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THE LEARNING BRAIN

Each week in BCPVPA eNews, we share tips, links and self-assessment tools that will help our members to better understand the mental health continuum, and to use the resources that are available.
bcpvpa.bc.ca/thelearningbrain

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CHILLING OUT



Learning to relax, calming your thoughts and sleeping well are not only important techniques for preventative health, but are powerful tools when you feel you are slipping to the **'Reacting'** quadrant of the Mental Health Continuum.

No excuses. Finding time to relax is not selfish, it is not 'lazy' and it is not unproductive.

That is just the 'little voice' in your head that you or someone in your past — like a parent — have trained you to think.

In fact, it can be the opposite. It is self care, for you and for those in your care, and it gives your mind and body that much needed space to repair, refresh and reenergize.

As Spring Break is upon us, now is the time to give back to your mind and body and fuel up your energy banks through rest and quality sleep.

Be proactive in getting rest! How? Check out this 8 minute video by Alex Pang:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QGef0CCTy8>

The Importance of Sleep

Why do we need to sleep? According to

<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/sleep-deprivation-and-deficiency>

... sleep plays a vital role in good health and well-being throughout your life. Getting enough quality sleep at the right times can help protect your mental health, physical health, quality of life, and safety.

During sleep, your body is working to support healthy brain function and maintain your physical health.

In children and teens, sleep also helps support growth and development.

Sleep helps your brain work properly. While you're sleeping, your brain is preparing for the next day. It's forming new pathways to help you learn and remember information. Studies show that a good night's sleep improves learning. Sleep also helps you pay attention, make decisions, and be creative.

The damage from sleep deficiency can occur in an instant (such as a car crash), or it can harm you over time. For example, ongoing sleep deficiency can raise your risk for some chronic health problems. It also can affect how well you think, react, work, learn, and get along with others. Studies also show that sleep deficiency alters activity in some parts of the brain. If you're sleep deficient, you may have trouble making decisions, solving problems, controlling your emotions and behavior, and coping with change. Sleep deficiency also has been linked to depression, suicide, and risk-taking behavior.

Safety becomes a significant issue when you are sleep deprived due to an increased risk of accidents as the body attempts to balance the need for sleep. Without adequate sleep, the brain will seek out rest through short sleep attacks called microsleeps. These microsleeps render you unable to process environmental stimulation and sensory information for a brief amount of time. Your eyes may remain open during these episodes, but you have essentially “zoned out.” These can be quite sudden, thereby the consequences of a sleep-deprived individual operating heavy machinery or driving can be catastrophic to you as well as others.

Source: <http://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/healthy/matters/consequences/sleep-and-disease-risk>

CALL OUT:

Did you know that driving on 5 or less hours of sleep is like driving drunk?
You are 1.9 times as likely to get in a car accident.

What kinds of sleep problems can you have?

- Trouble falling asleep: lying in bed for more than 30 minutes without being able to fall asleep
- Trouble staying asleep: waking up frequently during the night
- Early morning waking: waking in the early hours of the morning before you need to get up but not being able to fall back asleep
- Behaviours that interfere with sleep: such as snoring, grinding your teeth, restless legs, sleep walking and breathing problems
- Sleeping too much or for too long
- Excessive sleepiness or urge to nap during the day
- Excessive fatigue or lack of energy

How much sleep do I really need?

The Public Health Agency of Canada recommends the following sleep times:

- Toddlers: 11-14 hours a night
- Preschoolers: 10-13 hours a night
- School-aged children: 9-11 hours a night
- Teens: 8-10 hours a night
- Adults: 7-9 hours a night
- Older adults: 7-8 hours a night

Source: <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/wellness-module/wellness-module-6-getting-a-good-nights-sleep>

The main symptom of ongoing sleep loss is excessive daytime sleepiness, but other symptoms include:

• yawning • moodiness • fatigue • irritability • depressed mood • difficulty learning new concepts • forgetfulness • inability to concentrate or a “fuzzy” head • lack of motivation	• clumsiness • increased appetite and carbohydrate cravings • reduced sex drive • reduced tendency to think positively • a decreased willingness to solve problems • a greater tendency towards superstitious and magical thinking • intolerance and less empathy toward others • poor impulse control • inability to delay gratification
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Source: <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/307334#effects>

Sleep Apnea

Sleep Apnea is a sleep disorder that slows or stops breathing for 10 seconds or more at a time. Signs of sleep apnea include not feeling rested after a night's sleep, feeling sleepy during the day, waking up with a headache and loud snoring. It can lead to serious health issues, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, depression and diabetes.

Read more about sleep apnea here:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/chronic-diseases/sleep-apnea.html>

Be wary though! There are lots of “clinics” advertising free sleep apnea testing who are retailers selling the CPAP machine for sleep apnea. If you think you might be suffering from sleep apnea, contact your physician. If you go for testing, make sure your physician reviews the results and confirms your condition *BEFORE* you spend your money!

Improving Your Sleep

You can improve the quality and amount of your sleep.

Use a Sleep Diary

Finding the right solution often includes gathering some ‘data’ to target your sleep challenge. You may wish to track your behaviours and sleep quality to see if there are any patterns to when you sleep well vs. when you sleep poorly and what environmental or behavioural factors may have contributed to your quality of sleep.

