

# THE SLEEP SPOILERS

---

## 10 THINGS THAT INTERFERE WITH HEALTHY SLEEP

In order to sleep well, when you want to and to wake feeling rested, it's vital to develop helpful habits around sleep. It's almost as important to understand your BELIEFS about sleep. This lesson is an overview which raises questions about both, and provides you with some useful pointers. I call them Sleep Spoilers, and there are 10 of them.

Sleep spoilers are regular and perpetual aspects of how you approach sleeping. The basic contention here is that you DO know how to sleep, so it's not a new skill you have to learn. However, there are some common spoilers that disrupt sleep, and these often arise from your existing habits.

Guidelines for correcting avoiding these sleep spoilers will be given in more detail in a later lesson. External factors will also be covered later. This lesson is about you to can change, like your routines and beliefs.

Paradoxically, some of these unhelpful habits come from our attempts to solve the problem of sleeplessness. Alcohol, for example, may help you get to sleep, but can also it ruin the quality of sleep, so it's a strategy that is counter-productive.

Let's take a look at some of the main Sleep Spoilers:

### YOU DON'T 'WIND DOWN' FOR SLEEP

It is essential to prepare for a good night's sleep by relaxing beforehand. If you rush in from working late or a long drive, you'll need to allow yourself time to settle in readiness for bed.

Personally, I think that this should be done outside the bedroom. By all means, prepare for bed by taking a shower and getting into pyjamas if you wish, and that may be sufficient. But after a long hard day, especially if it was stressful, you'll probably need a little longer to 'disconnect' and settle your mind.

Don't expect to be ready for a good night's sleep if you go to bed agitated, wound-up, tense or worried about the activities of your day, or if you have kept yourself busy right up to bedtime. People often say that they 'don't have time' to relax in the evening, because they have too much to do. There's no simpler answer to that than to realise that if you allow things to encroach into what should be your 'down-time', then it's likely that the amount of sleep you get, its quality, or both, will suffer.

Reading, chatting with a partner (about nice stuff, not a rehash of work problems, they can wait until the next day), music or even a little non-challenging TV (avoid the news at all costs).

Winding down before bed ensures that you'll be sleepy when you get there.

## YOU DON'T HAVE A REGULAR BEDTIME

Like any regime aimed at good health, your sleep routine is not only a timetable, it's a message to your body and your mind about what to expect at certain times in each 24-hour cycle. If you are in the habit of eating at regular mealtime, you'll know what happens when they don't happen as expected. Your tummy starts rumbling and/or you feel hungry at the appointed time anyway!

Like any regime aimed at good health, your sleep routine is not only a timetable, it's a message to your body and your mind about what to expect at certain times in each 24-hour cycle. It's the same as if you are used to regular mealtimes. You'll know what happens when meals are missed or don't happen as expected. Your tummy starts rumbling and/or you feel hungry at the appointed time anyway!

Good sleep habits involve training yourself with regular times for sleeping and waking. This means not only going to bed at the same time each evening, but also getting up and getting on with your day at a preset time in the morning.

## YOUR MIND WON'T SLOW DOWN

Rumination is one of the most common sleep spoilers, and one that people complain about most often. Rumination means that you obsess about something, and often it is something you can't change. It may be that you are worried about the consequences of not getting enough sleep, or that you are mulling over events of the day or some problem or other.

Apart from stopping you sleeping, there are clear links between rumination and other negative consequences, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, binge-drinking and even disordered eating.

Stopping rumination can seem tricky if you don't know how, but it is a learnable skill to calm the mind so that it behaves the way you want it to. The simplest way to do this is with Relaxation Techniques like mindfulness or progressive relaxation. Use the downloadable exercises provided with this course to learn these.

## STRESS AND WORRY

Stress is the enemy of sleep. If you go to bed tense – even though you may be able to relax your body – the mind is still active. In bed, our thoughts are left free to wander where they will. Feeling anxious about getting enough sleep will only make it worse, and anxiety is linked to rumination.

Simple, pre-bed routines can help you put the stress and worry on one side, and to get into the right frame of mind to prepare for sleep. Light exercises (simple yoga stretches for example) before bed can counter the effects of stress by helping you 'switch off', as can any absorbing activity such as a hobby, listening to music, reading...., and of course mindfulness and relaxation referred to earlier.

Learning stress management techniques is covered in a later lesson. In relation to preparing yourself mentally and physically for sleep by first de-stressing, consider taking little 'stress-busting' breaks throughout the day. That way you can reduce the build-up so that you don't have to do it all at once later on.

