

Sleep

You can find all this information with music and working links to the articles at www.martinroddis.com/sleep

The 7-11 breathing method

Deep breathing techniques all have one thing in common, they work by stimulating what is known as the Parasympathetic Nervous System. Practising a breathing technique a few times a day will lower your overall stress levels in the long term.

It's important to realise that it's the out-breaths that stimulate the response, so it stands to reason that a breathing technique with longer out-breaths than in-breaths will be more effective at lowering emotional arousal.

Here is how you do it, and it is as easy as it sounds:

1 - breathe in for a count of 7.

2 - then breathe out for a count of 11.

Make sure that when you are breathing in, you are doing deep 'diaphragmatic breathing' (your diaphragm moves down and pushes your stomach out as you take in a breath) rather than shallower higher lung breathing.

If you find that it's difficult to lengthen your breaths to a count of 11 or 7, then reduce the count to breathing in for 3 and out to 5, or whatever suits you best, **as long as the out-breath is longer than the in-breath.**

Continue in this way for 5-10 minutes or longer if you have time – and enjoy the calming effect it will have on your mind and body. An added bonus of 7-11 breathing is that the very act of counting to 7 or 11 is a distraction technique, taking your mind off your immediate concerns.

The Perfect Sleep Environment

Temperature

Hot, cold and draughty rooms can seriously impact on your sleep. Your body heat peaks in the evening and then drops to its lowest levels when you're asleep, so a cool 16-18°C (60-65°F) is

thought to be an ideal temperature in a bedroom. Temperatures over 24°C (71°F) are likely to cause restlessness, while a cold room of about 12°C (53°F) will make it difficult to drop off. Young children and elderly people may require a slightly warmer environment, so it's useful to invest in a room thermometer to keep track of temperatures. It's also worth purchasing a range of suitable bedding depending on the season – an extra layer of sheets or blankets will make you more comfortable when it's cold, as will a hot water bottle or a good pair of bed socks for cold feet.

If possible, have windows open to maximise cool air circulation in the hot months. Of course, safety comes first, so keep downstairs windows shut and only open upstairs windows on a locked setting.

Lighting

Have you ever wondered why darkness is best for sleep? When we see light, our bodies assume it's time to wake up. When it's dark, we release melatonin, which relaxes the body and helps us to drift off. It's no surprise that many more of us struggle to adjust to a new sleeping pattern during British Summer Time!

There's nothing worse than being rudely awoken by the early morning sun, so try blackout blinds or an eye mask. If you like to read in bed, buy a dimmer light. You can also purchase alarm clocks with handy light settings, which dim slowly to help you drift off, and then brighten to wake you gradually in the morning. The biggest no-no is mobile phones and computer screens; these LED displays glow with blue light, which suppresses melatonin even more.

Comfort

Your bed is by far the most significant element of a good night's rest. It is near impossible to get a deep, effective sleep on an old, uncomfortable bed. Mattresses lacking comfort, space and support are likely to leave you waking tired and achy.

Everyone is made differently, which is why different beds suit different bodies. You should select the best mattress for you, offering the correct support and comfort for your weight and build. When we're asleep it's recommended that we maintain a good posture; a mattress too soft will cause us to slouch, while one that's too firm can apply pressure to our hips and shoulders. For more information on how to choose a bed visit the National Bed Federation.

Gadgets & Gizmos

Bedrooms are a place for rest, relaxation and intimacy. Unfortunately, many of us consider our bedrooms as extensions of our living rooms and studies, and so introduce digital distractions into the mix. While there's nothing wrong with watching a film, playing games or answering emails, these tasks should not be completed in bed.

Your bedroom is your sanctuary – a calm, relaxed space that has no requirement for technological toys. TVs, computers, phones and tablets prevent us from falling asleep, and can also be disruptive throughout the night. Beeps, buzzes and even the tiniest standby lights can wreak havoc with the body's circadian rhythm, so make sure everything is switched off at the mains or, even better, banned completely!

