

A Game Plan for Sound Sleep

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“Why can’t I just get a good night of sleep?” I hear this question quite frequently in my practice, and I know I’m not alone. A survey by the National Sleep Foundation found that 60% of Americans reported having sleep problems almost every night, and 25% take a prescription medication to help them sleep. In my practice, I do sometimes refer patients for sleep medication; however, my hope is that this will be a *temporary* aid to help get their body back on track. While not as easy as taking a pill, developing good “sleep hygiene” is a far superior strategy to improve both sleep and overall health, not to mention the sense of confidence in being able to have mastery over one’s body.

The following eight strategies can help you develop good sleep hygiene:

1. **Honor the Golden Hour.** Ideally, everything you do after dinner should be geared toward winding your body down for sleep. But who are we kidding? With busy lives as they are (a big contributor to the problem in the first place), this isn’t going to happen. So, make that last hour before going to sleep sacred, doing only those things which will promote good sleep.
2. **Get into the Routine.** Our bodies adjust quite nicely to routine. Keeping our circadian rhythm (the fancy term of sleep-wake cycle) as regular as possible facilitates sound sleep. This means keeping the same times for going to sleep and waking, and for most sleeping 7-8 hours each night. Keeping the same wake-up time is especially important, so even if you’re a bit late getting to bed one night or have trouble getting to sleep, get up at that time anyway – you’ll benefit from it that next night.
3. **No Staring at a Screen.** iPad or iPhone, laptop or desktop, good old fashioned TV – leave them all dark during the golden hour. Staring at a screen is counter to grounding the body. Many people will say, “This is how I relax at night.” I have to point out that what they’re really doing is escaping – disconnecting from their body and mind so they don’t feel. The problem when you can’t sleep is that you’re feeling your everything too much and can turn it down. Many use the TV as their anesthesia to get to sleep – yes it works, but quality of sleep suffers. Even if it’s the enjoyable video game, refrain from the temptation.
4. **Avoid Eating in the Golden Hour.** Whatever you put into your body will affect how well you sleep. Eating at night means the digestive system needs to work instead of rest. Give it a rest. Having a cup of chamomile tea or warm milk is a good idea. Each have calming properties (this isn’t just an old wives’ tale).

5. **Exercise, Exercise.** Regular exercise is necessary for overall health, and that includes promoting sound sleep. Studies have repeatedly borne this out. A general recommendation is that sleep should come earlier in the day and not in the Golden Hour as exercise has the effect of energizing the body. This however is not always the case as some may find strenuous exercise before bedtime beneficial. Learn what's best for your body. If you're like most, workout earlier in the day and try some light stretching, yoga or tai-chi before bedtime.
6. **Ground the Body, Mind & Spirit.** Mindfulness exercises – deep breathing, muscle relaxation, meditation, and prayer – are among the most recommended activities to do in the Golden Hour. They help ground the body, helping you experience calm while being aware of your body (unlike the escaping discussed in strategy 3). Guided exercises are often helpful as they slow down the pace and direct you. Many of these are available on YouTube – and you only have to listen and follow along, not watch.
7. **Reading & Writing.** These can be good wind down activities, depending on what you do. Reading for enjoyment, or spiritual reading is often fine; reading over that work project that you've yet to finish isn't. Nor is reading the thriller novel that gets your heart pounding. Writing in a gratitude journal is a good idea. An examination of conscience may also be a good idea, assuming it doesn't stir up to many anxiety or depressive issues.
8. **“My soul is restless until it rests in you.”** The ancient words of St. Augustine speak wisdom. At the end of the day, we have to realize we can't control everything, we have to let it go and turn it over. Where does your soul find rest? Connect with your God or higher power as a last thought before the lights go out and put it in his hands.

Sleep is a lynch pin to health. Try these strategies to develop a game plan that works for you. If your sleep doesn't improve, seek out psychological support – there's probably more going on that needs attention. For more information about sleep, visit the National Sleep Foundation website at www.sleepfoundation.org