Beyond Counting Sheep: Strategies for Better Zzz's

Trouble falling and staying asleep is a huge problem for many working in health care particularly those who do shift work. Below are some helpful suggestions, many based on rigorous research. As always, however, the list is not meant to trigger self-criticism. Everyone will experience trouble sleeping especially during times of increase stress and uncertainty. Wee are all trying to do the best we can to get the sleep we need. Sometimes we will need the help of sleep aids particularly during stressful times. There is no judgement about this. The suggestions below, when practiced overtime can help promote better zzz's. Be kind and patient with yourself as you work towards improving your sleep.

Behavioural

Limit Screen Time –Avoid screen time when it's bedtime. Research has shown that looking at screens, (i.e. TV's, ipads, phones, etc.), before bed, actually stimulates the brain to stay awake and suppresses our body's ability to produce melatonin. This leads to difficulties falling and staying asleep as will the content of what you are watching or reading. Try turning off your devices 30 minutes before you go to bed or using blue light filters on devices. Be very choosy about what you are exposing yourself to, choose pleasant and boring over stress inducing content.

Get Enough Exercise – If we don't expend enough energy during the day, our bodies will find it more difficult to fall asleep.

Avoid Big Meals Before Bed – Going to bed on a full stomach can interfere with sleep. Our bodies will be working hard to digest food. Try to eat dinner early and then have a light snack in the evening.

Follow a Routine –Create and follow a realistic routine to prepare for sleep including after night shifts. This will help the body recognize that it's time for sleep. Some parts of a healthy bedtime routine could include:

- Having a light, healthy snack
- Taking a warm bath
- Brushing your teeth,
- Listen to relaxing sounds or music
- Engaging in meditation or gentle yoga

Practice Relaxation - prior to bed, engage in a relaxation exercise, (eg. progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, read something pleasant, gratitude practice, etc.)

Take a Mental Vacation Before Bed - replay a favorite vacation in your head in as much detail as possible, using all your senses to remember what it was like so that you can actually trick your

mind and body into believing you are there and can relax into sleep. This is also very helpful for when you may wake up in the middle of sleep as a way of getting back to sleep.

Go to Sleep at a Consistent Time– If you have a regular bed time, your body will begin to expect sleep at that time. If you work shifts try to keep a consistent sleep time according to your shift.

Avoid Naps During the Day – Sleeping during the day can really interfere with sleep at night. Your brain can get your days and nights mixed up. Experiment with whether napping helps or inhibits, if you work night shifts.

Try to Get Lots of Natural Sunlight During the Day – Go outside as much as you can during the day. When you're not able to get outside, sit near a window, if possible, to ensure you're getting lots of natural light. It's important that your body and brain recognize the difference between daytime and nighttime.

Limit Caffeine and Sugar, Especially Close to Bedtime – There has been an abundance of research that supports increased caffeine intake interferes with sleep. If you're drinking caffeine to stay awake, try not to drink any within four hours of the end of your shift to give your body time to flush it out. Read labels to look for caffeine and sugar content in items you consume regularly.

Do Try a Relaxation/Meditation Practice as you Settle to go to Sleep – before bed is a good time to practice skills that settle the body like progressive relaxation, guided meditation, or gratitude practice which can encourage more pleasant thoughts

Don't Stay in Bed if You Can't Fall Asleep - get up and read awhile to relax or do some other activity that is calming. Otherwise, you'll set yourself up for tossing and turning.

Avoid Alcohol Before Bed – Alcohol depresses the nervous system, so a nightcap may help some people fall asleep. But this effect disappears after a few hours and may even lead to waking up throughout the night. Alcohol can also worsen snoring and other sleep breathing problems. Avoid drinking alcoholic beverages before bedtime. Although the sedative effect helps you fall asleep, it will reduce the quality of your sleep.

Avoid Smoking Before Bed- Nicotine is a stimulant and could get in the way of you falling asleep.

Avoid the Use of Sleeping Pills – people who rely on sleeping pills can develop dependencies, making it increasingly difficult to fall asleep without them.

Avoid Drinking Too Much – Drinking too much fluid before bed can lead to nighttime wakening for trips to the bathroom. Try to limit how much you are drinking close to bed time.

Practise Self-Compassion – When all else fails and you simply can't sleep because of racing thoughts, forgive yourself and be kind. Becoming critical will only increase the stress and further impede sleep. Can you just care for yourself like you would maybe care for a child who

was struggling to sleep after a bad dream? Think about what you would do and say to comfort the child and try it on yourself.

Environmental

Ensure Your Room is Dark - artificial light mimics natural light to keep you from sleep. One of the best things for sleep is to eliminate all lights possible. That means don't leave a lamp on, remove any night-lights, and get heavy curtains or blackout blinds to eliminate outside light. This is particularly important for shift workers needing to sleep during day light hours. Make your environment favorable to sleep (e.g., keeping your bedroom dark, cool and quiet). Wearing an eye mask may also help. For shift workers it may help to go straight to bed after work. Try to decrease your exposure to light by at least 30 minutes before attempting to sleep. Try wearing sunglasses on your way home, if possible.

Introduce White Noisel – Some people actually find it easier to sleep with some white noise playing in the background. Try to use a timer so that the white noise doesn't run all night as this may contribute to nighttime wakening.

Turn Your Clock Around - having a clock or alarm clock in your line of vision when trying to fall asleep. Looking at the time may make you feel anxious.

Use Your Bed Only for Sleep - Avoid doing other activities in your bed, (e.g. eating, doing work, watching TV, etc.) If we use our bed only for sleep, our brains will be trained that when we get into bed, it means it's for sleeping.

Find the Right Temperature - In general, the suggested bedroom temperature should be between 15 and 19 degrees Celsius for optimal sleep.

Try a Weighted Blanket – Some people have found that using a weighted blanket helps them get to sleep faster and can reduce the amount of nighttime wakening.

Introduce Soothing Smells – There is some evidence that certain scents, (e.g. Lavender), can promote relaxation and sleep. Try using a lavender hand lotion or a Diffuser before bed.

Limit Exposure to Negative Media - Exposing ourselves to negative media can lead to increased negative/distressing thoughts at bedtime. These distressing thoughts can significantly impact our ability to fall asleep and stay asleep.

Let Others Know Your Sleeping- if possible turn the ringer off your phone. Ask family to limit noise and visitors while sleeping. This is especially important for shift workers.