Noise

It goes without saying that loud, sudden or repetitive noises can interrupt sleep. You can use foam ear plugs, which are particularly effective in the warmer months when you may leave a window open.

While certain noises cause interrupted sleep, soft, steady sounds can be soothing. Some people have found that 'white noise' tapes help them fall asleep and sleep more soundly, others prefer the low familiar tones (much like Wayne Rooney, who favours the sound of a vacuum cleaner or hairdryer to help him drift off!)

Relaxation

The final step in creating a perfect sleeping environment is to make it relaxing. The bedroom should be an oasis of calm and tranquility – uncluttered and devoted to the land of dreams.

There are many ways you can relax before bed. Try running a warm bubble bath around an hour before bedtime, which will help you to wind down and gently raise your temperature, thus triggering the sleep mechanism as you cool.

Scents such as lavender and geranium are naturally calming, so invest in some essential oils to help you drift off. You can put these oils on a tissue near the bed so they do not overwhelm you. Less is more with essential oils and most are not to be used neat on the skin. A loved ones scent can also help create a relaxing environment.

Wind down with warm, milky drinks and herbal teas, which are a good alternative to a late night caffeinated cuppa or alcohol, and swap late night texting or social media scrolling for a good book. Spending half an hour reading is much more beneficial to your sleep, as bright screens are counterproductive to your sleep cycle. You could also play some soft, soothing music and practice yoga or breathing techniques. All of these activities will put you in the right frame of mind for sleeping.

<https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/perfect-sleep-environment/>

Your bedroom

If you're having trouble sleeping, one of the first things to consider is your bedroom. In order to get a restful night's sleep you need the right setting, which means a clean, peaceful and welcoming room. Many of us are unknowingly sleeping in a bedroom that's simply not fit for purpose, and that environment could be the key cause of a restless night.

Fortunately, it's relatively easy to transform your bedroom into a space that encourages a peaceful night's sleep. Here are our top tips:

- When it's time for bed, make your room completely dark. This can be achieved with a blackout blind or curtains, an additional window dressing, or even an eye mask.
- A tidy room makes for a tidy mind... and a restful night's sleep! De-clutter your bedroom and create a space that's clean, neat and simple. Even just relocating the laundry basket, stacking up some books or blitzing your bedside table can make a real difference.

- Add special touches to the space, which will help you feel more connected and peaceful. Family photographs, plants, flowers and ornaments will help to create a room that's pleasant and relaxing.
- Avoid using certain colours when decorating. Remember that bright reds, yellows and oranges are jarring, while browns and whites are boring and drab. Instead, choose soft, muted tones that will make you feel calm.

Your Bed

The foundation of a great night's sleep is a comfortable bed. The right mattress can make a huge difference between a restful and restless night, saving you from fatigue and irritability for the rest of the day. An unsupportive mattress will encourage a poor sleeping posture, which prevents you from good sleep. If you regularly wake up with aches and pains, it's probably time to change your mattress.

- Always put quality above price. Of course, there are some perfectly acceptable low-priced mattresses available, but when it comes to your bed, spend as much as you can afford.
- The right support is crucial. If your bed is too hard or soft, it will be uncomfortable and unsupportive. Your mattress should be firm enough to support your spine in the correct alignment while conforming to your body's contours. (Remember memory foam toppers)
- Always try before you buy! Lay down on each bed that you're seriously considering, spending a good 10-15 minutes realising its comfort and support levels.
- Avoid waiting until your bed has 'worn out' completely. Research shows that sleeping on an uncomfortable mattress can rob you of up to one hour's sleep per night, which adds up to a full night's sleep over the course of a week! You should consider changing your bed after seven years.

Your lifestyle

There are simple ways to adjust your lifestyle to promote a better night's sleep. These minor changes will help you to wind down and relax, removing you from the hectic, technology-crammed world that we live in.

