

Managing Adult and Pediatric Sleep Concerns during a Global Pandemic:

Supplementary Patient Handouts to Support Healthy Sleep during COVID-19

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GETTING HEALTHY SLEEP DURING COVID-19

A Resource by the Society of Behavioral Sleep Medicine (SBSM)

Life has changed **A LOT** since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared coronavirus disease 2019 (**COVID-19**) a global public health emergency on January 30th, 2020.

People are reporting more **STRESS** and **ANXIETY**:

- More worrying about health and safety (self and family/friends), feeling uncertain about the future
- Many employees have lost their jobs and have financial concerns, or must work longer hours and have no time to “relax”
- Many parents must balance work with teaching/caring for their children while schools/daycares remain closed
- Frequently following the news for updates can make it harder to “disconnect”

Our routines have been **DISRUPTED**:

- Many employees now work from home or work longer hours as essential personnel
- Time spent balancing work, childcare, and accessing basic necessities (e.g., food) leaves little time for self-care
- No more travel, organized sports, or common social/recreational activities (e.g., many bars and dine-in restaurants are closed)
- Less structure → days start and end later, schedules are more irregular

Our days are filled with **LESS ACTIVITY**:

- Recommendations to stay in your homes → more sedentary activities (e.g., watching TV, napping, bored snacking)
- Many gyms, parks, and playgrounds are closed
- Social distancing requires avoidance of physical interactions <6 feet

OVER TIME, THIS CAN LEAD TO UNHEALTHY SLEEP

It is important to be as *well-rested* as possible because good sleep is important for:

- **Immune Defense** so you are better protected against getting sick
- **Metabolism** so you can burn more energy to be healthy and active
- **Controlling Emotions** so you can focus on the positive and limit the negative
- **Thinking/Memory** so you can focus, learn, remember, think quicker, and make fewer mistakes

So what do I do? How can I get healthier sleep?

When it comes to healthy sleep, the **BIGGEST** factors involve paying attention to what you are doing during the day to “**set the stage**” for getting good sleep at night.

If you get into bed and **you just cannot fall asleep**, DON'T PANIC, your body may not be ready for sleep yet (which is okay, it happens sometimes). Following the guidelines below can help you get back on track towards healthy sleep:

1. Get up at the same time each day.

- The time when you *need* to be up for work/school/daycare may change day-to-day, and this can lead to variability in bed and wake times that can worsen sleep problems over time
- No matter what is on your daily schedule, set an alarm and get up around the same time each morning (yes, even on the weekends) so that your brain and body get into a rhythm
- Avoid sleeping in to “make up” for a bad night or by napping in the afternoons. This can make it harder to go to sleep at night

2. Get outside early.

- Even during home confinement, daily light exposure is critical and should be attempted as early after awakening for the day as possible
- Natural sunlight tells our brain it is daytime so that it can start preparing to help us perform our best throughout the day and help us wind-down at the same time each night
- Once the sun is out, go for a quick walk around the block or eat your breakfast outside before starting the rest of your day

3. Keep a routine.

- Your daily duties may be very different during home confinement compared to before the pandemic, and less structure during the day can lead to inactivity which has a big impact on your sleep at night
- As best you can, try and maintain a structured routine for meals, work, breaks, exercise, socializing, and leisure activities
- This routine will aid productivity, improve mood, and use the same amount of energy each day to best “earn” sleep at the same time each night (when you want to become sleepy)

4. Stay physically active.

- Exercising early in the day, like natural sunlight, can boost your mood and also helps our brain and body perform best for the rest of the day while helping “earn” sleep at the same time each night
- If you are unable to access outdoor/public spaces that are not crowded, turn a spare room into a home gym where you can stretch, practice yoga, or calisthenics such as sit-ups/pushups
- Avoid intense exercise close to bedtime, as this can possibly delay your bedtime or make it more likely you will wake-up throughout the night

