

Create the Ultimate Bedtime Routine

A good bedtime routine can help calm your mind if you're the kind of person who's brain seems to come alive, just when you want it to stop and sleep. Here is some practical step by step advice to help you follow an optimal bedtime, so you can be productive, concentrate well, feel more emotionally balanced, and have better energy levels throughout the day.

Pre-Routine, and your environment.

Before you begin to think about a routine, make sure you have the right environment and have a good foundation for healthy sleep. Consider the usual advice of not drinking too much in the two hours before bedtime, not drinking caffeinated drinks too late, avoid having too much alcohol, if you're hungry have a light snack, take exercise but avoid exercising in the four hours before sleep, keep your lighting dim in the evening, set your room to a comfortable temperature, ensure a quiet environment, sleep on a soft supportive mattress, and finally, avoid discussing emotional issues in bed.

Rethink your attitude toward electronic devices

Before looking at building an optimal bedtime routine, you may find it beneficial to change the way you use screens and electronic devices. In this digital age, most of us love our electronics, whether it's a tablet, mobile phone, games console, laptop, computer, or TV. But these things take up a lot of our time, and they do not help with insomnia. My suggestion is to not use any devices during the hour before going to sleep, because:

1. They stimulate your brain.
2. The light that some devices emit can interfere with your internal body clock.
3. Devices can be highly addictive, eating into even more sleep time.
4. Checking work emails at night can create worry and stress, leading your brain to become stimulated in thinking about a specific issue/task.

If you regularly spend a lot of time in front of screens, be it TV, or other electronic devices, then at least an hour without looking at screens is advisable before you start your bedtime routine. So no late night Intsa, Twitter, FB, or SnapChat!

Prepare for the next day

If you haven't already done so earlier in the evening, get your things ready for the next day. Many of us lie in bed thinking about what we're doing tomorrow, suddenly remembering things we need, making quick reminders on our phones for the morning, maybe you need to iron a shirt, make a child's lunchbox, or your own lunch, put the bins out, charge your laptop, the list goes on and on. So get prepared, avoid doing the preparation last thing at night when you will be out of energy, and it'll be the last thing you want to do, and it will also keep you awake longer than you want. It will also help you avoid worrying about remembering something the next day when you're lying in bed. The point is that you clear your mind of tasks, so you can have a more relaxing routine, and a restful nights sleep.

Write down tasks or reminders for the next day

Now that you've prepared all the practical things, you might still be left thinking of other tasks or reminders that you can't practically deal with right now. Things like, I must remember to email so and so tomorrow, I must drop that parcel off at the post office, I need to organise XYZ. I'm sure you remember things likes this many times, while lying in bed. These sorts of thoughts

can go around and around in our heads, making us feel more awake, less calm, and more worried. Worry keeps our brains active, and it activates the body's stress response, which increases arousal and makes sleep even more difficult. We then try to mentally solve these worries, in the middle of the night, but our ability to come up with effective solutions is poor at that time, which in turn makes the worry worse, and we can feel overwhelmed or stressed.

Keep a notebook by your bed, or somewhere else that is convenient, write down the things that come to you, as well as anything in particular that you want to achieve the next day. Writing them down will help your mind let go of them, so you can relax without having to get stuck in those thinking patterns when you really want to sleep.

Figure out how many hours sleep you need?

Most people need between 7-9 hours, figure out how much you need based on the days you've felt well rested, but haven't overslept. Then calculate the time you need to go to bed in order to wake up after having the amount of sleep you need, so you are rested and refreshed. Once you have determined your optimal amount of sleep, keep your bedtime and wake up time consistent. If you are having a late night, say at the weekend, try to sleep the same number of hours.

