

Let's talk about *Sleep*

Sleep is such an important building block for your young people's mental and physical health, but if you are finding it hard to help your young person sleep, you are not alone! According to research, sleep issues can affect between 25-50% of children and 40% of teenagers.

Understanding their sleep needs is a great first step towards better sleep – through a combination of sleep hygiene (sleep education), routines and, you can help your young person get what they need to grow up strong and healthy.

Why is sleep important?



Improves attention and concentration

The brain organises and processes all the information from the day, converting it from short term memories to long term memories

Sleep encourages the development of new pathways in the brain to help us learn new things



The body is given time to rest and repair

Supports the immune system to detect and destroy any sign of illness

Production of growth hormone, which is a hormone essential for strength, energy, body structure maintenance and metabolism

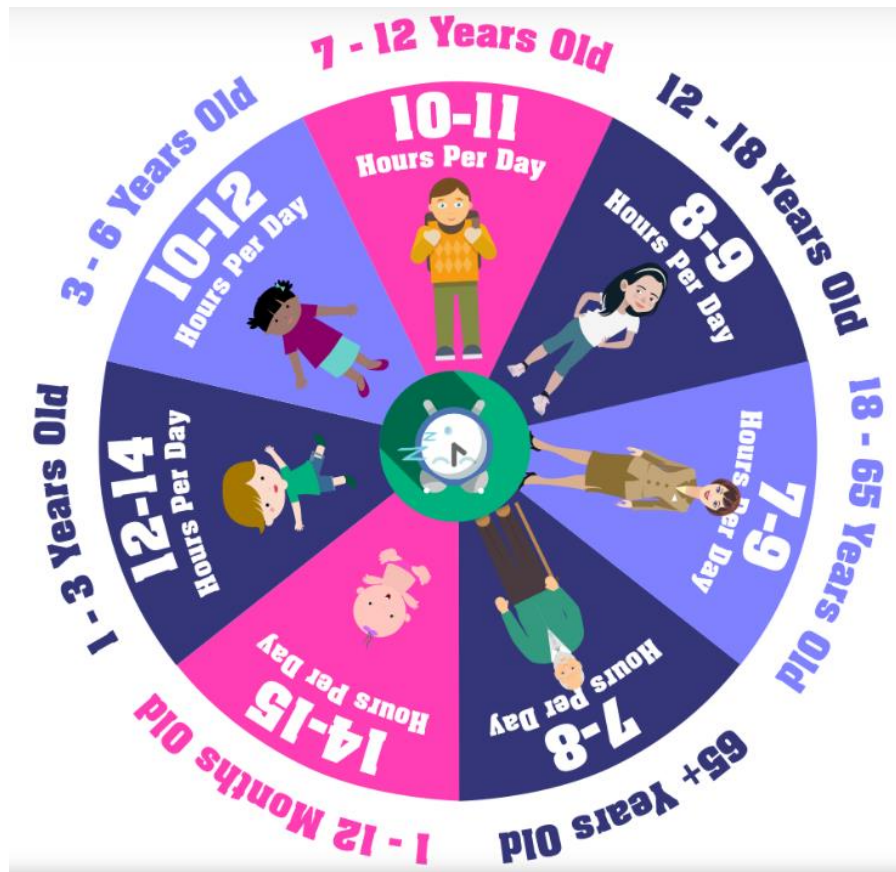
Encourages hormone regulation, e.g. hormone for stress (Cortisol)



Helps with regulation emotion by making sure the amygdala (a part of our brain that manages our emotion) is functioning correctly, otherwise you may notice:

- Mood changes e.g. irritability, stress, anger, anxiety, low mood
- Behavioural changes e.g. more impulsive, emotional outbursts, hyperactivity

As we have covered, sleep serves restorative and rejuvenating purposes, processing what has happened during the day, whilst getting ready for the next. I am sure we are familiar with the effects of a bad nights' sleep!



This diagram shows the recommended amount of sleep for each age group, including naps and night-time sleep. However, the amount of sleep we need varies from person to person but research has suggested that 25% of CYP aren't getting the right amount of sleep for them.

Primary sleep amount: 10-11 hours

If you are concerned that your young person not getting enough sleep, it might be helpful to consider these questions:

1. Is their functioning being affected? This would be in terms of any observed changes in their behaviour/ concentration/ learning/ ability to manage their emotions.
2. Do they find it difficult to wake up in the morning?

