Peer Education Project

Sleep: Finding our confidence with sleep

A Guide for School Staff

Mental Health Foundation

Contents

"Listening to a mindfulness podcast stops me from going down the thought spiral/hole before bed."

**Peer Educator
Peer Education Project**

What is sleep?

Sleep is integral to all aspects of our lives. We sleep every day, spending about a third of our lives asleep! Yet sleep is often one of the first things we compromise on when things become busy or overwhelming.

Sleep is important to help our bodies and minds process, heal and recover from the day.

Our minds and bodies are intrinsically linked, so getting good sleep can help us maintain good physical health. For example, it can help to boost our immune system, manage our hunger, improve our concentration, and prevent some health conditions.

Why is sleep important for our mental health?

Sleep is also a critical component of our mental health, not just our physical health.
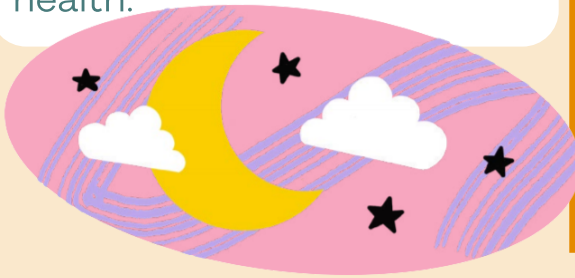
In our surveys, nearly half

48%

of adults and two thirds of teenagers

66%

agreed that sleeping badly has a negative effect on their mental health.

Good sleep can help us to:

- manage feelings, emotions and behaviour,
- be alert and remember things properly , and
- be attentive and learn better.

However, lack of sleep or poor quality sleep can:

- make us feel low, anxious, irritable or confused, and
- make it harder to manage our emotions and the challenges in life.

Sleep problems can be both a symptom of, and a contributor to, mental health problems. Experiencing a sleep problem is very common, with as many as 1 in 3 people having difficulties sleeping.

Lack of sleep over a consistent period of time can also increase impulsive behaviour, negative thinking, feelings of anger, and is linked to increased risk of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety disorders.

What is good sleep?

Good sleep is essential for our mental health and wellbeing.

How much sleep we need changes with age, and will vary person-to-person, but there are recommended average hours per night at each stage in our life:

NEWBORNS
14-17
HOURS

PRIMARY SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN
9-11
HOURS

ADOLESCENTS
8-10
HOURS

ADULTS AGED UP TO 64 YEARS
7-9
HOURS

OLDER ADULTS
7-8
HOURS

What is good sleep?

When it comes to good sleep, it is also about experiencing good quality sleep as well as the quantity of hours achieved.

Sleep is said to be of good quality if:

- the time it takes to fall asleep is less than 30 minutes.

- wakefulness once asleep is under 30 minutes.

- we achieve an age adequate total sleep length.

- the sleep efficiency - or percentage of time in bed spent asleep - is more than 85%.

Getting good sleep like this can be daunting for children and young people, but by understanding how sleep works and learning about their own sleep patterns, they can build the confidence to begin improving it.

Why can good sleep health be difficult to achieve?

There are many things in our lives that can make it difficult to get good sleep. These will be different for everyone. Some people will experience greater barriers to good sleep health, and often those factors are beyond their control.

Such inequalities may include:

- **Sex and gender**
  For example, insomnia has been found to be higher in women, whereas obstructive sleep apnoea has been found to be more common in men.
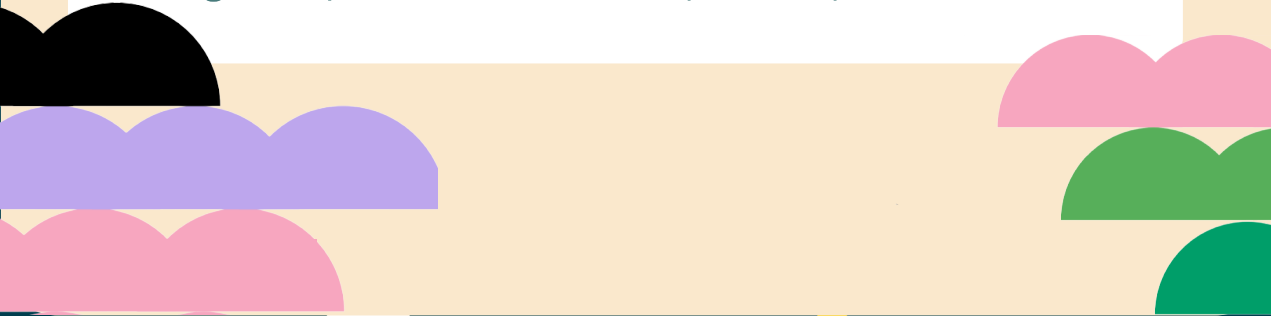
- **Race and ethnicity**
  For example, research has found that minority ethnic adults (in particular, Black/African American adults) are more likely to experience shorter, and poorer quality, sleep.