- Reduce the intensity of artificial light in your home by using dimmer switches or low wattage bulbs.
- Maintain a regular bedtime routine and sleep pattern.
- Use a hot water bottle if you get cold.
- Avoid drinking alcohol or caffeine before bed.
- Switch off your tech a couple of hours before bedtime – that includes your phone!
- Empty your bladder before bed, and try not to consume too many liquids before you sleep.
- Don't nap during the day.

Stress and Worry

Scientists have found a direct correlation between anxiety and rhythm of sleep. When a person is anxious, their heart rate increases, which causes the brain to 'race', too. An alert mind produces beta waves, making you far too stimulated to sleep. To make matters worse, an active brain triggers other worries, so it's even harder to achieve sleep.

Once this pattern sets in, bedtime can become a thing of anxiety. So how can you combat the stress of sleeping?

There are several techniques to banish anxiety and calm your heart rate. Cognitive behavioural therapy is one of them, helping people to 'unlearn' thought processes through psychological treatment.

You can also manage your heart rate by placing your hand on your heart and listen for the beating. Breathe in deeply for four-seconds, and then breathe out slowly. Repeat this until you can feel your heart rate slowing, which in turn slows down your busy brain activity.

Eliminate your anxious thoughts by practising the speaking technique. This means voicing the thoughts that would otherwise live in your head. Speaking aloud overrides thinking, which stops your negative thoughts in their tracks. Practise by thinking the alphabet in your head, and when you reach 'J', start speaking out loud. What happened to the alphabet? Well, you stopped thinking it in your head, because speaking overrode those thoughts. Use this technique when you start worrying in bed: instead of thinking 'the mortgage is due and I don't have the money to pay it', say aloud 'we will find a way to pay the mortgage this month.'

Diet

They say you are what you eat, and when it comes to getting a restful night's sleep, the food and drink you consume has a drastic effect. The best foods for sleep include milk, cherries, chicken and rice, while fatty meat, curry and alcohol are some of the worst. Some people choose not to eat after 6pm, as late meals can make it difficult to sleep. However, if you are eating before bed, remember that there are three main chemicals that promote good sleep: tryptophan, serotonin and melatonin. Here's how you can include them in your diet.

Tryptophan

All proteins involve amino acids, and tryptophan is one of them. It is, however, the rarest amino acid, but it can still be found in turkey and chicken, as well as pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, peanuts and beans. Milk also involves a small amount of tryptophan. When this chemical reaches the brain, it converts into serotonin.

Serotonin

You may be most familiar with this sleep-promoting chemical, which is connected to drugs like Prozac. Serotonin carries messages between neurones and other cells, and when levels are decreased, individuals can feel anxious, depressed and crave carbohydrates. At night time, serotonin undergoes metabolic changes to become melatonin, the chemical that induces sleep.

Melatonin

Melatonin is a hormone that helps to regulate the body's circadian rhythm, promoting a restful sleep. The best way to ensure optimal melatonin production is to sleep in a dark environment. Even low amounts of light can suppress the production of melatonin, which not only affects sleep, but has other health consequences too.

We can offer plenty of dietary advice to help you sleep better:

- Always combine a protein food with a low to medium glycemic index carbohydrate, which optimises tryptophan levels.
- Avoid stimulants like caffeine and cigarettes.
- Avoid sedatives, such as sleeping pills and alcohol, to help you sleep. They have short term benefits and long term counter effects, such as dependency.
- Don't buy melatonin supplements online. They are only available on prescription in the UK. Taking prescribed melatonin will disrupt your own natural melatonin production, potentially suppressing your ability to generate this important hormone.
- Don't stop taking sleep medication suddenly. The best course of action is to speak to a doctor and develop a strategy to slowly wean yourself off in a healthy manner.
- Changing your diet can help you sleep, but it takes time. Start a sleep diary to keep track of your progress, and don't give up if you see no sudden improvement – sleeping soundly takes practice!

