Sleep and Mental Health: How They're Connected, and how to Boost Both

Have you ever thought about how your sleep and mental health are connected?

January 6, 2022 By Michael Breus, PhD

Maybe you've had a recent night where you felt anxious or overwhelmed, and then woke up feeling groggy and out of sorts the next morning. Maybe you didn't get the right amount of sleep one night— or just slept poorly— leaving you feeling frustrated and moody the next day.

It's totally normal to have occasional nights like this. However, if you constantly struggle with your sleep, you may find your mental health beginning to suffer. On the other hand, if you struggle with mental health issues regularly, you may find it difficult, if not impossible, to sleep well at night.

Lack of sleep takes a toll on you. Your mental health and your sleep health aren't areas you have to address separately— in fact, taking care of one is also beneficial to the other.

The Relationship Between Sleep and Mental Health

One in every five adults in America is living with mental illness, and nearly 10 million adults live with a serious mental disorder. Unfortunately, it's also not uncommon for people who struggle with their mental health to have a sleep disorder as well.

Sleep disorders like insomnia and obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) have been linked to mental health problems including depression, anxiety disorder, and bipolar disorder. In fact, the presence of psychiatric disorder in patients with insomnia is estimated to be between 50 and 90 percent. But why is this?

A good night's sleep is vital to your brain's health, influencing not only your mental health, but your memory and critical thinking skills as well. Getting enough high-quality REM sleep helps your brain process emotional information, and sleep deprivation can harm your ability to process positive emotional content. As you can imagine, this can have a huge impact on your mood and leave you feeling down in the dumps.

Does Improving Sleep Improve Mental Health?

It can! Your sleep health and mental health are so closely connected that if one is suffering, then odds are the other is too at some level.

Thankfully, treating one can also treat the other. A good night's sleep can help you feel refreshed and ready to take on the day, while a clear mind can help you drift off to sleep easily and sleep through the night.

Sleep and your Teen's Mental Health

It's important for adolescents to get the sleep they need each night, but could getting adequate sleep be a solution for some of those teenage woes? Being a teenager is a hard time for most kids, but it's much harder for those who aren't getting enough sleep.

Recent research has shown that only seven percent of surveyed high schoolers were getting the right amount of sleep per night— which should be about nine hours. Following the pandemic, teens had a huge increase in sleep issues as well as mental health issues.

Susanne Button, clinical psychologist for the Jed Foundation, says "Adequate sleep for teenagers stabilizes mood and reduces irritability and depression." Insufficient sleep in teens, especially for those already struggling with their mental health, can pave the way for risky behavior, while getting enough quality sleep helps teens make better, less impulsive decisions.

As parents, you may not want your teen to sleep the day away, especially during their summer vacation! However, it may be best to let sleeping dogs, or teens in this case, lie. Not only will that help them feel more rested, but it may be a much-needed mental health boost too.

Ways to Improve Both Sleep and Mental Health

While sleep and mental health problems don't have "one size fits all" solutions, you may find that discovering the right solution can work wonders for you. Consider these recommendations if you're looking for a mental health boost, better sleep, or both.

1. Follow a Consistent Sleep Schedule

Consistency is key when it comes to getting the rest you need each night. A consistent sleep schedule is one of the most important sleep habits you can create. Not only can going to bed at the same time each night and waking up the same time each morning help you sleep better, it can do wonders for your mood and your overall health!

This consistency can elevate your mood and help protect you against depression and anxiety, as well as health problems including high blood pressure, high blood sugar, and high cholesterol.

One good way to help you sleep on a consistent schedule is to sleep according to your chronotype. Your chronotype is related to your body's circadian rhythm, which controls your body's sleep-wake cycle. Your chronotype is your body's natural inclination to be awake or asleep at certain times, and varies from person to person.

That's why it's so important to work with your chronotype— for example, you're setting yourself up to fail if you're a night owl trying to follow a morning person's schedule. In fact, one study has shown that people whose sleep patterns go against their body's internal clock are more likely to

experience depression.

To find your chronotype and learn how to sleep according to your unique biorhythmic schedule, check out my chronoquiz.

2. Track Your Thoughts in a Sleep Journal

It's hard to sleep when your mind is racing and your thoughts are out of control. Thankfully, there's an easy and accessible way to calm your mind and get the quality sleep you deserve.

Sleep journaling allows you to track your thoughts and worries so you can better process them and prevent them from ruining your sleep. You don't need anything fancy to get started— just a pen, some paper, and enough time before bed to thoroughly process your thoughts.

Giving yourself time to put your thoughts or worries into words helps you cope with them in a healthy way. This helps you get good sleep by calming your mind and encouraging healthy sleep onset.

3. Try a Weighted Blanket

Weighted blankets have become a popular health item lately, and for good reason! They're very helpful for coping with anxiety, as well as a sensory tool for those with Autism or behavioral struggles.

Like a warm hug, these blankets can help you settle your nerves and calm down when you're feeling anxious or sad. Unlike a regular blanket though, weighted blankets are filled with pellets or beads to make them heavier, which is what creates the relaxing effect.

If you're in the market for a weighted blanket, I personally recommend Remzy. These weighted blankets provide the perfect amount of weight without extra bulk, which keeps you calm without making you uncomfortably warm. Each blanket also includes my 7-day sleep program to help you get deeper, better sleep each night.

4. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is not only beneficial for treating an anxious mind, it's also hugely effective in treating insomnia.

Through cognitive behavioral therapy, patients can end the cycle of negative thinking, learn to cope with their worries in a healthy way, and get the restful quality sleep they deserve.

If you're tracking your thoughts in a sleep journal like I suggested above, you're already reaping some of these benefits! Journaling helps bring awareness to how you're feeling and why you're feeling as you are. In part, this self-reflection allows you to heal and in the process, sleep better.

Will Antidepressants Affect My Sleep?

Yes and no. Antidepressants can cause insomnia or poor sleep, but the same can be said for lots of other medications too. However, some medications can put you at a higher risk of sleep disturbance than others.

As far as antidepressants go, sleep disruption is not uncommon for people who take benzodiazepines like Xanax or selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) like Prozac or Zoloft.

Insomnia is a common side effect of antidepressants, If an antidepressant is ruining your sleep, consider these solutions for a better night's sleep.

- Consult your physician and see if you can change your dosage
- Seek an alternative to your current prescription
- Talk to your physician about alternate times to take medication that may be further away from your bedtime.

It's vital that you contact your doctor before you make any changes to any medication. It's important that you continue to take any medications as prescribed until you and your doctor can come up with an alternative.

When to Seek Help

Stress, anxiety, and sadness are unpleasant parts of life, but they are normal. What isn't normal is feeling that way all the time. If you're experiencing any of the following symptoms, it's vital that you seek help from a your doctor or a mental health professional:

- Depressive symptoms, such as hopelessness or loss of interest in things you once found enjoyable
- Constant stress or anxiety
- Episodes of mania, followed by episodes of depression
- Thoughts of suicide

If you are experiencing a mental health emergency, please consider contacting a mental health hotline. These national services are available both over the phone and online in case you need immediate support.

- National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1 (800) 273-8255
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1 (800) 799-SAFE (7233)
- Veterans Crisis Line: 1 (800) 273-8255
- SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) National Helpline: 1

(800) 662-HELP (4357)

Your sleep and mental health are closely connected, complex issues that can really leave you feeling awful when something’s not right. But thankfully, if you treat one, you can treat the other. A healthy mind and a good night’s sleep are instrumental to your overall health— so it’s important to take care of them just as you would your physical health.

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