Why Sleep is So Important to Your Mental Health

It is easy to see the chaos caused by lack of a good night's sleep in a toddler. Without enough sleep, a young child can be irritable, cranky, loud, and unreasonable. If that sounds familiar, it's because it's the same for all of us. Adults become irritable and unreasonable without plenty of sleep, too, although we are perhaps a bit less obvious in showing the symptoms of sleep deprivation than our children. Even if we try to soldier on and believe we can live our lives unaffected by too little sleep, the deficit affects our ability to handle what life throws our way.

Brain and Body Health

When we sleep, [our brains clean out toxins](#) that otherwise will slow down our ability to think. That same lack of sleep impacts the part of the brain, called the amygdala, that runs our emotions. The amygdala is the emotional, reactive part of our brain. It needs to be tempered by the prefrontal cortex or else chaos prevails and we become more emotional, more easily angered, and more prone to depression. If that lack of sleep builds up, it can lead to mental health issues. Bottom line, the brain needs sleep to function and to be healthy.

[Getting enough sleep](#) is as important to our bodies as getting enough oxygen to breathe. During sleep, our brains cycle between a deep sleep and REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. Both are essential for our mental and physical health. The deep sleep repairs not only our brains but our bodies as well. Our immune system is boosted, too, which helps us to stay healthy. The REM sleep processes our emotions and enhances our memories, both of which help make our waking hours more cogent and creative.

Combating Mental Illness

Sleep deprivation has always been considered one of the symptoms of depression. [New research](#) has shown that it isn't just a symptom of depression—it is a cause. Childhood depression, ADHD, anxiety disorders, and bipolar disorder all have a high incidence of sleep-related problems. When sleep is treated, there is a corresponding improvement in these conditions. It also has the same therapeutic effect with adults.

Addressing the sleep elephant in the room is a family affair. Heavy meals, coffee, and alcohol at least two hours before bedtime all disrupt the body's ability to sleep. Alcohol, for example, initially can make you feel more relaxed and sleepier, but several hours later, you will find yourself waking up. Eating too closely to bedtime could also cause you to wake up during the night and not get the full amount of rest that your body needs to perform at its best the following day.

Switch Off Electronics
In order to promote healthy sleep in your household, your entire family could benefit from switching off the tv, the PlayStation, iPads, and phones before bed. The backlight on these devices disturbs the body's production of melatonin, and signals to the brain that it's time to stay awake. [Melatonin is a hormone](#) that aids in your ability to fall asleep. Backlight from your electronics lowers your body's levels of that essential sleep hormone.

Create a Routine

Keeping a set routine for bedtime for both yourself and your children helps to reinforce the body's rhythm and makes it easier for everyone to fall asleep. Try lowering the lights a half hour before bedtime and use that half hour to set a relaxing atmosphere. Favorite stories, books, and stuffed animals bring your children's stress levels down and gets them ready for sleep. That thirty-minute transition from the day's more rapid pace to a slower, more reflective time reduces the cortisol levels that keep us from a good night's sleep.

Promoting quality sleep is not just important for you and your mental health, but also for your family. If you or your children are struggling with dark moods, try adjusting your sleep schedule and habits first — you may be surprised how much sleep affects your everyday mood!