



Opinion Article

Can't Sleep During the Covid-19 Lockdown? Tips to Get your Sleep Cycle Back on Track

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COVID-19 has brought the world into uncharted waters characterized by halted economies, lock down and uncertainties that have detrimental effects on health and livelihoods. As a result of changes to routines, and a lack of structure in our everyday lives – many are finding it more difficult to fall to sleep and sleep well. One-third of the world's population (2.6 billion people) is living under some kind of lockdown which is arguably the largest psychological litmus test.

Worrying affects sleep cycles negatively, the only thing worse than waking up to more bad news, is not falling asleep. Sleep is critical to physical health and effective functioning of the immune and metabolic systems, heightening brain functions, enhancing mood, improving general mental health wellness, beating back stress and optimal productivity; those who sleep for 5-6 hours per night will be 19% less productive at work the next day, compared with when they sleep between 7- 8 hours per night. Sleep disturbance is a common trauma response, along with anxiety and depression.

Social distancing, school closures, quarantines and working-from-home all bring profound changes to normal routines. Physical exercise, exposure to natural light and regular meal times are powerful forces in aligning our circadian rhythms. Current sleep patterns characterized by sleeping more or sleeping less impact our natural circadian rhythm, which is an essential internal "clock" that plays a key role in regulating our sleep and controlling body temperature and hormones. While some of us are reconnecting with our natural circadian rhythm, others might have trouble falling asleep, or may be waking up multiple times during the night as uncertainty increases stress levels and stress hormones such as cortisol, which help regulate our sleep-wake cycle.

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Anxiety can be exacerbated by isolation at home hence sleeping problems. Canceled trips, isolation from friends, and an abundance of time cooped up at home can place a strain on anyone. Keeping up with work-from-home obligations such as managing a house full of children who are accustomed to being at school can pose real problems, stress and discord. Other factors contributing to insomnia at this historic time include difficulties in adjusting to new daily schedules or lack of schedules, inability to keep track of time without typical time "anchors", naps during the day, economic concerns and more time for TV and films that might be tempting to have drinks such as coffee and alcohol which disturb sleep cycles. In addition, excess screen time, especially later in the evening, have a detrimental impact on winding down and suppressing the natural production of melatonin necessary for sleep.

The good news is that there are steps we can take to mitigate insomnia including: coming up with daily schedules that include wake-up time, wind-down time, bedtime, eating meals at the same time each day and blocking off specific time periods for work and exercise; creating the right sleep environment-light can be one of the biggest barriers to sleep thus keeping your bedroom dark and cool at night is advised; avoiding use of the bedroom as an office- using the bed as a workstation or eating area can adversely impact sleep patterns; ditching digital devices-many of us are spending more time on our digital devices for news, social media feeds and audiovisual communication-digital devices emit a blue light which delays the production of melatonin; avoiding looking at screens an hour before bed- laptops and TVs mess with the body clocks making it harder to get to sleep and the content one comes across could be destructive; getting outside-exposure to both natural light and dark to helpkeep circadian rhythms in balance and make one tired; keeping a healthy diet- finish your evening meal and let it digest before bed, ideally 3 hours before bed time; don't drink too much caffeine and never after 2pm; be very careful with alcohol consumption - above a moderate level, alcohol can certainly help to get us to sleep, but it will also ensure that sleep is lighter, and can lead to early morning awakenings; avoid naps especially in the afternoon; take a warm shower 90 minutes before bed to help nod off faster and increase total sleep time; shut pets away; exercise daily- exercise has been shown to aid in getting more sleep and better quality sleep; utilize relaxation techniques and; lastly contact your doctor if necessary.

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