**Sleep your way to better mental health**

Few things beat a good night’s rest. From a physical health point of view, studies show that restorative sleep helps with a range of critical body functions, restores your energy, helps repair muscle tissue and boosts both your metabolism and immune system.

Another advantage of a good night of ZZZs? The positive impact on your mental health by refining your cognitive skills and regulating emotions.

The relationship between sleep and mental health is two-way. Multiple studies show that poor sleep or sleep deprivation negatively affects our psychological state. When you’re experiencing mental health issues, your sleep patterns are often disturbed. You may battle to fall asleep or wake up at various times throughout the night. At the same time, poor sleep can contribute to – and worsen – mental health problems including depression and other mood disorders, anxiety disorders and attention deficit disorders.

**The effects of poor sleep**

Christine Brophy, VP of Behavior Change at Vitality Group suggests building “sleep hygiene routines” that promote good quality sleep. “About half of us are kept awake by stress and 1 in 3 people experience insomnia,” she says. “Seven to nine hours of sleep a night is recommended for optimal health for most people, but this isn’t always easy to achieve, with work being the number-one reason people cut back on sleep.”

“Without question, a lack of sleep takes its toll on our mental abilities – our mental reasoning skills suffer, and our decision-making processes become challenged.” This may result in making mistakes on the job, poor performance and productivity.

Your emotional capacity is also stressed. Think about the last time you had a poor night of sleep. You likely got up the next morning feeling groggy, irritable – and even anxious and lacking concentration and focus. This makes a full, productive workday impossible, which heightens feelings of stress. It also makes it harder for you to cope with even the smallest of challenges in daily life which may impact your personal relationships, too.

“A big priority for us at Vitality is to continue to add health education content, interventions and incentives to our wellbeing program to help our members achieve good quality sleep,” adds Brophy. “Staying ahead of sleep problems is crucial to help protect overall mental health and wellbeing.”

**Tips for a more restorative sleep**

Did you know that our sleep habits change as we age? Adults up to the age of around 60 need 7-9 hours of sleep, which decreases to 7-8 hours per night for people who are 65+. Here are our tried-and-tested sleep hygiene tips to help you get the sleep you deserve:

1. **Give yourself a bedtime and wake-time.**

Have a set ‘bedtime’ and try to maintain a steady sleep schedule, even on the weekends. Just as importantly, make sure you have a set ‘wake-time’ in the morning. We are creatures of habit so getting into a routine is a helpful way to prepare our bodies for more consistent sleeping patterns.

1. **De-stress – before the mattress.**

Wind down in the evenings as it gets closer to bedtime. Light a candle. Read a book. Or try relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises and light stretching.

1. **Say ‘no’ to that late-day cup of coffee.**

Save your coffee for the morning. You’ll thank yourself for avoiding caffeine (as well as reducing alcohol) at least 4 hours before bedtime. If you’re more sensitive to the stimulant, avoid caffeine from midday.

1. **Bye-bye nightime tech.**

Dimming the lights and putting away your phone or smart device helps to prepare the body for sleep. Try to charge your phone in a separate room so you’re not tempted to use it late at night. For more on this, read our Vitality article on the link between technology and mental health.

1. **Good sleep starts during the day.**

Practise healthy habits like regular exercise and try to get natural light exposure during the day. This will help to regulate your body’s sleep-wake cycle.

1. **Get tracking.**

Most wearable devices now offer sleep tracking functionality. This means you’re able to monitor your sleep patterns for a clearer view of how you’re sleeping. This data can then help you to make adjustments to improve your sleep quantity and quality.

“What is reassuring,” adds Brophy, “is that practicing good sleep habits can help with disordered sleep like trouble falling asleep or staying asleep and likewise many sleep disorders such as insomnia and sleep apnoea can be resolved or mediated when under the care of a doctor.” If your sleep patterns have changed and you’re not sleeping as well as you used to, speak to your doctor. They’ll be able to help you determine if there’s an underlying medical or mental health condition causing your poor sleep and help you get the right types of treatment.

Living a healthy life with healthy habits can get you the restorative rest you need. **Find out more here** about how to get more active and eat more healthily with Vitality.