

Ten Useful Strategies For A Restful, Restorative Night

Below you'll find a number of recommendations for things you can do that are likely to give you a more restful night and a better quality of sleep. No single strategy works for everyone - but most people find most of these strategies helpful. But be flexible with them: don't turn them into RULES THAT YOU MUST ALWAYS OBEY. Experiment with them - adapt and modify them as necessary - and notice what difference they make to your sleep quality over time.

1. Restrict stimulants before bed

Avoid products containing caffeine (tea, coffee, chocolate) for at least 4 hours before bedtime. Avoid nicotine (cigarettes, vaping, nicotine patches, etc.) for at least one hour before bedtime, and when waking during the night.

2. Restrict alcohol and eating close to bedtime

Don't drink alcohol around bedtime, because although it often promotes sleep at first, it can disrupt sleep later in the night. Don't eat large meals, especially those packed with fat and protein, immediately before bed.

3. Avoid 'blue light' for one hour before bed

Exposure to blue light - from phones, computers, TVs - immediately before bedtime often impairs our ability to get off to sleep. So ideally, avoid looking at these devices for at least one hour before bedtime. Ideally, also avoid working or studying, for at least an hour; otherwise, your brain is likely to keep going over it in bed.

4. Create a 'wind-down ritual'

Create your own 'wind-down' ritual to help prepare you for sleep. This may involve listening to relaxing music, reading a relaxing book, having a warm bath or shower, practicing a mindfulness or relaxation technique, or doing any other activity that helps you to 'wind down'.

5. Maintain regular sleeping hours

The more regular your hours for getting up and going to bed, the better your sleep is likely to be. And the more irregular, the worse your sleep is likely to be. Sleeping in, or staying in bed longer than you should, is particularly disruptive to healthy sleep. Do your best to get up at the same time every day, even if you've had little or no sleep. In the short term, this means you'll have some difficult sleep-deprived days to get through. But in the long term, your sleep will improve.

6. Exercise during the day

Do regular physical exercise during the day. Even mild exercise helps - and anything is better than nothing. Getting out into the sunlight during the day also helps sleep at night. But don't exercise vigorously (to the point of sweating) for at least one hour before bed.

Ten Useful Strategies - continued

7. Make your bedroom favourable to sleep

Make your bedroom as conducive to sleep as possible. Keep it clean and tidy and well-aired (not stuffy), and choose a mattress, sheets and pillows that are comfy. Block out light and noise in the bedroom. Make sure your phone is on silent. If necessary, wear an eyepatch or ear plugs in bed. Avoid extreme room temperatures. Most people sleep best in room temperatures of approximately 65 degrees Fahrenheit (or within the range of 60 - 67), or 18 degrees Celsius (or within the range of 15.6 to 19.4 C).

8. Limit daytime naps to half an hour or less

Many people find a short nap - up to half an hour, in the late afternoon is helpful. But longer naps than that usually impair sleep quality at night.

9. Limit Activities in Bed to Sleep, Sex, Relaxation or Practicing ACT Skills Such as Unhooking, Noticing & Naming, Making Room, Body Scans, Focusing on Your Breath

When in bed, limit your activities as much as possible to sex or sleeping. You can also do something relaxing, such as reading a book or listening to peaceful music. You can also practice ACT skills such as noticing & naming, thanking your mind, expansion/opening up/making room, 'dropping anchor', 'leaves on a stream', body scans, or self-compassion exercises such as 'kind hands'.

Alternatively, you can gently tune in to the warmth and comfort of your bed: notice the mattress supporting you, the warmth in your chest, arms and legs, the softness of the pillow beneath your head, the darkness behind your eyelids, the touch of the blankets on your chest, your body resting, etc.

But don't do things in bed that expose you to blue light (e.g. watching TV, using your phone), or wake you up (e.g. reading a gripping thriller), or tax your brain (e.g. working or studying).

You also want the bedroom itself to be strongly associated with rest and sleep. So avoid doing other forms of activity in the bedroom such as watching TV, working, eating, doing yoga or lifting weights etc.

10. Don't Try To Force Sleep

If you're in bed, and you're not sleeping, trying to make yourself sleep is a recipe for failure. So instead, the idea is to use that time effectively. Instead of tossing and turning and worrying, practice your unhooking/noticing/making room skills, and/or self-compassion skills. That way, although you're not sleeping, you're resting. And, as a bonus, you're developing useful skills, which can help you with many other problems.

The good news is, the ACT skills mentioned in point 9 are usually restful and restorative - and a much better alternative to tossing, turning, stressing, worrying, and so on. Plus, often when you do these practices in bed, you will eventually fall asleep. That's not the aim of them, but it is a nice bonus. So enjoy this bonus when it happens — and when it doesn't happen, at least you'll get the benefits of a comfortable rest.