5. Find ways to socialize throughout the day.

- Regular social interaction is another way our body gets feedback from our environment on when to help us be most active and perform our best during the day, while we tend to become sleepy at night when social interactions stop
- To prevent risk of COVID-19 spreading, current guidance on social distancing discourages face-to-face interactions, which can limit how social we are during the day and the benefit social activity lends to our sleep at night
- Loneliness and social isolation are also linked to risk of depression and anxiety, which can worsen sleep at night
- Share thoughts and feelings with friends and family by telephone or on social media to alleviate stress
 - Focus on sharing internet content that is uplifting, humorous, or inspirational

6. Take time for relaxation.

- While some might say they have been “too relaxed” during home confinement, many are using this time to engage in “passive coping” activities (e.g., watching the news) which may actually worsen stress/anxiety
- Schedule breaks throughout the day and use some of this time to enjoy “proactive” relaxation activities that are familiar and enjoyable, such as reading, puzzles, or listening to music. This is a great way to relieve stress and is an effective technique to prevent becoming overwhelmed and allowing this to impact your sleep.
- You might also practice deep breathing during these breaks or if you have trouble falling asleep at night. Here’s a helpful link that describes the basics of this technique:
 - <https://www.verywell.com/how-to-breathe-with-your-belly-89853>

7. Watch what you are putting into your body (and when!).

- Many substances can affect whether you go to sleep (e.g., nicotine, caffeine), or help you feel like you can get to sleep faster (e.g., alcohol, marijuana) but may interrupt the quality of your sleep at night
- Caffeine stays in your system for 10-12 hours and can affect your ability to fall asleep at night.

- After noon, choose non-caffeinated options such as decaf tea, coffee, or sodas
- Avoid large meals rich in protein, fats, and processed carbohydrates before bed. These require our body to work overtime and can get in the way of feeling rested and refreshed for tomorrow.
- Limit water intake before bed to avoid unneeded trips to the bathroom during the night.
 - If needed, keep a small cup next to you during the night to sip from if you awaken thirsty/dry mouth
- Limit alcohol to 1-2 drinks/day and avoid consuming these within 2 hours of bedtime
 - Alcohol can help shorten time to fall asleep, but causes you to spend less time in rapid eye movement (REM) sleep and may worsen snoring or symptoms of obstructive sleep apnea.
- Nicotine is a stimulant that can delay falling asleep. Avoid tobacco 1-2 hours before bed
- During this stressful period, it may be tempting to consider taking medications for sleep
 - Sleep aids come with side effects (e.g., morning drowsiness) and can cause dependence as well as “rebound insomnia” (worse sleep on nights after taking a sleep medication) after you stop taking the sleep medication
 - Generally, it is best to avoid medications for insomnia. If you are interested in options for over-the-counter or prescription sleep aids, consult with a medical professional

8. Set limits later in the evening.

- The 24-hour news cycle and availability to remain constantly informed of COVID-19 coverage can make it difficult to detach, while the light and/or stimulation from electronic media (televisions, computers, cell phones, and tablets) at night can confuse our brain into thinking it is still daytime
- Set limits on when and for how long you will follow news coverage of the pandemic; turn off the news 2-3 hours before bed and use the rest of the evening for more relaxing activities
- Limit use of social media, smart phones, and TV/tablets close to bedtime and do not bring these devices into the bedroom

9. Make the bedroom all about sleep.

- Stay out of the bedroom until bedtime
 - This room should be used for sleep and intimacy only to best protect sleep.
 - Do not eat, watch TV, play games, use social media, read, or worry/plan in bed.
- If you must be in the bedroom due to self-quarantine/isolation or limited private space in your household, create an area away from the bed (e.g., a comfortable chair) to do these activities
- Keep your sleep environment cool, dark, comfortable, and quiet at night
 - Use fans, white noise machines, blackout curtains, eye masks to better protect sleep

