Answering 5 Common Sleep Questions, Including Tips on How to Fall Asleep Quicker

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March 30, 2020 By Michael Breus, PhD

How's everyone doing this week? Like millions of others, I've spent much of the last few weeks self-isolating at home with my family, due to the coronavirus outbreak.

If you're doing the same, you're probably feeling a bit restless, just like I am. But this downtime has also given me a great opportunity to reflect on some of the most frequently asked questions I receive on a day-to-day basis — and I wanted to share a few responses with you this week.

Whether it's handling nightmares or how to approach your teenager about sleeping in, here are a few questions I hear on a routine basis. Alright, let's jump right into it:

I have a hard time falling asleep at night. Do you have any tips for getting to sleep faster?

This might be the most frequently asked question about sleep that I get. And luckily, I have a few things you can try.

First off, always consider melatonin. Melatonin is the engine for sleep. I recommend taking 1 to 1.5 milligrams of melatonin about a half hour before bed, especially for anyone entering their 50s and 60s, when melatonin production begins to dip. Also make sure your sleep environment is dark; this may seem like a no-brainer, but light interferes with melatonin production. By keeping your room as dark as possible, coupled with a little bit of melatonin before bed, you're already off to a good start.

Also, to get to a state of unconsciousness, your heart rate needs to be hovering near 60 beats per minute. But sometimes, after a long day, it can be hard to unwind, even when we're trying to relax in bed. For this, I normally turn to the 4-7-8 breathing method. That's breathing in for 4 seconds, holding it for 7 seconds, and breathing out for a count of 8 seconds. This gets all the carbon dioxide out of your lungs, gets all the fresh oxygen into your heart, and most importantly, helps lower your heart rate. This is a technique often used by snipers in the military, and I've found it's also a great way to ease into sleep.

And to help you stay asleep during the night, you might want to have raw honey before going to sleep. I know you're probably thinking "raw honey? How's that going to help?" It turns out, raw honey is very difficult to metabolize, so it keeps your blood sugar stable and helps keep you asleep. This should help reduce any nighttime arousals where you end up sneaking off to the pantry for a midnight snack.

What's the best way to handle nightmares?

Nightmares are rough. Everyone knows that feeling of waking up in the middle of the night anxious, short of breath, with your heart pumping and your mind racing. It's not a pleasant feeling — and it can make falling back asleep a real chore.

Typically, when you wake up in the middle of the night, I recommend trying to go back to sleep as fast as possible, unless you're waking up to go to the bathroom. Nightmares are the exception, however.

You can think of nightmares like chapters in a book; when you wake up from a nightmare, it's just like folding the page and walking away for a few minutes. But when you try to go back to sleep immediately, your mind tends to go back to the "page" it was just on. That's not ideal, and that's why I say it's best to get up for a little while and occupy your mind. Find something to distract you for a little bit, whether it's reading a book or just breathing for a few minutes to "shake it off." That way, when you do go back to sleep, your mind is starting off on a fresh "chapter."

Other helpful options include the aforementioned 4-7-8 method, and counting backwards from 300 by 3. Trust me, it's as boring as it sounds, that's the point—and effective.

Getting 8 straight hours of sleep is hard for me to do. Is it okay to break my sleep into chunks?

The short answer is yes — but there are a few stipulations to keep in mind. The main thing to consider is that sleep comes in roughly 90 minute cycles. That's why I tend to support push back against breaking up your sleep into two 4-hour blocks. Instead, shoot for getting 4.5 hours or 6 hours of sleep at once, and then find time during the day for a nap to top yourself off.

Needless to say, I love naps. You can read my blog post on the power of naps from earlier this year — including how 30 minute "power naps" can increase stamina and creativity — for more great info.

How important is my mattress when it comes to getting good sleep?

Your mattress plays a big role in whether you get a good night's sleep, there's no doubt about it.

I look at sleep as a performance activity. If you have the right equipment, you set yourself up for success. You wouldn't run a marathon in sandals, right? The same goes for sleep — you want to have a mattress that will help you get the best sleep possible.

I've written about how to pick your mattress before, but the two key things to remember are comfort and support. You want to balance these factors. Finding a comfortable bed is important, of

course, but finding one that supports you at the hips and also offers relief at pressure points like the knees and shoulders is critical as well.

I know mattresses can be a big investment, but make sure to keep your eyes on deals. Mattresses tend to go on sale about 4 times per year.

Another option: consider a mattress topper. Mattress toppers give you a new addition to your sleep foundation and quite often upgrade the quality of the mattress. Mattress toppers are also less expensive than a new mattress and can extend the life of your existing mattress by several years. Check out the 3" Sweet Dreams Topper from Luma Sleep. It's an affordable and easy way to improve your mattress, and it's Natural Latex and Serene foams offer the perfect combination of comfort and firmness you need. And, don't overlook replacing your pillow with a newer, more supportive pillow, especially if you are a side sleeper.

My teenager loves to sleep in. Should I let them sleep—or force them to get out of bed?

With a teenage son at home, this is one I'm very familiar with. But I tend to surprise many parents when I tell them this: let your kids sleep in.

Now, I'm not talking about during the week. Obviously they need to get to school, early-morning swim practice, or a number of other things. But on the weekend, let them sleep. Trust me, it's not a waste of time. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends teenagers get between 8 to 10 hour of sleep each night. Kids need sleep to grow and heal, and that's exactly what they're doing when they sleep in. Still, finding those 8-10 hours each night can be difficult during the week, so that's why I'm a fan of sleeping in on the weekends.

There are still some ground rules, though. I tend to support picking one day as your sleep-in day on the weekend. I prefer Saturday, since it's coming after your teen has just finished a week of school and activities. I also recommend avoiding back-to-back sleep-in days on Saturday and Sunday. The reason? If you sleep in on both days, your biological clock wants to wake up late on Monday, too. There's still a little room for leeway; you can add an extra hour to when you'd normally wake up during the week on Sunday, but try keeping your sleep schedule as consistent as possible when it's not your designated sleep-in day.

That's it for this week, but if your question didn't get answered, don't worry because I plan on doing this again soon. There are plenty of other FAQs for me to get to. In the meantime, my recent post on 5 surprising health problems tied to poor sleep might be another quick and useful article for you. Thanks for reading, stay safe during this hectic time, and we'll dive into another interesting sleep topic next week.

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