3. Do they often go back to bed or nap if possible?

4. Are they irritable during the day?

Having naps throughout the day is a very debated topic, as naps are very much dependent on the individual, therefore there is some flexibility with this. Some research shows that naps do affect sleep negatively, whereas other research report inconclusive results.

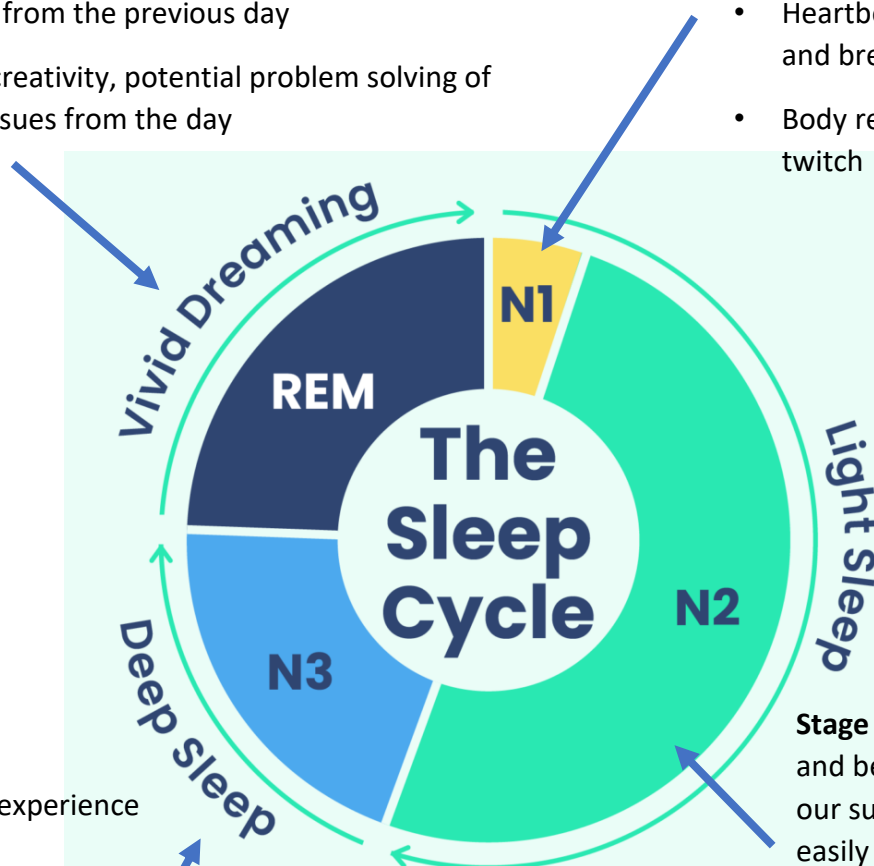
A bit of science: sleep stages

Stage 4, Rapid Eye Movement, is the dream stage

- Consolidation of memories and knowledge from the previous day, to be stored in long term memory
- Form of emotional first aid, working through the emotions from the previous day
- Boost of creativity, potential problem solving of difficult issues from the day

Stage 1 is the lightest sleep stage, the transition period between wakefulness and sleep

- Brain and body will start to slow down and relax
- Heartbeat, eye movements, and breathing slows down too
- Body relaxes, muscles may twitch



Stage 3 is when we experience our deepest sleep

- Most important for physical recovery – growth hormone is released, body is recharging the immune system

Stage 2 is when we're asleep and becoming less aware of our surroundings, but can easily be woken up