10. Keep a regular bedtime and allow time to unwind beforehand.

- Establish cut-times after which you will no longer attempt to continue doing work/chores, and use the time to engage in quiet, enjoyable activities such as reading, knitting, or playing card games until you head to bed.
- Power down the electronics in the evenings and choose other activities (reading, family board games) to maintain your natural circadian rhythm.
- Set aside some time (privately or with family) in the evening to process your day, plan for tomorrow, discuss worries/concerns, and identify solutions so these thoughts don't pop up once your head hits the pillow
 - Make sure this “thinking/worrying/planning time” happens outside of the bedroom; it can be helpful to use a notebook or voice recorder to store your notes to come back to later

11. Only go to/remain in bed when you are sleepy.

- Spending time in bed when your body is not ready for sleep can make sleep problems worse, as your brain/body learn(s) not to expect to sleep right away and instead learn(s) to expect the other activities you do in bed (e.g., worry, read/watch TV, toss-and-turn)

- You may be *tired* (i.e., physically drained or fatigued) throughout the day (especially if you have not slept well for a few nights in a row); however, it is important not to get into bed until you actually feel sleepy (i.e., rolling/heavy eyes, head bobbing) as this is a sign your body is actually ready for sleep
- If you awaken during the night and are unable to easily fall back to sleep, it may be because you are not sleepy enough. When this happens, go to another room and distract yourself with calm activities in a dimly-lit room (e.g., practice deep breathing, read, listen to music) until you feel sleepy enough and are ready to return to bed

12. Be considerate of others.

- If you share your bed/living space with others, be mindful of how your behavior in the morning and evenings affects the sleep and daytime function of those around you
- Everyone has a different sleep need and schedule (in terms of timing and how many hours), which may not be the same as your own
- When making changes to your sleep-wake routine, talk with your family to make sure that you are on the same page to minimize disruptions to anyone's sleep

If you try the above recommendations and continue to have trouble with your sleep, you can find more information about sleep disorders and search for a Behavioral Sleep Medicine provider in your area on the SBSM website at: <http://www.behavioralsleep.org/>

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Recommendations for Essential Employees/Healthcare Workers

A Resource by the Society of Behavioral Sleep Medicine (SBSM)

BE AS WELL-RESTED AS POSSIBLE BECAUSE GETTING GOOD SLEEP IS IMPORTANT.

- Unhealthy sleep can lead to worse health, worse mental health, and decreased ability to perform physically and mentally.
- Sleep is important for healthy immune system functioning.
- Sleep also promotes cardiovascular and metabolic health. This includes blood pressure, weight management, and regulation of blood sugar and energy. This is especially important, as impaired cardiovascular health is a COVID-19 risk factor.
- Sleep loss increases the likelihood of mistakes and errors. It reduces an individual's ability to focus, can slow down the ability of the brain to process complex information, and impairs decision-making.
- Mental health is somewhat dependent on sleep. Poor sleep can increase the likelihood of depression and anxiety, and can worsen the impacts of stress, pain, and worry.

SET YOURSELF UP FOR OPTIMAL SLEEP.

- When possible, keep a regular schedule, which includes a regular bedtime and waketime. Use bright light in the morning and dimmer light at night to help keep this schedule.
- Try to set aside 7-8 hours of sleep, preferably at night. Consider setting a "bedtime alarm" as a reminder to begin winding down.
- Avoid major barriers to sleep, like caffeine or other stimulants too close to bedtime, as well as alcohol (which can make sleep shallow) and nicotine (which can worsen sleep).

IF YOUR SCHEDULE IS DISRUPTED BY LONG SHIFTS AND SLEEPLESS NIGHTS, GET SLEEP WHERE YOU CAN.

- Get as much of your sleep at night as you can.
- Take naps if you are not getting enough sleep at night. A short nap of 15-30 minutes might reduce fatigue and improve mental and physical performance.
- Consider taking a low dose of melatonin in the evening to help prepare your body for sleep. About 5 milligrams of melatonin within 30-60 minutes of bedtime might be helpful.
- Avoid sedating medications before sleep, especially if you cannot set aside 8 hours for sleep. Also, if mental and physical performance is important for safety, know that these medications can cause impairments.