Exercise

Sports and exercise can help you to enjoy a better quality of sleep. Working out effectively can tire your body out gently, promoting a better night's sleep. Releasing pent up tension through exercise is also highly beneficial, helping to banish stress before bedtime. Exercising also lowers your body's temperature, which induces better sleep. However, there are several things to keep in mind when exercising to improve your sleeping habits.

- Don't overdo it. Contrary to popular belief, wearing yourself out physically is not likely to induce sleepiness. In fact, it can often be counter productive, leading to additional alertness when trying to sleep.
- It's believed that exercising close to bedtime can disturb sleep, however there is no evidence to back this argument. As such, exercising in the evening is much better than not exercising at all!
- When it comes to exercise, the most important thing is to feel fitter and healthier. If you are experiencing sleeping problems, try to exercise a little more or change the type of activities you do. Yoga is renowned for its relaxation and sleep benefits, while moderate-aerobic exercise like walking has been found to help people fall asleep more quickly.

Relaxation and Other Therapies

Relax Your Body

This method is best done in bed, though it can also be practiced throughout the day if you're in the right environment. By relaxing separate groups of muscles, you become more aware of your body and able to wind down mindfully.

1. Tense a muscle, for example your bicep, by contracting for 7-10 seconds. Flex it gently – do not strain.
2. At the same time, visualise the muscle being tensed, consciously feeling the build up of tension.
3. Release the muscle abruptly and then relax, allowing the body to go limp. Take a few moments before moving on to the next muscle.
4. Remember to keep the rest of your body relaxed whilst working on a particular muscle.

Stimulus Control – The 20 Minute Rule

We should all go to bed when we're tired, but if you're not asleep after twenty minutes, it's recommended that you get up and find another activity to do. This should be quiet and peaceful, and not involve your phone or other digital displays. Listening to music, reading or doing yoga are all recommended as great 20 Minute Rule activities. Remember HOUSE CLEANING as well ;-)

When you feel sleepy again, you should return to bed. The idea of this method is to build a strong association between bed and sleeping, and eventually you'll be able to fall asleep quickly.

Take a hot bath

Your temperature naturally dips at night, starting two hours before sleep and bottoming out at 4 a.m. or 5 a.m., according to a 1997 study conducted by New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center in White Plains, N.Y. When you soak in a hot tub, your temperature rises—and the rapid cool-down period immediately afterward relaxes you.

Two hours before bed, soak in the tub for 20 or 30 minutes, recommends Joyce Walsleben, PhD, associate professor at New York University School of Medicine. "If you raise your temperature a degree or two with a bath, the steeper drop at bedtime is more likely to put you in a deep sleep," she says. A shower is less effective but can work, as well.

Music

You don't need scientific research to tell you that listening to music can calm your mind and help you relax. But here it is anyway.

As long as a song or musical number is string-instrument based, with minimal brass and percussion, it has the potential to bring on drowsiness by decreasing anxiety, blood pressure and heart and respiratory rates. Findings suggest that music around 60 beats per minute (the low end of a healthy resting heart rate) can trigger your brain to synchronise your heart rate with the musical beat, and classical does this best.

Just keep in mind that two to three tracks probably won't do the trick. You may need to spend at least 45 minutes in a relaxed position in your bed, listening, to feel the effects. And it could take consecutive days of listening before you find your eyelids drooping to the beat.

According to Gabe Turow, the organizer of a Stanford University symposium that looked at therapeutic benefits of musical rhythm, "Listening to music seems to be able to change brain functioning to the same extent as medication, in many circumstances."

Is there one perfect song that will put me to sleep?

Actually, there is, according to the British Academy of Sound Therapy. The institution, collaborating with the Manchester band Marconi Union, said it used scientific theory to produce the world's most relaxing song ever, "Weightless." If you Google Weightless by Marconi Union you will find it free on youtube. You can also play it from www.martinroddis.com/sleep

Singing Bowl music - <https://youtu.be/ujyu7tkyxtw>

Marconi union - <https://youtu.be/sYoqCJNPxv4>