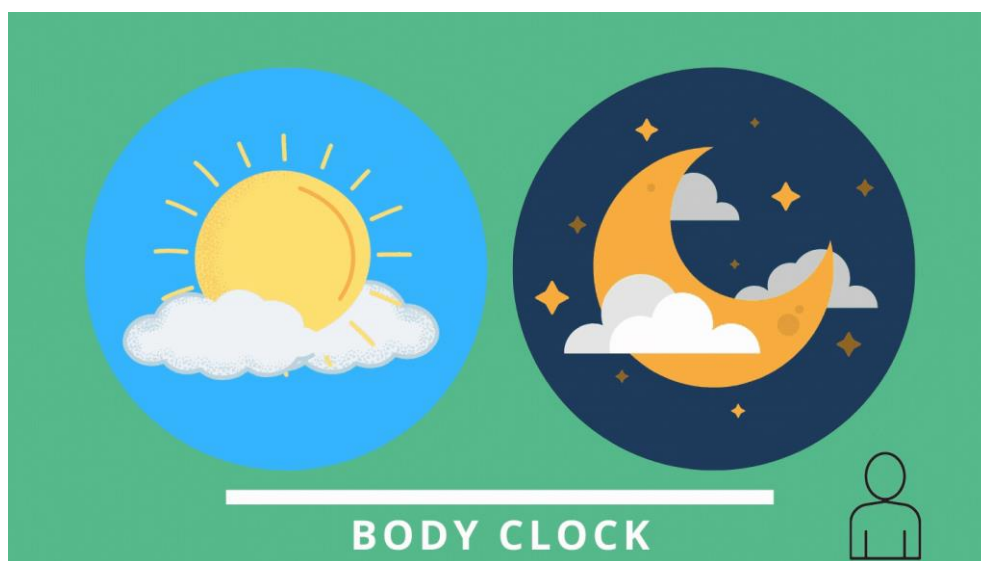
- Drop in core temperature
- Eye movement stops
- Brain waves slower
- Breathing and heart rate becoming regular

Our total sleep is made up of several rounds of the sleep cycle, where a person can go through this sleep cycle 4 to 6 times, with each cycle lasting about 90 minutes each time.

Understanding the sleep stages and what occurs in each stage is important as it does really emphasise that sleep is our number one recovery tool. From this overview of the sleep stages, we can see the significance of the sleep cycle for our physical and emotional recovery.

If we're not getting the amount of sleep we need, it usually has a significant impact on the REM stage, as we get the majority of this later in the cycle. It's REM sleep, alongside stage three sleep in particular, that can really increase wellbeing.

A bit of science: our body clock



We all have something called a circadian rhythm, which is our 24hr internal body clock. The aim of this body clock is to help manage the completion of essential functions and processes throughout the day; one of the most important being our **sleep-wake cycle**.

Our sleep-wake cycle is directly influenced by the environment, specifically light and darkness

- When it's dark, a small part of our eyes sends this information to the brain to start the process of becoming tired.

- When it's light, this restarts our circadian rhythm. Our sleep-wake cycle also works with other processes, with Melatonin and sleep pressure contributing towards better quality sleep.

A bit of science: Melatonin



Melatonin is a natural hormone that is produced in the brain, and then distributed through the bloodstream. Melatonin is also known as the sleep hormone, as it's a hormone that promotes restful sleep by supporting our body clock.

We have more melatonin at night-time as darkness promotes the production of it. The more melatonin we feel, the sleepier we feel. We have less melatonin in the morning as the light stops the production of the melatonin, which then prompts us to wake up. So light and dark encourage this hormone to either increase in production or stop.

As we will find out later, melatonin can be affected by technology.

Tips and strategies



CIRCARDIAN RHYTHM, OUR BODY CLOCK

The sleep/wake cycle loves routine, so having different times of going to sleep or waking up can lead to difficulties in waking, falling asleep, or getting enough sleep in the future. If we get up at different times each day, the body doesn't know when to prepare for waking up – when we wake up unexpectedly, this can cause that groggy feeling in the morning.

Interestingly, the body starts preparing to wake up about one hour before we actually wake!

What could help?

- Wake up and go to sleep at the same time each day (1 hour difference at most on weekends).
- Spending at least 30 minutes each day in natural sunlight, as it can help support the waking up process.



MELATONIN, THE SLEEP HORMONE

The use of screens at night and even during the day can affect this production negatively. Screens emit a certain light which can halt or slow down the

production of Melatonin, so at night, individuals may find that it takes them longer to feel sleepy or fall asleep quicker.

What could help?

- Avoiding computers, smartphones or other blue light-emitting devices in the hours leading up to bedtime (minimum of 1 hour before bedtime).
- Making the bedroom a screen-free zone.
- Keeping the bedroom lights dim.
- Decrease electronic use/set a limit on how long screens can be used for.
- Use of night mode on technology.



As humans, we thrive on routine as it's something that can be guaranteed and in our control. A bedtime routine is a consistent and repetitive set of activities that are completed before bed every night, even if it's the weekend, half term or in other places that aren't home e.g. on holiday.