When I did an online search, I found several examples of sleep diaries, and I have included a few links below. You may prefer one to another, or may search to find a diary style that works for you. Using a sleep diary for a week may help reveal what may be impacting your sleep!

Examples of Sleep Diaries

<https://www.anxietycanada.com/sites/default/files/SleepDiary.pdf>

(Personally, I like this one. Simple and easy to use!)

<https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/wellness-module/wellness-module-6-getting-a-good-nights-sleep>

<https://www.sleepfoundation.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/SleepDiaryv6.pdf>

TIPS to Improve Sleep

My personal strategies include:

A warm bath or shower 45 minutes before bed. As your body cools, this prepares you for sleep.

Stretching before bed helps me relax faster. We hold so much tension in our muscles, we need to allow it to release.

Taking a Magnesium supplement before bed. Speak to your physician or naturopath to see if this is something that would help you as well.

If it has been a particularly stressful day or am feeling anxious, I do belly breathing (See video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRSbxS-uG9A>)

If you have young children – they can do this as well: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mZbzDOpyIA

I listen to sleep music or sleep frequencies. There are so many of these online, find one that works for you.

Here is an example to get you started: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fgc0HiFNCoI>

For those who like videos – here are some sleep tips: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSJa4vxeIXY>

There is also further information from the *heretohelp* website.

Click on this link for more detail per Tip noted below.

<https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/wellness-module/wellness-module-6-getting-a-good-nights-sleep>

Tip #1

Avoid caffeine close to bedtime

Some people have problems sleeping when they have consumed too much caffeine.

This is especially true as you get older.

Tip #2

Avoid alcohol close to bedtime

It might feel like drinking alcohol helps you fall asleep faster, but alcohol can disrupt your sleep.

Tip #3

Unwind

Stress has a big impact on sleep, so it's important to take time to relax before bed.

Click here for some relaxation techniques:

<https://www.concordia.ca/students/health/topics/stress-management/strategies-that-address-the-symptoms-of-stress-relaxation-strategies.html>

Screen time is stimulating and the blue light emitted by devices can affect sleep, so it's best to avoid watching TV, going online or using other electronic devices at least 30 minutes before bed.

Tip #4

Exercise a few hours before bedtime

Research shows that people who exercise regularly (30 to 60 minutes, three times a week) have deeper sleep. Exercising gives you a boost of energy, so it's best to exercise four to eight hours before bedtime. It is not wise, however, to exercise within 2 hours of going to bed as this may make it hard to fall asleep.

Tip #5

Follow the same routine

Try to keep the same sleep and wake schedule every day—including weekends.

Keeping a consistent schedule helps your body get into a routine.

Tip #6

Avoid naps if you experience sleep problems

Naps aren't necessarily a problem, but for some, naps may interfere with sleep at night.

If you experience problems with sleep, consider cutting out naps to see if your sleep improves. In all cases, it's best to keep naps short, around 30 minutes at most, to minimize disruptions to your normal sleep patterns.

Tip #7

Avoid going to bed too hungry or too full

Eating balanced, healthy meals and snacks at regular times throughout the day will help with a good night's sleep. Try to avoid eating a large meal in the two hours before bedtime. Consider a light, healthy snack if you're still hungry just before going to bed.

Tip #8

Get up if you do not fall asleep within half an hour

Get up if you don't fall asleep within 30 minutes. Leave your bedroom and do something relaxing like listening to soft music, taking a bath, drinking a warm caffeine-free beverage or meditating. Avoid watching TV or going on a screen during this time. Go back to bed once you feel very drowsy. At first, this strategy might feel like it's making things worse because you may have a few sleepless nights. However, after several nights, it will become easier to fall asleep and stay asleep. Be consistent in your use of this strategy. Studies show it is very effective in reversing sleep problems.

Tip #9

Make your bedroom comfortable and only use it for sleeping

A mattress with good support and comfortable bedding (invest in a good pillow!) are helpful. Make sure your room is not too hot or too cold—slightly cool is best (18 degrees C). Don't use your bed for watching TV, working, studying or any other mentally stimulating activities, especially if you are already experiencing sleep problems.³

Tip #10

Challenge the belief you can't function without a perfect night's sleep

When you can't sleep, you might check the clock and worry about getting through the upcoming day. This increases anxiety and makes it even harder to fall back asleep. Turn the clock away from your view. Remind yourself that you can likely do your daily activities even when you feel tired (unless this would pose a danger to yourself or others).

Technology to help sleep

Technology can also help us get better sleep. Online, there are many videos and apps from sleep music and frequencies, to guided body scans to relaxation techniques. Many of the mindfulness apps have a sleep component (we will look more at mindfulness in the next issue). For example, many of you may already be familiar with Calm.com app that includes sleep meditation, sleep music and sleep stories – for both you and your children. Finally, if you are still struggling getting quality sleep, there is also online help, customized for you. Check out organizations like <https://www.haleo.ca/en> with an evidence-based approach using tools and sleep therapists to help coach you towards a better sleep experience!

So: do you have a sleep tip that's worked wonders for you?



We'll be posing that question on Twitter and Instagram this week. Follow **@bcpvpa** to read, engage, share and comment!

Next week

Calming a Reacting Mind