WHEN YOU ARE ABLE TO GET SLEEP, TRY TO PROTECT IT.

- Find a place to sleep that will remain mostly undisturbed. Perhaps lock the door or post a sign.
- Keep your sleep environment cool, dark, comfortable, and quiet.
- Consider simple tools like eye masks and ear plugs to block out light and noise.
- Consider white noise to protect sleep.
- Make sure to disconnect from stressful media (like social networking apps and the news), providing enough time to wind down before sleeping.

DO WHAT YOU CAN TO PROTECT THE SLEEP OF OTHERS AS WELL.

- Don't wake a sleeping colleague unless you really have to. The same goes for a patient that you may be treating. Sleep is an important part of healing.
- If you sleep with a partner, and your schedule will disrupt their sleep, consider temporarily sleeping somewhere else.
- If you or someone else has sleep apnea and is using a CPAP device, and you may be exposed to the SARS-Cov-2 virus, consider sleeping in a different place, since the machine may blow the virus into the air.

IF YOU CANNOT SLEEP, GET OUT OF BED.

- Short-term insomnia can take on a life of its own and become a long-term problem.
- To prevent this, get out of bed if you cannot sleep. If you are in bed for more than 20-30 minutes unable to sleep, get up and try again later. Staying in bed will only increase a BED=WAKE connection that will impede sleep later.
- This also applies for awakenings in the middle or end of the night.

WHEN YOU HAVE TO STAY AWAKE, SET YOURSELF UP FOR ALERTNESS.

- Most of the time, it is difficult to know if you are sleepy. Common signs are excessive blinking, rolling eyes, and head-bobbing. If this is happening, know that you are more likely to make an error or mistake until you are able to sleep.
- Caffeine can be used to promote wakefulness and alertness, though this takes about 30 minutes to reach peak effectiveness and can interfere with sleep for 4-6 hours or more.
- Note that caffeine might not fix decision-making impairments due to sleep loss, even if it does improve focus and attention.
- If you might be impaired, create safety nets: double/triple check things and back up co-workers.
- If you have been on the job for more than 18 hours in a row, try to avoid driving yourself home.

Note, parts of this handout are based on Grandner, M. A. (2020). Get some rest: A Brief guide for those on the COVID-19 front lines. Medium, (April 1, 2020).

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Recommendations for Parents with Children/Teenagers

A Resource by the Society of Behavioral Sleep Medicine (SBSM)

What can you do as a parent of a child or a teen to support healthy sleep during this time when families are home together?

EXCEPT FOR VERY YOUNG CHILDREN, ESTABLISHING A SLEEP SCHEDULE DURING THIS TIME SHOULD BE DISCUSSED WITH YOUR CHILD OR TEEN – this is not the time for conflict about sleep.

- Many children and teens are feeling relieved that they have more flexibility with regard to their bedtimes and wake times now.
- Not having to get up very early for school during the week can be beneficial for those with later sleep cycles.

WHEN NEGOTIATING THEIR SLEEP SCHEDULE, FIRST FIGURE OUT HOW MUCH SLEEP YOUR CHILD OR TEEN ACTUALLY NEEDS – how much sleep your child/teen actually needs to function well should be based upon your observations of them and what they tell you rather than on national guidelines or others' opinions.

- Guidelines for sleep duration for different ages of children usually reflect what the “average” child or teen sleeps, but there is a large range.
- Some children and teens need more sleep than this average, while others need less.
- Figure out based on observing your child/teen and talking with them about how they are feeling to come up with what works best for them.
- If your child or teen wants to take naps during the day or easily falls asleep easily during down times (such as when watching a movie), night-time sleep may not be adequate.
- While generally naps are not encouraged when children are older (past preschool age), allow some flexibility for naps as long as the child's night-time behaviors are not disruptive to the household. If there are multiple, long wake ups in the middle of the night, naps should be minimized or discontinued.

NEXT, TAKE INTO ACCOUNT YOUR CHILD’S NATURAL SLEEP CYCLE – there are larks (early to bed, early to rise) and there are owls (late to bed, late to rise) -- including teens who often have a later sleep cycle, and therefore keeping a “regular school schedule” may not be recommended for every child or teen.

