



Sleep scenarios and how to put them to rest

Poor sleep can feel like a recurring nightmare. A bad night's sleep leads to a muffled mindset, which leads to problems during the day, which leads to another bad night's sleep. But it doesn't have to be that way. Here, we work our way through common sleep scenarios and, with help from experts, shine the light on some solutions

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Every night in the UK, 22% of people have trouble falling asleep. Nightmare, right?

When we struggle to sleep, the impact trickles out into the rest of our lives. It can affect our performance at work, our diet, and our relationships with others. The underhand shot is that our diet and lifestyle can also be the reason we're not dropping off at night, and we can quickly find ourselves in a never-ending downward spiral.

So how can we break free? With help from a counsellor and a nutritionist, we play out some of the most common sleep problem scenarios, and look at how to address them.

When a lack of sleep starts to affect your mental health

The scene...

You feel fatigued and lethargic, even the small things in your daily routine feel like monstrous, energy-sucking quests. And when things feel that difficult, it's easy to let them fall by the wayside. You struggle to concentrate when you're at work, and your to-do list builds up to an overwhelming level. Recalling things that happened even yesterday becomes hard, and you start to notice that you're forgetting more than you normally would. You're irritable with your colleagues, friends, and family – you're at the end of your tether. When you do finally get round to doing the things that you enjoy, you can't engage as you would do normally. You feel anxious and hopeless.

The next act...

This scene is all too familiar to counsellor and psychologist Dr Vikki Powell, and to the 16 million adults in the UK who report sleep problems. On Vikki's advice, for many the first step to addressing these problems is to go back to basics. "The most effective step is to start a regular routine around sleep," she explains. "This involves not only having a regular bedtime and wake time that you maintain throughout the week (including weekends), but also having a regular wind-down routine too."



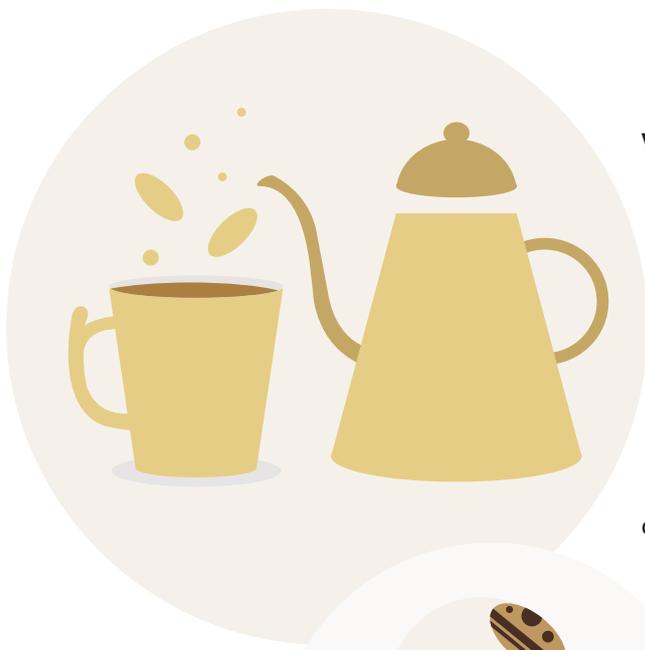
“ 16 million adults in the UK report sleep problems

As Vikki sees it, this routine should involve time away from screens and tech, and you should try not to arouse the brain too much, or do any strenuous physical activity. But rather than listing the things you can't do, look at this time as an opportunity to indulge in some relaxing activities you genuinely enjoy. You could rediscover a love of reading, journaling, or crafting. Or now could be the time to

La petite mort

In English: 'The little death'. It sounds a bit morbid, but it's the French expression to describe the sleepy feeling we experience post-orgasm. Sex boosts oxytocin (the happy hormone) and reduces cortisol (the stress hormone). Orgasms also release prolactin, the hormone responsible for the sleepiness. So, if you're finding yourself tossing and turning in your sheets, it could be an idea to get busy between them.

practise light yoga, meditation, or another mindfulness activity – sex is also on the cards. Make this time sacred and special, dedicated to winding down, and something that you can look forward to at the end of the day. >>>



When your mental health keeps you up at night

The scene...

