

Sleep



Getting Quality Sleep When Stressed

Is Stress Affecting Your Sleep Patterns?

By [Elizabeth Scott, M.S.](#), About.com Guide; Updated September 07, 2007; About.com Health's Disease and Condition content is reviewed by the [Medical Review Board](#)

Sleep is an important resource that keeps you healthy, mentally sharp, and able to cope with stress more effectively, among other things. Unfortunately, stressed and busy people tend to get less sleep than they need. According to a poll on this site, 50% of readers like you are missing enough sleep to triple their risk of a car accident. Learn some of the reasons why stress and sleep deprivation seem to go together, and important techniques for getting the sleep you need.

Why You're Missing Out on Sleep

The following are all common factors that contribute to lack of sleep:

Overthinking

Many people take their work home with them, either physically or metaphorically. And it makes sense: with today's demanding workloads, it's often difficult to come home from a day of troubleshooting and automatically stop thinking about all the, well, trouble. Stay-at-home parents and students can experience this as well.

If you find yourself still trying to solve problems at the end of the day, and the thoughts won't seem to leave your mind, this can make sleep come much more difficult. It can even disrupt your sleep in the middle of the night, as you transition between sleep stages.

Caffeine

People under stress tend to consume significant amounts of caffeine to get a boost that gets them going in the morning or helps them make it through the day. Caffeine can actually exacerbate stress levels and significantly affect the amount and quality of sleep you get.

Cortisol

This stress hormone is one of the key players responsible for the fight or flight response -- that jolt of energy you get when you feel stressed or threatened that enables you to respond. Unfortunately, chronic stress can lead to excessive levels of cortisol, and this can disrupt healthy sleep patterns.

Over scheduling

A hectic, busy life can rob you of time you can actually dedicate to sleep. If you find yourself pushing your bed time back further and further to get things done, or getting up earlier and earlier in the name of productivity, you may feel tired a lot of the time but not realize the toll lack of sleep is taking.

Anxiety

Like over thinking, anxiety can make sleep difficult and wake you up at night. Anxiety keeps your mind busy as you imagine threatening scenarios and worry about what may happen next. You may become preoccupied with finding solutions. That racing of your mind can rob you of sleep by keeping your cortisol levels high, making sleep harder to achieve.

Get the Sleep You Need

Try these tips if you find yourself regularly short on sleep:

- Healthy night time habits can go a long way toward helping you consistently get more high-quality sleep.
- One great way to purge your body of stress so your mind can relax is to learn progressive muscle relaxation and deep muscle relaxation techniques. Meditation is also a valuable tool to relax your body and quiet your mind -- it can easily transition you into sleep.
- A favourite way for many people to relax before bed--one you may have already thought of--is sexual activity. It can give you a dose of relaxing hormones and provide several other stress management benefits. Unfortunately, many people find that stress zaps their sex drive. Here are some tips on getting in the mood when stressed.
- Don't underestimate the value of the power nap. Napping can increase your productivity and give you a valuable dose of sleep when you need it. Learn more about effective power napping techniques.

http://stress.about.com/od/unhealthybehaviors/a/stress_sleep.htm

Reduce Tension with Progressive Muscle Relaxation

By [Elizabeth Scott, M.S.](#), About.com Guide; Updated September 24, 2008; About.com Health's Disease and Condition content is reviewed by the [Medical Review Board](#)

Progressive Muscle Relaxation ([PMR](#)) is a great technique for reducing overall body tension. As you practice tensing and relaxing all the muscle groups in your body, you can move to a shortened procedure, [Deep Muscle Relaxation](#) where you rapidly relax your whole body. As you reduce the tension you carry in your body, your whole being will feel less stress and you will enjoy increased physical and emotional health. Here's how to get started:

Difficulty: Easy **Time Required:** 5 Minutes

Here's How:

1. After finding a quiet place and several free minutes to practice progressive muscle relaxation, sit or lie down and make yourself comfortable.
2. Begin by tensing all the muscles in your face. Make a tight grimace, close your eyes as tightly as possible, clench your teeth, even move your ears up if you can. Hold this for the count of eight as you inhale.
3. Now exhale and relax completely. Let your face go completely lax, as though you were sleeping. Feel the tension seep from your facial muscles, and enjoy the feeling.
4. Next, completely tense your neck and shoulders, again inhaling and counting to eight. Then exhale and relax.
5. Continue down your body, repeating the procedure with the following muscle groups:
 - chest
 - abdomen
 - entire right arm
 - right forearm and hand (making a fist)
 - right hand
 - entire left arm
 - left forearm and hand (again, making a fist)
 - left hand
 - buttocks
 - entire right leg
 - lower right leg and foot
 - right foot
 - entire left leg
 - lower left leg and foot
 - left foot
 -

for the shortened version, which includes just four main muscle groups:

- face
- neck, shoulders and arms
- abdomen and chest
- buttocks, legs and feet

Quickly focusing on each group one after the other, with practice you can relax your body like 'liquid relaxation' poured on your head and it flowed down and completely covered you. You can use progressive muscle relaxation to quickly de-stress any time.

What You Need:

- A comfortable place, some privacy, a few minutes.

<http://stress.about.com/od/generaltechniques/ht/howtopmr.htm>

Top 10 Better Sleep Strategies: Great Ways to End Your Day

By [Elizabeth Scott, M.S.](#), About.com Guide; Updated February 02, 2009; About.com Health's Disease and Condition content is reviewed by the [Medical Review Board](#)

Sleep is a valuable and restorative resource that's vital to wellbeing and stress management, but can sometimes be hard to come by for the busy and stressed. (According to a recent poll on this site, for example, about half of you are getting 6 hours of sleep or less, and are in dire need of more and better sleep!) Here are some effective nighttime habits to get into, to help enhance the amount and quality of sleep you get!

- 1. [Try Light Exercise](#);** Exercise has so many stress management and health benefits, and for many of us, nighttime is when it best fits our schedules. Light exercise like yoga or walking at night can also help sleep as it releases tension without overstimulating the body. (It's debatable whether or not exercise right before bed disrupts sleep; according to sports medicine expert Elizabeth Quinn, it could actually improve sleep).
- 2. [Listen to Music](#);** Music can soothe your mind and body to the point that it's now being used as a therapeutic tool by some. You can use music to your benefit by playing relaxing tunes before bed, and throughout the evening to help you wind down and release tension as bedtime approaches. These are some of my favourite picks.
- 3. [Clean Up](#);** A recent poll on this site found that close to 80% of you live with a level of clutter that can cause additional stress. Cleaning up at the end of the day can leave you feeling less stressed because you're doing something to tackle the problem, and the anticipation of waking up to a cleaner house can make your rest more peaceful.
- 4. [Quiet Games Instead of T.V.](#);** While many people like to zone out in front of the T.V. before bed, playing low-key computer games can be a refreshing alternative. They can create a nice distraction from the stress of the day and be a great way of 'shifting gears', but aren't so exciting that they make sleep elusive. These games can also sharpen your mental abilities and help you learn new skills: The Stress Relief Memory Game and The Stress Management Word Game. Find other games and fun stuff in the Fun and Games Section.
- 5. [Bubble Bath](#);** Soaking in a tub of bubbles can rinse away tension and leave your body pampered and your mind free. It's also a great segue to sleep, as any parent of a small child can attest. Read more about the

importance of self care, and find tips on how to create a soothing home spa experience.

6. Massage; Massage is a great stress reliever that also feels good. If you can't trade massages with people you live with, you can do a self-massage or use massaging tools to relieve tension. Either way, having a massage before bed can loosen stress in your body, relax you, and make sleep come more easily.

7. Journaling; Journaling has many stress and health benefits, making it a great way to end the day. Writing in a journal before bed can clear your mind, help you process emotions, solve problems, mentally prepare for the next day, make plans, and get your thoughts out of your head and on the page, where they can be picked up the next morning. A gratitude journal can get you in a positive frame of mind for sleep, and over time helps you change your whole frame of mind to a more positive, less stressed one.

8. Meditation; Meditation has been used by many, many people to relieve stress in the body and mind. It's a great technique to use before bedtime because it segues so naturally into sleep: it relaxes the body, clears the mind, and creates inner peace. Be patient with yourself and follow these tips for beginners, and you should find meditation to be a great stress management tool.

9. Sex For those in a committed relationship, sex is known as a great nighttime stress reliever for a reason! Not only does a healthy sex life enhance your relationship, but it relaxes your body, releases 'happy' chemicals, and even promotes wellness. And, of course, it welcomes sleep. Unfortunately, excessive stress can also be a libido dampener. If you're having trouble 'getting in the mood', here are some important tips for you.