It can help give your young person a sense of security, and teach them to fall asleep on their own. Given that their day may be full of situations or experiences that were unexpected, them knowing that they have a guaranteed routine in the evening before falling asleep can give them that sense of security.

Research has shown the following:- bedtime routines can result in young people being more likely to go to sleep earlier, fall asleep quicker, sleep longer, wake up less during the night; can strength parent/carer-child relationships; improve mood, stress levels and behaviour.

Below are just some suggestions of what activities can be included in a bedtime routine. It has been suggested that a bedtime routine should last ***no longer than one hour***, it would include ***3 to 4 activities*** that are implemented every night.



Bath/shower



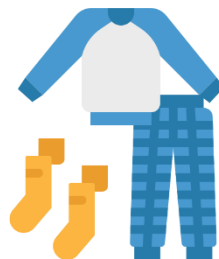
Brush teeth



Read a book



Affection/time with parent



Put on PJs



Listening to music



Calming/relaxation techniques

Understandably, it can be hard to keep consistent with a routine, but the main crux of a bedtime routine is to encourage relaxation and getting ready for bed.

Calming music could be swapped with a bedtime story or breathing exercises, chatting about the day may have been done already on the way back home from school or when you have just got back home from school, so something could replace that. As long as the bedtime routine is around the same time before bed!

Calming and relaxation techniques can include some breathing exercises. Another technique that could promote relaxation is something called Progressive Muscle Relaxation. PMR is a deep relaxation technique that involves tensing one muscle group at a time, then releasing the tension. We tend to carry tension in our muscle group, which may be a signal of stress or anxiety throughout the day, so relieving ourselves of this tension may be beneficial before going to sleep. *There are plenty of Youtube videos specifically for young people to help with this.*

Creating a bedtime routine is a collaborative exercise between you and your young person, and it can be creative and personalised to them. This may encourage them to buy into this idea, because of course they may be tempted to stay up later to do other things! A visual timetable could be created together to map out what the bedtime routine would look.

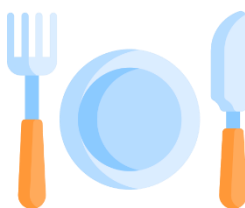
Before the bedtime routine

EXERCISE



Exercising daily can be helpful for a good night's sleep, but only when it's earlier in the day, not before bed.

Exercise can tire us out, which can promote better sleep at night. The term of exercise can cover a variation of movement, from just being active, walking, to a workout. Before bed however, it's better to do lower-intensity exercises, such as yoga or walking.



MEAL TIMES

It's advised to not eat a meal too close to bedtime (2 to 3 hours before) as it can affect the natural release of Melatonin.

If we go to bed hungry, we can be distracted by this and therefore struggle to sleep. If we go to bed right after a big meal, this gives our body energy, which fuels our brain, which in turn, keeps us awake. It's also difficult for our body to absorb food properly when lying down.



CAFFIENATED DRINKS

It has been suggested that caffeine levels can remain high in our blood for 6-8 hours, therefore drinking caffeinated liquids after 3-4pm is not recommended.

Caffeine affects the sleep pressure that is usually built up throughout the day. The more sleep pressure we have, the sleepier we feel. Caffeine can affect this process, which can make us alert and vigilant still.



NAPPING

Try to limit napping during the day, or napping for a long time, as it can confuse the internal body clock.

This is the general rule when it comes to napping, but as suggested earlier, napping is very debatable! Throughout the day, we are building up our sleep pressure to fall asleep when it's time for bed. A useful way of imagining this is by viewing your young person as being a car full of fuel at the beginning of the day. During the day, fuel is being used due to being at school. Bed is like the petrol station, so when it's bedtime, your young person is filling up with fuel, readying themselves for the next day. Napping may interfere with the end of the night fuelling.



THE BEDROOM ENVIRONMENT

A relaxing bedroom environment can contribute towards a good night's sleep. Research has shown that people simply sleep better when their bedroom accounts for light and noise levels, temperature, and comfort.



TEMPERATURE: a cool room temperature can promote a good night's sleep, temperatures ranging from 15 to 21 degrees.

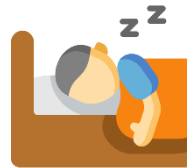


LIGHT: using dimmer lighting in the bedroom so that melatonin production isn't affected, before sleep.