You've had a bad day. In fact, it's been a bad week – scratch that, maybe even a bad month. It feels like a million different thoughts are rushing around your head, knocking into, and interlocking with, each other. The moment your head hits the pillow, you start inadvertently working your way through everything that has been worrying you throughout the day – like a showreel of your lowest moments.

It comes to the point where you begin to dread this time of night, and so stay up later and later, filling your evening with distractions. You wake up physically and mentally exhausted – it's a vicious cycle.

The next act...

The reassuring thing is, you're not alone. Periods of poor sleep are very normal and will affect most of us at some point.

“This is often related to a trigger event such as illness, stress, change of environment, and extra demands or responsibilities,” Vikki explains. “When the trigger event

or period subsides, so should the insomnia. Worrying about not sleeping, and adopting unhelpful strategies for coping with poor sleep, become the problem – and this perpetuates insomnia.”

It's easier said than done, but the first step is to take a look at the potential triggers.

You may not be able to do anything about them instantly – for example, if you are going through a stressful life change – and it may be the case that counselling, or further professional support, is needed, but being able to recognise your triggers will be the first step to controlling them. Vikki also recommends keeping a worry journal, or to-do list, to throw down the things in your head before you go to sleep, meaning you can move them out of your head and on to the paper, leaving room for more positive, relaxing thoughts to send you off to sleep.

“**The first step to treating insomnia is to take a look at the potential triggers**”

When sleep affects your diet

The scene...

You wake up in the morning with a headache, feeling exhausted. You force yourself into the kitchen to make the first of many coffees that day. You didn't get much sleep last night, and you feel ravenous, and crave sugary foods. Throughout

Eat your way to a better night's sleep

The food we eat in the day can have a soothing effect on our sleep. To tap into this, Sonal Shah suggests trying:

- Cherries. They contain natural melatonin, especially tart cherries or tart cherry juice.
 - Walnuts. The amino acid called tryptophan is the precursor to serotonin.
 - Herbal teas. Chamomile, lemon balm, lavender, passionflower, valerian root, and ginger teas have a calming, sedative effect.
 - A handful of almonds or sunflower seeds. They contain magnesium, which can help sleep.
-



the day you snack between meals, and have another coffee in the afternoon. To wind down after work, you have a couple of glasses of wine. You feel tired, but when you go to bed you find you're restless, and you wake up several times in the night.

The next act...

The relationship between food and sleep is often neglected. But, according to nutritional therapist Sonal Shah, it's one that we must start paying more attention to. "There is a strong link between lack of sleep and more hunger," Sonal explains. "The hunger hormone ghrelin is stimulated, which means you feel like you want to eat more the following day – and often the foods craved are simple carbohydrates, or junk food, that

provides quick energy to the body and mind."

So a good night's sleep can help us manage our hunger cycle, but how can what we're eating help with getting the sleep in the first place? The first tip any nutritionist will give you is – you've already guessed it – cutting the caffeine. We've all been told it before, but to really drive the point home, Sonal highlights how caffeine stays in the body for between six and 10 hours – meaning you should cut yourself off from 2pm. Alcohol and sugary snacks can also lead to disturbed sleep. Of course, there's nothing wrong with treating yourself every now and then, but these tips are worth keeping in mind while you're working towards healthier routines.

Curtain call

You've had a long day.

It's been a busy one, but you feel proud of yourself for getting through the essentials on your to-do list. The sun has set outside, and everything has started to get quieter.

You walk into your dimly lit bedroom, change into fresh pyjamas, and spend half an hour on a hobby you've been looking forward to all day. You slowly sip on a mug of warm herbal tea. Your eyes are starting to feel droopy, so you slip in between the sheets and turn off the light.

Your head sinks into the pillow followed by your neck, your



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shoulders, your spine, your hips, your knees, and finally your heels. You take deep, slow breaths and gently let your mind ponder on the things that brought you joy that day. Without stress or urgency, you slowly drift off into a deep, calm, rejuvenating sleep.

A good night's sleep won't come easily to all of us, but it's not a pipe dream. With deliberate steps, we can find our balance, and bid tossing and turning goodnight. Now, that's what dreams are really made of. **||**

