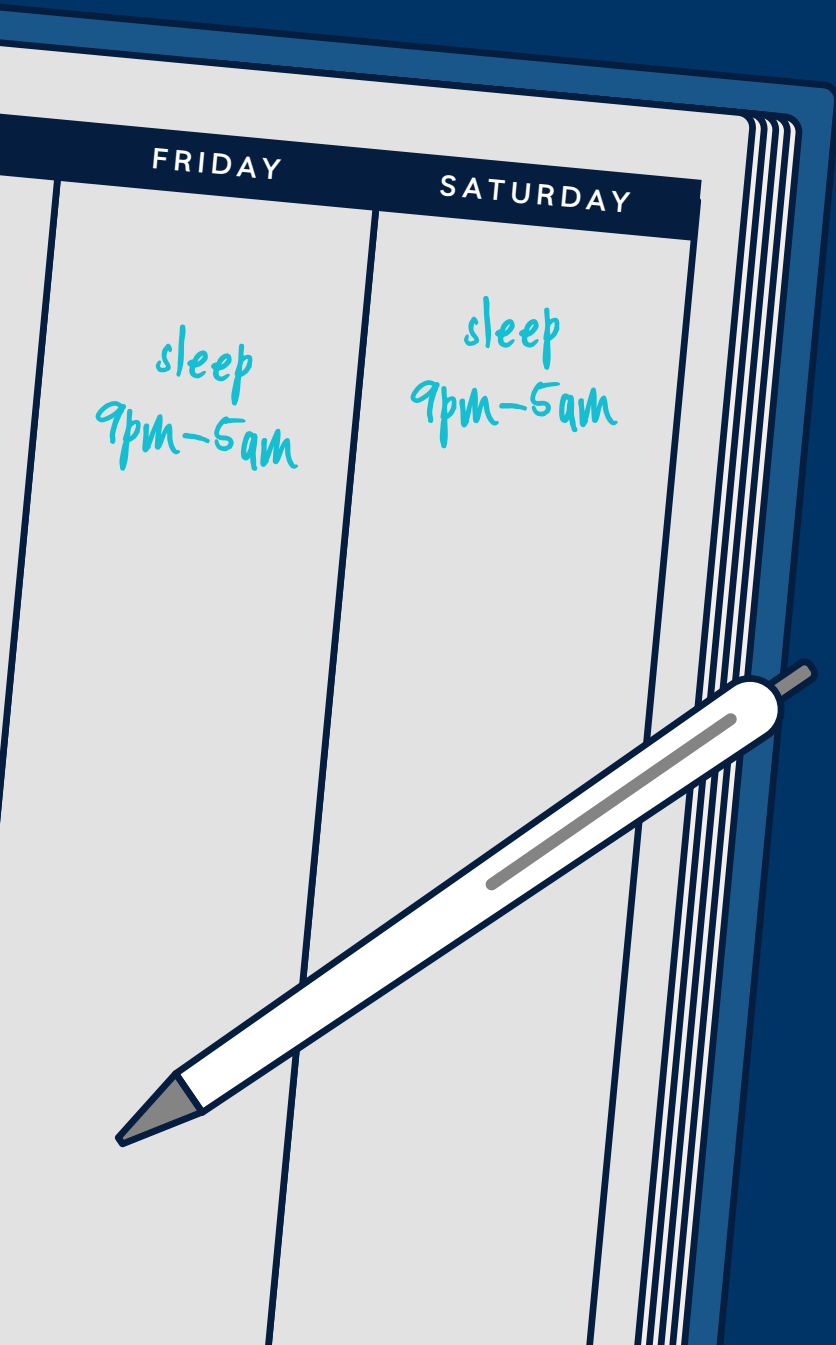
7. Keep sleep the same on weekdays and weekends

Sleep prefers a consistent rhythm, which means getting up and going to sleep at a similar time each day. Remember, the body can't tell the difference between a weekday and a weekend. If you find yourself having a long lie-in on the weekend, it's likely that you're not getting enough sleep during the week. Making sure that you're giving yourself enough time to get the sleep you need during the week, and keeping it the same on both weekends and weekdays, helps the body to manage and predict sleep periods. This makes good sleep easier to come by.

> " Try not to have long lie-ins at the weekend. If you feel like you need one, you are likely not getting enough sleep during the week!

FRIDAY

SATURDAY

sleep
9pm–5am

sleep
9pm–5am

Summary

During these difficult and unusual times, prioritising sleep for you and your family is as important as ever.

✦ Keeping a regular routine in terms of activity and sleeping patterns is important, and helps make sleep predictable for the body clock.

✦ Protect your bedroom from non-sleep activity and technology that might disturb sleep; make it your own sleep oasis.

✦ Give yourself time to wind-down and relax in the evening, including at least an hour of dim light to allow the body to get ready for sleep.

✦ Stay active during the day and keep up some regular and enjoyable physical exercise as part of your routine.

✦ Keep sleep for night and don't nap during the day; give your body plenty of time to build up the sleep pressure it needs before bed.

✦ Keep your sleep the same throughout the week - remember, the body can't tell the difference between a weekday and a weekend.

Getting these principles into action can be a powerful way to maintain healthy sleep or get it back on track. However, if you have a long-standing sleep problem, don't hesitate to get in touch with your local healthcare provider to access the help you need.

Sleepio

Having trouble sleeping?

Sleepio is an online sleep improvement programme based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Over six weekly sessions, you will learn tools and techniques to help get your sleep back on track.

To learn more about the programme visit www.sleepio.com/nhs

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Welcome to the Sleepio Sleep Test

I'm going to ask you a few short questions to find out your Sleep Score and how we can help.

Get started

Learn how Sleepio works

MacBook