Figure out how long your bedtime routine should be

It's up to you to decide how long your routine should be, based on the amount of time you feel it takes for you to unwind. Your life circumstances will help shape the way your routine goes, and how long it lasts. If you spend the evening doing only calming activities until it's time to go to bed, 15 minutes of routine might be plenty. If your circumstances are different, you feel less relaxed, maybe 30 minutes is what you need. If you are suffering from serious sleep problems, maybe an hour is a better amount of time. Look at how your evening time is spent, how stressed or calm you feel, and how long it seems to take, at the moment for you to switch off and get to sleep. After thinking about these things decide how long you need from 15/20 minutes to an hour.

Set a daily reminder alarm to prompt the start of your bedtime routine.

Say you need to be asleep by 11.00pm, and you've decided you need a 30 minute bedtime routine, your alarm should be set for 10.30pm. Most smart phones will let you add a repeat daily alarm so you don't have to remember to set it every day. When your alarm goes, stop what you're doing, finish off things you were in the middle of, disconnect yourself from all stimulating activities, and set your alarm for the morning ideally on an alarm clock (if you do this on a mobile phone make this the very last time you use the phone). Go to your bedroom!

The Routine

So, you have now shut off everything, you're things are ready for the next day, you dealt with your daily worries, you can now get ready for bed by using your routine. Make sure you have a tranquil atmosphere with low lighting. Your bedtime routine should be simple, easy to do, and relax you. Most people have things that they 'have' to do at bedtime like getting into nightwear, visiting the bathroom, washing your face, brushing/flossing your teeth, applying serums/creams, whatever it is that you need to do. People with sleep difficulties often struggle to be consistent with these tasks, if that applies to you, developing a regular pattern in your routine will be helpful.

Following necessary tasks it's time to quiet your brain for sleep. All activities associated with

your bedtime routine should be calm, quiet, relaxing and enjoyable. The actual activities will differ from person to person based on what they find calming and relaxing. **Don't underestimate the value of relaxation, there are so many things to choose from, you are sure to find something that suits you.** Here are some ideas, my suggestion would be to pick one or two consistently in order to establish and maintain a good routine. You can also think of other things that you like.

Have a warm bath

Read a book or magazine (nothing too exciting) - don't use a smart phone or tablet, because they have different lighting that stimulates the brain, a Kindle is okay.

Mindfulness (I highly recommend this book, which comes with a CD, you can play a session as part of your bedtime routine)

Listen to calming music - some people find that they rarely just 'listen' to music it always seems to be on in the background when something else is going on, just listening to music that is calming can be relaxing

Listen to a podcast (nothing too exciting)

Simple yoga - having a short 5-10 minute relaxing yoga routine, nothing too dynamic

Meditation - you may already practice meditation, try to build a short meditation into your bedtime routine

Praying - some people find saying a prayer at night a good end to the day, this can also be incorporated into your bedtime routine

Once you've finished your relaxing activities, lie down for sleep.

Still can't sleep? Don't lie awake for hours.

Some people will drift off to sleep within minutes, most of us take between 20 and 30 minutes to fall asleep, for some it can be an hour. If you're still awake after following all of the above advice, it might be that your body needs to adjust to having a routine, being consistent, sticking at it will help, so don't give up.

If your lying in bed for more than an hour, and not feeling like sleep is about to be induced, your mind and body might not be ready for sleep just yet. If this happens, don't just lie there, clock watching, panicking at the time passing, worrying about how less time there is left for sleep, and desperately wanting to switch off. All these things increase your anxiety, especially if you are worried about getting enough hours of sleep, and the more anxious you get, the less likely it is that you will fall asleep. Let go of the frustration, the tossing and turning, turn the clock around so you can't see it, and don't count the hours. Stay focussed on relaxing and feeling comfortable, get up but keep the lighting dim, either sit in bed, or in a chair (this can be in your bedroom or another room), keep your body cosy and warm. Then repeat some aspects of your routine for about 15 minutes or until you start to feel sleepy again, ideal activities at this time are reading a book, or listening to a podcast (nothing too exciting though). When you notice you're feeling sleepy get back into bed to fall asleep.