- For the “lark” – if your child or teen can easily fall asleep within 20-30 minutes and get enough sleep when waking up at a regular school time, then it might work well to keep the regular schedule.
- For the “owl” – many children function better if allowed to fall asleep when they are sleepy in the evening and wake up naturally in the morning.
- Most teens have a regular sleep cycle (or circadian rhythm) of 1 a.m. to 9 a.m. and so a normal school day sleep schedule doesn’t fit with their natural biological rhythm.

FINALLY, WHILE THERE MAY BE LEEWAY FOR BEDTIMES AND WAKE TIMES, A REGULAR SCHEDULE FOR SLEEPING IS VERY IMPORTANT – there is a lot of research on sleep regularity that shows that keeping a regular sleep cycle is best for children and adults.

- Most importantly, consider keeping the wake time within a two-hour range or less regardless of the day of the week.
- This means that if your teen gets up at 9 a.m. during the week, it’s best to wake up by 11 a.m. (or earlier) on the weekends.
- It’s an even healthier option to figure out a regular time for waking up and keep this consistent.

MOST IMPORTANTLY, REALIZE THAT ALL FAMILY MEMBERS MAY HAVE DIFFERENT NATURAL SLEEP CYCLES AND NEED FOR SLEEP – now is the time for being considerate of others.

Note, this handout was adapted from Ievers-Landis, C.E. (2020). Sleeping tips for the COVID-19 pandemic from a Rainbow sleep expert, Rainbow Babies & Children’s Hospital, University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center, Cleveland, OH.

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Education on Nightmares and Sleep Expert Recommendations

A Resource by the Society of Behavioral Sleep Medicine (SBSM)

Why am I having nightmares? This is a common question, especially since many people worry that their dreams may have meaning or predict the future. It is important to know that having nightmares right now is normal and expected. We are all undergoing a communal stressful event, and these dreams are a common response to such an event.

What do dreams mean? It is very common for our fears and anxieties to impact our dreams, especially if these are worrisome thoughts that occur at multiple times throughout the day. For instance, if I am worried about losing my job during the day, it would be common to dream about this worry. It does not have greater meaning than that and does not mean bad things will happen, but instead this dream reflects daily worries and anxieties.

What can I do to reduce these dreams during COVID-19? Although these dreams are not unexpected, reducing anxiety and worry is a vital part of reducing nightmares. Although this is a challenging goal during this time, there are a few strategies that are likely to be especially useful. Most importantly, consider letting go of worrying about things beyond your control, such as employment status or whether or not you will get sick. Since these are beyond our direct control, the worries cannot improve our odds of a good outcome, but they might have a notable negative effect on us. We also can help reduce the odds of having a nightmare by keeping a constant sleep schedule, particularly one that involves a typical bedtime. Many of us have found our bed and wake times drifting later and later given that there are fewer outside factors forcing us to keep an earlier schedule. However, this can increase the amount of REM sleep we receive, thus increasing the odds of bad dreams and nightmares. Lastly, using stress reducing strategies such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or yoga can be very helpful in reducing stress and anxiety levels, and thus also reduce our odds of nightmares during the night.

What if the bad dreams continue after COVID-19? Thankfully for most of us the bad dreams and nightmares will stop shortly after the stressful event ends. However, there will be some who regularly encounter these dreams even after the stressor has subsided. If you are waking up after having nightmares for a month or more following COVID-19, you might consider consulting a sleep doctor to determine whether nightmare treatment may be indicated. Currently the most strongly recommended nightmare treatment is imagery rehearsal therapy, a talk therapy, although other talk therapies and medications exist. These treatments are recommended after the traumatic experience has passed if nightmares persist and are bothersome.

If you are having trouble with your sleep, you can find more information about sleep disorders and search for a Behavioral Sleep Medicine provider in your area on the SBSM website at: <http://www.behavioralsleep.org/>