

## A Good Night's Sleep

By Colin Clerkin

**How often do you notice that you've slept well?** Those mornings when you come down for breakfast and comment "Now *THAT* was a good night's sleep!" What made *that* sleep stand out over previous nights? Was it that you got to bed earlier, settled to sleep sooner (without tons of busy thoughts rattling round your head), slept through until you woke naturally (and *not* to an alarm clock or to one of the kids waking you, needing the toilet at 2.30 *AND* 5 am)? Something else?

There are numerous possible explanations for why we feel we've had a good night's sleep, but the overarching feeling that mostly applies is that we wake up *feeling rested*. I mean, that's the point of sleeping, isn't it? To allow our bodies to rest, rejuvenate and recharge ahead of whatever the new day might bring.

But how often do we experience sleep in quite this idealised way? Hopefully, for most of the time, we come close to this with our sleep. But, invariably, we all also know those nights when it just isn't happening for us. This might last for a night or two, but it can just as easily be for quite extended periods of time, and when that happens, we most definitely feel the strain that lack of sleep and proper rest places upon us: we feel lethargic, irritable, forgetful. Our decision-making is not as efficient or effective, we can't concentrate, and we are even more susceptible to illness.

Just because we haven't had a good night's sleep ...

### But what can we do about it?

The first step is to examine just what is going by recording our sleep habits. Using a simple **Sleep Diary**, we can track when we go to bed, settle to sleep, the hours of sleep we get and when we wake, so as to get a baseline for our current sleep patterns. Clicking on these links - [Adult Sleep Diary](#) / [Child Sleep Diary](#) - will take you to a downloadable Sleep Diary that you can use to begin this process. Keep the sleep diary for about two weeks to get a good overall picture of what is going on with your sleep.

It is also important to review your bedtime routines and look at what you can do to improve these ... this is what we call Sleep Hygiene: the business of good sleep practice.

Do you have a regular bed *time* (a consistent time you normally look to settle to sleep) and bedtime routine that helps prepare your body for sleep? A winding down period that allows you to move from "busy-ness" to calm and quiet? Have you cut caffeine out of your evenings? Is your bedroom environment quiet, the right temperature for you, *dark enough*, with a comfortable bed?

If you don't have things in place to ensure good sleep hygiene, what do you need to change to begin to develop these habits? Okay, it might not always be possible to achieve the things in your new routine every night, but if you can manage them most nights, you will begin to improve the quality of your sleep.

### Too tense to sleep?

If you feel stressed still from your day when you get to bed, you will need to address this too. Sleep generally won't happen when we are tense. Think about it: sleep is a period when our bodies are allowed to relax and our muscles can unwind. If we are tense, quite obviously, we are not relaxed, and so inevitably, sleep will be difficult to achieve.

Try this: make a tight fist, so tight your knuckles start to whiten. If this is how you feel normally when you go to bed, it's no surprise that you can't sleep! Now, slowly open your fist, one

finger at a time. Notice how good that feels, as your hand loosens and your muscles relax. This is the state that you need to aim for if you want to get off to sleep.

An exercise you can use to help you move towards this state when you go to bed is to practice muscle tensing and relaxing (don't do this if you have existing muscle problems; seek medical advice to ensure it won't cause you any harm - it shouldn't, but just in case, check with your GP).

Work your way up your body, from your feet to your head, tensing and relaxing various muscle groups to help create a more relaxed bodily state that will make it more likely that you will be able to drop off to sleep. Start by pointing your toes away, hold for a count of 10, then relax your feet. Feel the difference along your whole lower leg. Next, tense your buttocks and hold. Release. Move to your stomach. 10 seconds. Release. Clench your hands into fists, keeping your arms straight, while pushing your shoulders up to your ears. Hold for 10, then release. Finally, screw your eyes tightly closed, while opening your mouth wide and sticking your tongue out (you'll be doing this in the dark, in bed, so don't worry too much about anyone watching!). Hold and release.

Great, you've just helped your body begin to make a distinction between tense and relaxed, and you have started the settling process for sleep. You may find that your mind drifts away from the exercise as you think about something else from your day. That's very common, so don't worry about it. If you notice that's happened, don't give yourself a hard time about it, just let that go, take your mind back to the exercise and continue.

Repeat the above sequence as often as you need to and you will notice your body becoming more and more tired and receptive to sleep. Initially, you may need to do this many times before you drop off to sleep, but with practice, a few passes through the sequence should be enough as your body comes to associate these actions with you settling to sleep. Use this technique when you go to bed or if you wake in the night. You'll find that in using this approach, you take back control over your sleeping and you should start to see better sleep outcomes within a relatively short space of time.

These tips won't address *all* of the challenges people can face with sleep problems, but they should go some way to alleviating a number of them. If you think you, one of your clients or someone in your family would like the opportunity to work with me and have my support to overcome the challenges that they are facing with sleep or some other emotional health issue at the moment, please don't hesitate to get in touch for an initial chat. You can **call me directly on 01244 677010** or Email [colin@clerkinspsychology.co.uk](mailto:colin@clerkinspsychology.co.uk)

Thanks for taking the time to read this article. Please feel free to forward it to any family, friends or colleagues you think may be interested in its contents. And if you have thoughts, comments or questions, do please get in touch.

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