- **Socioeconomic status**
  For example, food insecurity has been linked to a higher risk of sleep disorders, depression, and anxiety.

- **Experiences of trauma**
  For example, 15% of UK adults reported that thoughts and feelings about a traumatic experience had negatively affected their sleep in the previous month.

Why can good sleep health be difficult to achieve?

Another important factor that can affect sleep health is developmental changes in our bodies, especially ones which affect our sleep and wake patterns – known as our 'circadian rhythm'.

For example, as bodies change with puberty, the sleep/wake pattern tends to shift, resulting in less natural pressure to sleep earlier in the night and a greater desire to go to bed later and wake up later.

The lives and routines of young people don't always allow for waking up later, so many teenagers experience a chronic lack of sleep. This is why it is important to support pupils to think about how sleep affects their mental health and wellbeing, and what they can do to improve their sleep health.
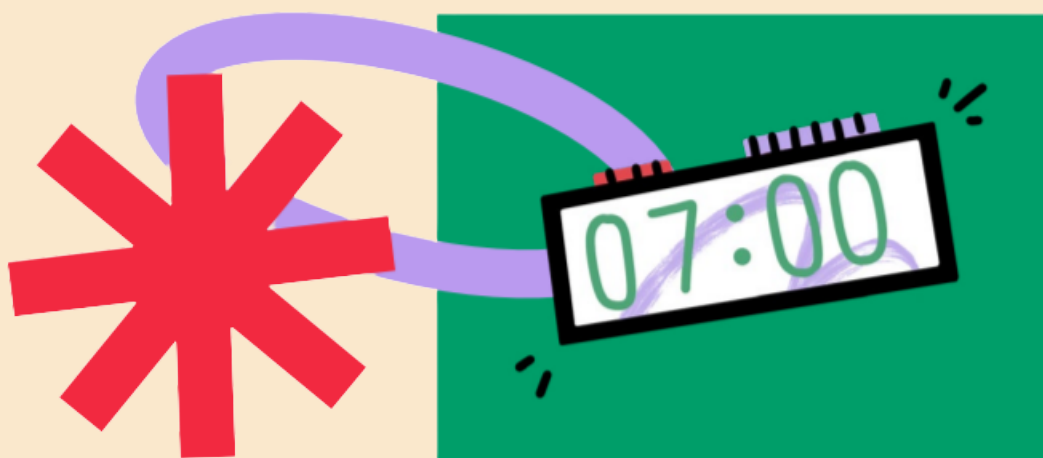
Top tips for good sleep health

Five principles of sleep

Professor Colin Espie, an expert in Sleep Medicine, recommends that we should:

1. Value our sleep
It is something vital to our lives, and we need to take sleep seriously.

2. Prioritise our sleep
We need to put sleep first when making choices about what we want to do.

3. Personalise our sleep
We need to find the 'sleep window' that works best for us i.e. when and how long you sleep.

4. Trust our sleep
It is a natural process, and our sleep will get itself into a good pattern.

5. Protect our sleep
We can do this by avoiding or preventing things that upset it.

Our lifestyle and the environment around us can often impact our sleep health. It is vital that we find ways to reduce factors that negatively affect our sleep, and focus on what helps us achieve good sleep health.

Top tips for good sleep health

Children and young people may feel unsure or frustrated about sleep, especially if they feel like they have tried lots of things that haven't worked.

The important thing is to remind your pupils to be patient and give their bodies time to adjust when they try new things – good sleep health develops over time.

Below are some ideas to help you think about how to support your pupils to improve their sleep health.

Encourage your pupils to:

Have drinks before bed that encourage a calming effect on the body and aid sleep, like chamomile tea, rather than sugary, caffeinated drinks.

Eat foods that promote sleep if they feel hungry before bed, like bananas, cherries and even tomatoes.

Prioritise time during the day to exercise or move their bodies, which can release tension and energy and bring their bodies into a restful state for sleep.