10. Avoid These: Some activities can be too stimulating at night and can make it harder to fall asleep, or make your sleep less restful. For a restorative night's sleep, you should avoid caffeine after 2 p.m., interpersonal conflict or stressful conversations, or anything else that's overstimulating. (Dealing with finances or even certain T.V. shows can be overstimulating to some.) Everyone's different, so try to pay attention to your internal states, and respond accordingly.

http://stress.about.com/od/lowstresslifestyle/tp/better_sleep.htm

Sleep Benefits: Power Napping for Increased Productivity, Stress Relief & Health

The Benefits of Sleep and The Power Nap

By [Elizabeth Scott, M.S.](#), About.com Guide; Updated July 07, 2008; About.com Health's Disease and Condition content is reviewed by the [Medical Review Board](#)

Why A Power Nap? Facts on Sleep:

While small children typically take naps in the afternoon, our culture generally frowns upon mid-day sleep; however, even in those who get enough sleep (but particularly in those who don't), many people experience a natural increase in drowsiness in the afternoon, about 8 hours after waking. And research shows that you can make yourself more alert reduce stress and improve cognitive functioning with a nap. Mid-day sleep, or a 'power nap', means more patience, less stress, better reaction time, increased learning, more efficiency and better health. Here's what you need to know about the benefits of sleep and how a power nap can help you!

How Much Sleep Do You Need? The body needs 7-8 hours of sleep per day; 6 hours or less triples your risk of a car accident. (Interestingly, too much sleep--more than 9 hours--can actually be harmful for your health; recent studies show that those who sleep more than 9 hours per day don't live as long as their 8-hour-sleep counterparts!)

The Effects of Missed Sleep: Sleep is cumulative; if you lose sleep one day, you feel it the next. If you miss adequate sleep several days in a row, you build up a 'sleep deficit', which impairs the following:

- Reaction time
- Judgment
- Vision
- Information processing
- Short-term memory
- Performance
- Motivation
- Vigilance
- Patience

Fatigued people also experience more moodiness, aggressive behaviours, burnout and more stress.

The Benefit of a Power Nap: Studies show that 20 minutes of sleep in the afternoon provides more rest than 20 minutes more sleep in the morning (though the last two hours of morning sleep have special benefits of their own). The body seems to be designed for this, as most people's bodies naturally become more tired in the afternoon, about 8 hours after we wake up.

How Long Should I Sleep? When you sleep you pass through different stages of sleep, known together as a sleep cycle. These stages include light sleep, deep sleep (which is believed to be the stage in which the body repairs itself), and rapid-eye movement sleep, or REM sleep (during which the mind is repaired).

Many experts advise to keep the nap between 15 and 30 minutes, as sleeping longer gets you into deeper stages of sleep, from which it's more difficult to awaken. Also, longer naps can make it more difficult to fall asleep at night, especially if your sleep deficit is relatively small. However, research has shown that a 1-hour nap has many more restorative effects than a 30-minute nap, including a much greater improvement in cognitive functioning. The key to taking a longer nap is to get a sense of how long your sleep cycles are, and try to awaken at the end of a sleep cycle. (It's actually more the interruption of the sleep cycle that makes you groggy, rather than the deeper states of sleep.)

As there are pros and cons to each length of sleep, you may want to let your schedule decide: if you only have 15 minutes to spare, take them! But if you could work in an hour nap, you may do well to complete a whole sleep cycle, even if it means less sleep at night. If you only have 5 minutes to spare, just close your eyes; even a brief rest has the benefit of reducing stress and helping you relax a little, which can give you more energy to complete the tasks of your day.

Tips For a More Effective Nap If you want to obtain more sleep, and the health benefits that go with getting enough sleep, here are some tips for more effective napping and sleep at night:

- Avoid caffeine after 3pm. It's a stimulant that can disrupt your sleep and stay in your system longer than you think; its half-life is four to six hours!
- If you don't want to nap a long time, set an alarm.
- If you don't have time for a power nap, or don't feel comfortable napping during the day, try meditation; it gives your body a rest and produces slower brain waves similar to sleep.

<http://stress.about.com/od/lowstresslifestyle/a/powernap.htm>