# The Importance of Sleep

We've all skipped a slumber from time to time. We've all felt the effects of doing so, as well. Sleep is critical to our health and overall well-being. That is why we struggle so immensely when we are lacking in sleep. Without sleep, our relationships, health, mood, and overall quality of life will be negatively impacted. The more you know about sleep, the better off you will be. That is why we would like to take some time to educate you this Better Sleep Month.

## What Causes Sleep Deprivation

Many of us have experienced moments when we struggle to get to sleep. When those moments of struggle turn into days, weeks, or months of tossing and turning, you will likely find yourself wondering just what is going on.

Sleep deprivation can generally be attributed to chronic low-quality or lack of sleep. The average adult is estimated to need at least [seven hours of sleep](https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2016/p0215-enough-sleep.html#:~:text=The%20American%20Academy%20of%20Sleep,optimal%20health%20and%20well%2Dbeing.) a night in order to function at their best. When a person chronically struggles to hit this goal, their physical and mental health will experience long-term adverse effects.

There are many reasons one may experience a loss of sleep, including:

* Stress
* Sleep apnea
* Insomnia
* Restless leg syndrome
* Medical ailments and illnesses
* Mental and psychological illnesses
* Certain life events like having a newborn or having an excess of work to get done

## What Happens During Sleep?

Our bodies and mind need sleep to function at their best. When we sleep, our body recovers and heals itself, repairing the damage and fatigue it has endured throughout the day. Sleep is typically made up of four different [sleep stages](https://www.sleepfoundation.org/how-sleep-works/what-happens-when-you-sleep) we work through as we experience multiple sleep cycles.

The first three stages are considered non-REM sleep. Stages one and two are the lighter sleep cycles in which our body is slowly making its way into a deeper slumber to begin its recovery process. Stage three is considered a deep slumber. This is when your brain and body enter recovery mode.

The fourth and final sleep cycle stage is called rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. During this stage, one's brain becomes much more active, showing activity levels similar to when awake. While our brain is more active, our body remains in rest mode. Because of this, REM sleep tends to be associated with the most vivid dreams of the whole sleep cycle.

## The Effects of Sleep Deprivation

 Without sleep, a person cannot function to their highest abilities. That is because your brain and body need to rest in order to pursue the recovery process. Without a quality night of sleep, every system within the body and mind will malfunction, causing a multitude of issues, like:

### A Weakened Immune System

We all know it is highly recommended to rest as much as possible when sick, but do you know why? Your immune system depends on sleep in order to build the antibodies and cytokines needed to combat harmful bacteria and viruses.

### Disruption in the Central Nervous System

The central nervous system comprises the brain and spinal cord. Our brain thinks, plans, feels, moves, and learns. Our spinal cord then sends the messages from our brain to our body. When a person is not sleeping enough, the brain will experience exhaustion. The messages passing from your brain to your spinal cord will then be disrupted, and your mind may begin experiencing a number of problems, like:

* Struggles with cognitive functioning, including learning, concentration, and memory
* A disruption in sending messages from the brain to the body leading to issues like slowed reflexes
* Mood dysregulation, leading to problems like mood swings and irritability
* Hallucinations and delusions
* Increased psychological risks like depression, anxiety, paranoia, psychosis, and suicidal thoughts

### Heightened Risk of Overeating

When you lack sleep, your body cannot balance and produce hormones necessary to your health and overall well-being. Two hormones that are heavily impacted by a lack of sleep include leptin and ghrelin.

Leptin is the hormone that tells your brain when your body has had enough to eat, while ghrelin is the hormone that screams that your body is hungry. A lack of sleep can cause your leptin hormones to decrease while your ghrelin hormone increases, causing you to overeat.

### Microsleep

Microsleep occurs when a person is so exhausted their body causes them to fall asleep for short periods without them realizing it. This can be incredibly dangerous in situations like driving, caring for little ones, or working with one's hands.

## Tips for Improving Sleep Hygiene

When you are struggling to get a good night of sleep, making some changes to your daily habits can be critical to improving your quality of sleep. Some great sleep-improving habits include:

### Consistency

When you fall asleep and wake up at random times every day, it can be difficult for your body to know when it is time to sleep and when it is time to wake. Set a bed and wake-up time that allows you to get the necessary seven hours minimum of sleep per night and stick to it!

### Creating a Relaxing Environment Before Bed

When your environment promotes relaxation, your body will get the message that it is time to rest. Dim the lights, shut off your screens, create a comfy bed situation, and avoid overstimulating sounds as you enter your evening.

### Stopping Screen Time at Least an Hour Before Bed

Studies have suggested that screen time, particularly exposure to blue-wavelength light, can suppress the body's [melatonin](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5703049/#:~:text=The%20use%20of%20light%2Demitting,melatonin%20and%20causing%20neurophysiologic%20arousal.) levels.

### Set a Caffeine Cut-Off Time

Many of us love our caffeine. However, it can make it difficult for some people who are sensitive to fall asleep. Try [cutting off caffeine](https://jcsm.aasm.org/doi/10.5664/jcsm.3170) at least six hours before bedtime.

### Move Your Body

A multitude of studies have found that exercise can improve sleep, particularly in decreasing the amount of time it takes to fall asleep. So, work to include some moderate to vigorous movement in your day-to-day life.

### Keep Your Bed a Relaxing Place

You need to have your bed a space dedicated to sleep. When you do things like work, browse the internet, or watch the news in bed, your bed becomes less of a relaxing environment and more of a place that leaves your mind running.

### Avoid Heavy Meals Before Bedtime

Research has suggested that eating a large meal before bed can negatively impact a [person's sleep quality](https://www.sleepfoundation.org/nutrition/is-it-bad-to-eat-before-bed#:~:text=Health%20experts%20advise%20against%20eating,can%20also%20lead%20to%20obesity.) while also putting them at a higher risk for obesity. Try to stop eating two to four hours before bed in order to give your body a chance to properly digest your food before going to sleep.

## When Your Mental Health Suffers from Lack of Sleep

Sleep is critical for one's mental health and overall well-being. However, sleep doesn't always come easy for everyone. Some people struggle with insomnia. Others have newborn babies or children experiencing sleep regressions. There are a seemingly infinite amount of reasons a person may not be able to get the amount of good quality sleep we all need to function at our best.

If you have found that your mental health is struggling, we are here for you. [Contact](http://michiganpsychologicalcare.com/contact.php) us today, and we will partner you with one of our caring and compassionate therapists to work toward improved mental wellness.

**References**

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