Top tips for good sleep health

Reduce screen time before bed. Screens can make it harder to fall asleep because they suppress the production of the sleep hormone, melatonin, which we get from darkness. They could still use their phone or device to listen to music, a podcast, or a guided meditation to help get to sleep but they should limit their time looking at screens before bed.

Create and use a sleep diary that records the timing, quality, and quantity of their sleep. This gains a more realistic idea about the type of sleep they get, and can help them plan how to get better quality sleep.

Check out apps like Sleep Cycle, which can improve sleep by using an intelligent alarm clock and tracker that analyses patterns and wakes them up in their lightest sleep phase.

Create a wind-down routine in the hour before bed – limiting screen time, homework, or physical activity and encouraging strategies that work for them to calm their mind. For example, reading, listening to relaxing music, or journaling.

Try to keep the temperature of the bedroom cool and the space clutter free, this creates a calming environment for sleeping.
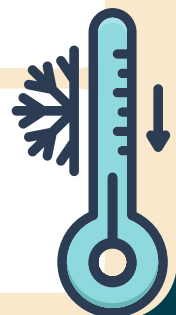
Top tips for good sleep health

Encourage good sleep health in your school community:

Prioritise discussions around good sleep health in assemblies or wellbeing, personal, and social education classes. Focus on promoting positive strategies like mindfulness, audio books or practical sleep toolkits such as sleep diaries and journaling, to help pupils schedule and prioritise sleep in a way that works for them.

Encourage staff to look out for signs of sleep-deprivation in pupils and work empathetically with the pupils to understand their situation and find solutions to improve their sleep that take into account other contributing factors.

Encourage staff to learn about the changes in children and young people's circadian rhythms, or 'body clocks'. Sleep deprivation linked to body clock changes could affect academic performance and general health and wellbeing outcomes.

Top tips for good sleep health

Your school could explore shuffling the school timetable to avoid scheduling cognitively demanding classes in the first two hours of the day.

Instead, you could prioritise classes that may regulate the circadian clock, e.g. physical education, music and the arts, personal development or wellbeing classes that could include mindfulness activities.

Embed the importance of sleep in your school's whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing. This could include many of the things suggested here, like reviewing and sleep-proofing your school timetables and examination schedules, as well as co-producing sleep toolkits.

Find out more

The Mental Health Foundation have a great guide on How to Sleep Better.

BBC Future shared an article from Claudia Hammond about why teenage sleep is so important for mental health.

Mind published a paper in 2020 which explains insomnia and other sleep problems, giving practical suggestions for what you can do and where you can go for support.

Mentally Healthy Schools shared a TED Talk on why we sleep by Russell Foster.
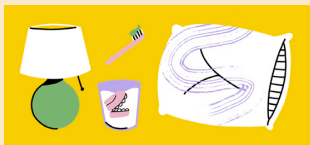
This is a handy educational video for kids and teens which explains good sleep habits.

Here are top tips for you, as school staff, to managing your own mental health and sleep habits.

Promote Good Sleep Health in School
Fundraising Ideas

Pyjama Day
What better way to talk about sleep than by wearing your favourite pair of pj's or onesie to school! Pupils and staff can all get involved and wear their nicest (or silliest!) sleepwear and donate £1 to MHF.

Host a Quiz
Hold a fun quiz around interesting sleep facts and its benefits for us humans – especially for our mental health. A bonus round could include interesting sleep facts about other animals! Pupils can each pay 50p to take part and the winner gets a prize.

Sponsored Onesie Walk
Exercise can help reduce anxiety and relive stress, but also improves the quality of your sleep. Why not organise a sponsored onesie walk and ask pupils to collect sponsorship from friends, family and people in their community.

Craft Sale
Set up a fun classroom activity where pupils can make and decorate 'sleepy' items such as sleep masks and candles. You set up a craft sale, where pupils, staff, parents and other community members can donate to charity.

Any donations you raise will help us at the Mental Health Foundation to continue to raise awareness of mental health inequalities and the need for preventative action, and advocate for change so that individuals and communities can thrive.

How to send the money to us:
After you have finished fundraising, you can send the money over to us by making a donation via our website. Please give full details of your fundraising. Or you can e-mail events@mentalhealth.org.uk and we can provide you with our bank details. Alternatively, you can set up a fundraising page for the school and ask pupils, parents and teachers to make any donations via this page.
Thank you so much for your support!

mentalhealth.org.uk

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REGULATOR

Many thanks to the pupils and staff at Royal High School Bath, St Edmund's School, St Mungo's High School, Upper Wharfedale School and Whitburn Church of England Academy for supporting the development of the School Packs.