SLEEP HYGIENE FOR
MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

There's no doubt that good sleep benefits our mental health and wellbeing on myriad levels. Following a regular sleep routine calms and heals the body, improves concentration, regulates mood, and sharpens judgment and decision-making, so, unsurprisingly, we're better problem solvers and more able to cope with the stresses of life when we're well-rested.

If you haven't already heard the term 'sleep hygiene', it simply refers to a set of practices and habits that promote good quality sleep. When thinking about the kinds of things we can do to improve our sleep, it can be helpful to know that there are four key pillars of great sleep – depth, duration, continuity, and regularity, and we've kept these in mind when collating some suggestions to help you improve the quality of your sleep. You might also like to take a look through these with friends, family or colleagues to see what other ideas you can come up with together.

have a consistent sleep schedule

Go to bed and get up at the same time every day (or as close to it as you can practically get). Yes, even on your days off. This helps regulate our body's internal clock and sets it to know when to wind down for sleep and when to wake up for activity.

create a relaxing bedtime routine

Set up calming pre-sleep rituals; again, signalling to the body that you're preparing for sleep. We're all different, so try a few things out to see what works for you. You might like to take warm bath, read for a while (choose something that's calming and avoid anything that gets you worked up!), or practice stress-reducing relaxation techniques such as meditation, deep diaphragmatic breathing, gentle stretching, or progressive muscle relaxation. These can all help calm the mind and body.

optimise your sleep environment

Keep your bedroom cool, dark, and quiet. Consider using blackout curtains, earplugs, or white noise to help reduce the chances of being disturbed by whatever is going on elsewhere in the house or outside. Invest in a comfortable mattress and pillows – finding the right bed for our own individual needs can make a real difference to the quality of our sleep.

limit exposure to screens before bed

The blue light emitted by screens interferes with the production of the sleep hormone melatonin, which is fundamental to good sleep. Cutting back on screen time can be a tough habit to break once we're in it, but reducing exposure to electronic devices such as smartphones, tablets, and computers at least an hour (preferably two to three hours) before bedtime will make all the difference to your quality of sleep. If you find you can't cut it out completely straight away, try cutting back an extra 15 minutes a night every few days to help break the habit.

be mindful of what you consume

Avoid heavy meals, nicotine, and food and drinks that contain caffeine and added sugar, within three hours of bedtime. If our body is working hard to digest our dinner or is over-stimulated, it's highly likely our sleep will be compromised. If you must east, opt for a light snack. Reduce the consumption of liquids close to bedtime to minimise the number of times you might wake in the night to use the bathroom.

consider the timing of your physical activity

Engaging in regular exercise aids sleep, but intense physical activity too close to bedtime may have the opposite effect by stimulating the nervous system and raising the heart rate; both of which will make falling asleep more difficult. Try to complete any heavy workout at least three hours before bedtime. If you find movement helps calm you before bed, taking a short, relaxed walk may help.

be a smart napper

The keys to a helpful nap are duration and timing. Keep naps to no more than 20 to 30 minutes, and avoid taking one after 3pm. A short nap taken before then can be refreshing and energising, but our body is more likely to confuse a late nap with us going to bed for the night, which can leave us groggy when waking up and make it more challenging to fall asleep later.

seek professional help if needed

If you are still consistently struggling with sleep despite adopting sleep hygiene practices, consider seeking professional advice to ensure there are no underlying reasons that need addressing.