## IGNORING THE REST-ACTIVITY CYCLE

Understanding your natural rhythms can help you balance your life in many ways. Though you probably won't be aware of it until it's pointed out to you, we all experience the natural ebb and flow of physical and mental energy known as the rest-activity cycle. This is a biological rhythm of waxing and waning alertness; This consists of periods of about 90 minutes where we are fully alert, alternating with approximately 20-minutes of 'down time'. During sleep, this controls our cycles of REM and slow-wave sleep.

Recognising and respecting the rhythm means that you can maximise both the 90-minute 'up-time', and make use of the 20-minute interval where you are less energetic and outwardly focused. In practical terms this is one of the most powerful ways of preventing a build up of stress during the day.

## MENTAL STIMULATION

One way that rumination can get a toe-hold in our minds is because we remain alert, when we should be dropping off to sleep. We've covered a couple of steps that can help avoid this, and here are some others to consider

Unhelpful habits in this department are among the easiest to change.

Be careful about what you feed the mind with just before bed. Watching the news, with its often graphic and alarming images, can intrude on your senses and is unlikely to set the scene for a serene and relaxing bed-time. In my book, it should be avoided at all costs (and that includes vicarious consumption because the person next to you is watching it).

Likewise, thrillers, cliff-hangers and scary movies are not designed to be calming. Emotional arousal is the stock in trade of every competent film director and story teller. Drama works on our emotions, and hyping yourself up just when you need to be winding down for bed is a bad idea.

## ELECTRONICS IN THE BEDROOM

It's nearly impossible to avoid computers or phones before bedtime, but if you want to ensure a good night's sleep, it is good advice.

Our electronic devices act as a constant reminder of social or work activity, and as such help keep the mind stimulated.

Social media is a common culprit here, so is catching up on email. Apart from the mental stimulation these apparently aimless activities induce, there's also some debate about the light emitted the screens of electronic devices. It sets the brain in 'alert' mode at precisely the time we need to be shutting down for the night. As you'll see in another lesson in this Unit, 'No Electronics in the Bedroom', is a safe rule to follow.

Mobiles go one step further with some studies suggesting that the radiation given off by our handsets may be disturbing sleep. Then there's the risk of late-night texts, calls and e-mails which can wake you without you even realising it.

## TOO LITTLE EXERCISE

Regular exercise during the day improves sleep. Studies have shown that exercise improves sleep; it reduces the time it takes to get to sleep, and it increases total sleep time.

To ensure that exercise is promoting sleep rather than disturbing it, avoid the gym before bedtime. The earlier you exercise out, the better you'll sleep.

Vigorous exercise close to bedtime though can have the reverse effect.

## ALCOHOL AND STIMULANTS

Coffee, alcohol, and other stimulants are detrimental to sleep. Even if you manage to go to sleep, they can reduce both the length and depth of restorative sleep.

Caffeine makes it harder to fall asleep and can result in more time in the lighter stages of sleep, with less deep sleep. It's not just coffee; many soft

drinks contain caffeine and other stimulants which can stay in your system for many hours.

Although alcohol can help some people fall asleep, too much of it may disrupt sleep. A moderate amount of alcohol (more than a small glass) consumed within an hour of bedtime appears to disrupt the second half of the sleep period.

Too much alcohol close to bedtime means we bypass the normal first stage of sleep and go straight into deep sleep. Coupled with that, we usually have six to seven cycles of REM sleep each night, which leaves us feeling refreshed. After an evening of drinking we'll typically have only one to two REM cycles, and so wake up feeling exhausted.

## TAKING WORK TO BED WITH YOU

A major sleep spoiler comes from the idea that you can cram more into your day by allowing your work time to encroach at bedtime. No matter how busy you are, allowing your work or other tasks to invade your sleep-space is a no-no.

If you really need to catch up on work then the last thing you should be doing is lowering your energy levels and getting tired due to lack of sleep. The odd burst of activity – working extra late to meet a deadline for example – is OK if you can handle it. But this should be rare not regular, and even then, don't take it to bed with you.

## RULES MAY BE BROKEN

Like all dictates, there are times when you can safely ignore these Golden Rules. If you are well rested, and for some reason or other you think it's OK to break them, then you can take a chance. But if you are a victim of poor sleep, these correcting these sleep spoilers can provide the marginal gains you need to begin to restore more satisfying sleep habits, and all the associated benefits that will bring.