NOISE: noise can cause sleep disruption, with slight noises shifting individuals to lighter sleep stage or to wake up momentarily.

It would be best for the bedroom to be as quiet as possible, by blocking outside noises. Soothing music may effectively mask other sounds and help your young person to fall asleep for example.



BED SLEEP CONNECTION: encourage using the bed for sleep only, and not for other activities like completing homework, using screens/technology.

Making the bed in the morning, ready for bed at night has been suggested to promote better sleep at night, as it can make a room seem less cluttered.



SMELL: there may be a scent that your young person finds relaxing e.g. lavender, a certain candle/spray.



A COMFORTABLE ENVIRONMENT: ensuring that the room is comfortable and relaxing by removing schoolwork, de-cluttering/tidying, favourite toy on the bed.



MATTRESS/BED LINEN: comforting bed linen and a comfortable mattress can help a young person form positive associations with sleep.

Mattress toppers can add an extra layer of comfort, pillow firmness is individual from person to person, and clean linen sheets may hold comforting scents.

Anxiety and worries

Sometimes what can keep us awake is the content of our thoughts as we lay in bed, trying to sleep. It is common for young people to worry before bed if things are on their mind as that's when there are no distractions. Tests, starting a new school year, going on holidays, are all very common things which might unsettle young people at night.

Adrenalin (stress hormone) is sent to the brain when we worry or overthink, which then signals to the brain to stay awake. So, it blocks our usual sleep processes.



What could help?

- Keep a diary where they can express their thoughts and feelings, as young people can better make sense of what they are worried about and process this, rather than letting this roam around their minds at night. Ideally you wouldn't write in the diary directly before bed as this could stimulate their brain more and encourage them to think about this.
- Worry Time is a useful strategy to use with young people. Worries can snowball and feel never ending. Having a set time each day where they can express their worries (by themselves or with you) can help them release their concerns and get these out in one go. Following Worry Time, young people should then try to let the worries go and do something else. Any other worries that pop up after can be written down to be discussed the next day. This helps young people learn that they can control their worries and not letting them take over. It's important that Worry Time is limited to up to 15 minutes, and that this doesn't take place directly before bed.
- Calming and relaxing activities before bedtime can really help to settle young people's minds from their daily activities or what is coming tomorrow (colouring, writing, game, relaxation, relaxing music). Even doing this 15 minutes before bed can make a big difference.

- It's best to avoid potential stressors, e.g. news updates, school work, chores, too close to bedtime.

Nightmares



Sometimes young people go to sleep without any problems, but can suffer from frequent nightmares, making them wake up in the middle of the night. Nightmares can be seen so vividly that they can feel real and lead to strong emotions. When young people wake from a nightmare, they can often still see the images and therefore believe the dream is real. Of course, young people will feel distressed by this.

What could help?

- Responding calmly and letting them know that it isn't real, they are safe and you are there. Staying with them for a short time (in their room), before encouraging them to go back to sleep (own bed).
- Behaving confidently about how we all get scared sometimes and that it will pass. Overprotection or parent worrying can increase this in young people as they search for anxious cues. Checking for monsters can suggest to young people that there is something to check for and be afraid of.
- Talk about the dream/fears. Ask them to describe the nightmare. What happened? Who was in the dream? What made it scary? Remind them that the nightmares aren't real and can't hurt them. Responding to the nightmares by taking them seriously helps them feel they are being heard and supported. Talk about the difference between fantasy and reality.
- If your young person has frequent reoccurring nightmares, rewrite the ending: Imagine a different ending for the nightmare. Encourage them to draw a picture of the nightmare, "talk" to the characters in the nightmare or write about the nightmare in a journal. Do this in the day as nightmares don't seem as scary in daylight.
- Manage stress. Can use breathing exercises or relaxation to help with any stress.
- Comfort: Sleeping with a favourite toy, blanket or other comfort object. Keeping the door open. Using a night light. Imagining safe space.

- Avoiding stressful material (scary movies/ shows/ reading) or triggers (conversations/ activities) before bedtime.

Other useful resources to consider

[NHS Approved Sleep Advisors for babies to teens \(millpondsleepclinic.com\)](https://millpondsleepclinic.com)

[Children - The Sleep Charity](#)

[How can I help my child sleep? | Health Issues | Health for Kids:Grownups](#)