BrainWorkshops

Optimising Sleep

A checklist for 7-9 hours every night

1. Create the right environmental conditions
2. Create the right physiological conditions
3. Create the right mental conditions



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THE CONTEXT

Why Sleep Matters

Our collective relationship with sleep is one of paradox. Each year, British doctors write millions of prescriptions for sleeping pills. Meanwhile, sales of energy drinks have soared. It seems we can neither fall asleep nor stay awake.

In my experience, it is rare that people don't know how much sleep they need: **between 7 and 9 hours every night**. It is equally rare that they get it, with most averaging closer to 6–7 hours.

We're all busy, but insufficient sleep impairs logical reasoning, decision making, memory and attention. Sleep debt is also cumulative: sleep for less than six hours a night for five nights in a row, and your cognitive performance drops to that of someone who hasn't slept for 48 hours.

Tiredness also compounds. As your thinking suffers, you lose the ability to distinguish important work from unimportant work, so your perceived workload grows. The risk is you work even longer hours, and consequently sleep even less.

Sleep is not simply downtime. While you sleep, your brain consolidates learning and memories, restores the neural systems needed for attention and clear thinking, and clears away metabolic waste that accumulates during the day. It also helps regulate emotion, stress and appetite. In short, good sleep improves how you think tomorrow while helping protect your brain for the future.

The good news is that sleeping well is not as hard as it can feel. It is the product of creating the right environmental, physiological and mental conditions, and that is exactly what this checklist details.

So if you ever struggle to fall asleep, or wake in the night and find it hard to drop off again, apply this checklist.

You'll sleep better, your performance will improve, and your brain will thank you for years to come.

PART ONE

Sleep: Environmental Conditions

Your environment is the set-up. Configure your bedroom once, and it works for you every night.

KEEP IT COOL AND DARK

- Ideally keep your bedroom around 18°C
- Make your bedroom as dark as possible: blackout blinds or an eye mask

THE SCIENCE *A cool room supports the drop in core temperature that triggers sleep. Even low light suppresses melatonin, the hormone that initiates sleep.*

QUIET AND UNCLUTTERED

- If your environment is noisy, use earplugs or consistent white noise
- Some people find clutter disrupts their sleep, so keep your bedroom clear and calm
- Keep work out of your bedroom

THE SCIENCE *It's unpredictable sound that wakes the brain, not sound itself.*

KEEP IT PHONE-FREE

- Charge your phone out of your bedroom
- If it's not within reach, you can't check it: in the evening, at night, or first thing
- Need an alarm? Use a simple alarm clock instead
- Keep your bed for sleep: no working or scrolling in bed

THE SCIENCE *Your brain learns by association. A bed used only for sleep becomes a cue for sleep.*

PART TWO

Sleep: Physiological Conditions

Your body decides when you sleep. Give it the right signals: calm, cool, and clear of stimulants.

RELAX YOUR BODY

- Create para-sympathetic dominance
- Do a progressive relaxation in the evening to lower cortisol and adrenaline
- Or use deep breathing to shift your state (try the 4-7-8 breathing technique)

THE SCIENCE *Slow breathing and muscle relaxation switch on your body's 'rest and digest' system.*

REDUCE YOUR TEMPERATURE

- Start to lower your body temperature the hour before bed
- Try a warm bath or shower 1–2 hours before bed: it draws blood to the skin, accelerating the drop in core temperature
- Eat dinner more than 2 hours before bed, to avoid a rise in temperature too late
- Exercise during the day, but not late in the evening (more than 2 hours before bed)

THE SCIENCE *Your core temperature needs to drop by about 1°C for sleep to begin.*

MANAGE SLEEP 'DISRUPTORS'

- Aim for no caffeine after midday
- Avoid evening alcohol; go easy on sugar too

THE SCIENCE *Caffeine blocks adenosine, which builds sleep pressure. Alcohol fragments the second half of the night.*

A WORD ON SUPPLEMENTS

Evidence is modest, but these may help:

- **Magnesium glycinate** (250mg): may help you fall asleep
- **L-theanine** (200–400mg): may improve sleep quality
- **Glycine** (3g): may help lower core temperature

Melatonin is prescription-only in the UK. On medication or pregnant? Check with a pharmacist first.

PART THREE

Sleep: Mental Conditions

Sleep follows a quiet mind. You can't force it, but you can stop giving your brain reasons to stay awake.

DISCONNECT FROM WORK

1. Get better at switching on during the day: work with deep focus
2. Have a very clear deadline for work each day (at least 2 hours before bed), and be disciplined about it
3. After that point, be mindful of tech use and resist staying responsive to your inbox
4. Calendarise evening activities you love: switch on to something nourishing and restorative
5. Do a weekly 'brain sweep' to clear your mind

THE SCIENCE *People who mentally detach from work in the evening sleep better and recover faster.*

JUST BEFORE BED

- Build a wind-down routine: the same calming sequence for 30–60 minutes each night
- Significantly reduce light exposure in the evening
- No smartphone or other bright screen use for at least 60 minutes before bed

THE SCIENCE *Bright evening light delays melatonin and pushes your body clock later. A familiar routine tells your brain that sleep is coming.*

MASTER YOUR ATTENTION

- When in bed, do a focused meditation (counting your breath from 1 to 21)
- Try mentally recreating the state of profound sleepiness (the feeling of a 4am alarm)
- Or try the 'cognitive shuffle': go through the alphabet, picturing a random word for each letter
- If it takes you a while to fall asleep, don't check your phone (or the time). Be patient; sleep will come

THE SCIENCE *Sleep can't be forced, and trying harder only raises alertness. Giving your attention one simple job leaves less room for racing thoughts.*

PART FOUR

Sleep: Schedule & Other Considerations

Your body clock runs on routine. Keep your timing steady, and know what to do when sleep doesn't go to plan.

HAVE A CONSISTENT SCHEDULE

- As much as possible, go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day. It's more important than it sounds
- At weekends, keep your wake time within an hour of weekdays
- Get bright light within an hour of waking, ideally outside

THE SCIENCE *Morning light is the strongest anchor for your body clock. Regular sleep timing predicts long-term health as strongly as sleep duration.*

WAKE UP IN THE NIGHT?

- Recreate the right physiological and mental conditions
- Do a progressive relaxation, a focused meditation, or try 4-7-8 breathing
- Mentally recreate the state of profound sleepiness (like waking to an early alarm)
- Don't check your phone or the time: both kick-start mental activity
- Still awake after what feels like 30 minutes? Get up, keep the lights low, and do something dull. Return to bed only when sleepy

THE SCIENCE *Brief night wakings are normal. Getting up when you can't sleep keeps your brain's bed–sleep association strong.*

NAPS

- Effective, but use them mindfully: aim to get the sleep you need at night
- Best between 12 and 4pm; keep them short (under 30 minutes)

THE SCIENCE *Short naps avoid deep sleep, so you wake without grogginess.*

WHEN TO GET HELP

- Poor sleep three or more nights a week, for three months? See your GP
- Loud snoring or gasping? Get it checked
- Persistent insomnia is very treatable