Better sleep

	Introduction

All of us can experience moments of sleep disturbance or problems sleeping well for a variety of reasons including stressful events during the day, anxiety problems, trouble at work or in our private life. Those who work in humanitarian settings may be particularly vulnerable to developing sleep disorders. Working in intensive, high risk or unpredictable environments with traumatized clients can create conditions such as secondary or vicarious trauma and burnout, where affected sleep is a common experience. Furthermore, we may consider sleeping well a luxury and/or feel guilty because refugees or other populations we are working with cannot. This can result in underestimating our need for a good sleep.

Getting enough sleep is vital for mental and physical health, and it is necessary to help our bodies to recover and regenerate. Good sleeping is composed of two aspects: duration and continuity. Most adults, need to sleep an average of 8 hours and if sleep is frequently disrupted, it interferes with our natural sleep cycle.

All research agrees that a good amount of sleep is also necessary to improve learning, memory and stabilize our mood, while lack of sleep can affect us in many ways. Immediately following a poor night's sleep, there may be reduced concentration or low energy. Over time, a lack of sleep can have an impact on all body systems increasing the risk of developing chronic conditions such as diabetes, depression, heart disease, stroke and other systemic problems.

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Signs you have sleeping problems	Signs you are sleeping well [1]
Waking up tired or feeling slow	Waking up feeling refreshed in the morning
Taking more than 30 minutes each night to fall asleep	Having lots of energy during the day
Consistently waking several times each night and then having trouble falling back to sleep, or waking too early in the morning	Feeling clear-headed
Difficulty focusing or maintaining attention during the day	
Feeling 'foggy' or down as well as concentration and memory problems	
Easily angry or irritable	
Desire to sleep or falling asleep during the day	

[1] Libman, E., Fichten, C., Creti, L., Conrod, K., Tran, D. L., Grad, R., Jorgensen, M., Amsel, R., Rizzo, D., Baltzan, M., Pavilanis, A., & Bailes, S. (2016). Refreshing Sleep and Sleep Continuity Determine Perceived Sleep Quality. Sleep disorders, 2016, 7170610. https://doi.org/10.1155/2016/7170610

In order to have healthy and refreshing sleep, there are some actions you can take and others you can avoid. Here is a Checklist to help you have a better night's sleep:

✓ Do

- ✓ **Routine**: Create your own routine. For example, a small ritual you can do before going to sleep, such as switching off all electronic devices, saying good night to loved ones, wearing comfortable clothes, listening to music or talking calmly with someone can help with sleep.
- ✓ **Close the work window**: Stop working or thinking about work at a planned time. For some people, preparing a plan or a schedule for the next day is helpful in having a clear idea of what it is expected the next day.
- ✓ **Sleep environment**: Minimize environmental factors that can disrupt your sleep as much as possible. For example, create a dark and quiet room or have a friend or a family member with you if that is what you prefer. Consider using ear plugs or a sleep mask. Check the temperature of the room is comfortable for you. As much as is possible use comfortable and supportive pillows and mattress.
- ✓ **Use your bed for sleeping:** It is preferable to use the bed just for sleeping and not doing other activities such as watching TV, using a laptop or eating**.** In this way, you associate the bed with sleep**.**
- ✓ **Get up if you can't sleep**: If you do not fall asleep within 20-30 minutes, get up and do something relaxing outside of the bedroom and return to bed when you feel tired. This might include a relaxation exercise. Avoid watching the clock when you are struggling to sleep.
- ✓ **Relaxation techniques**: If you need to stay in bed, then use some relaxation exercise such as breathing, grounding or progressive muscle relaxation (see handouts).
- ✓ **Daily exercise**: Do some daily exercise for around 30 minutes to raise your heart rate. Avoid, however, heavy exercise just before bed as this can actually wake your body up. It's better to do some gentle and relaxing exercise such as stretching.
- ✓ **Reading**: Some people find it useful to read a book before sleep.
- ✓ **Sleep schedule:** Define a sleep schedule and try to stick to it as much as possible. For example going to sleep and wake up every day at the same time.

✗ Avoid

- ☐ **Screens**: Switch off all electronic devices, computers, smartphones, tablets, and video games around 1 hour before going to sleep. Such devices stimulate your nervous system, the opposite of what you need to sleep. For the same reason it is better not sleep with the TV or laptop screen on.
- ☐ **Food**: Avoid heavy meals right before going to sleep as this requires your body to work hard to digest the food. If you need to eat before bed, a small snack would be better.
- ☐ **Caffeine**: Avoid caffeine and other stimulants before going to sleep, such as black tea, coffee, chocolate or energy drinks. It is preferable to stop such liquids a few hours earlier.
- ☐ **Stressful Television/Social Media**: Avoid watching or listening to news, television programs or social media that you find stressful before going to sleep, particularly if you are living in a conflict zone or high stress area.
- ☐ **Daytime napping**: It can be helpful to resist sleeping during the day as your body will then be more tired at night.

Pain or discomfort is a common contributing factor to poor sleep. Below are some simple suggestions on positioning which may help create more comfort and allow you to have a better night's sleep.
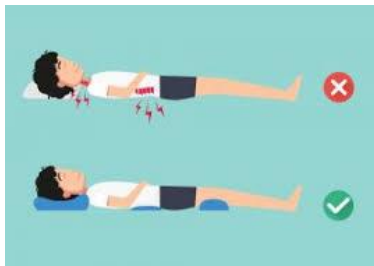
Sleeping on your side

Placing a pillow between your legs can help to prevent back and hip pain that comes from twisting at night


Sleeping on your back

Place a pillow under your knees and under your head to support your neck. You can also place a small, rolled towel under the small of your back.

Sleeping on your abdomen

This position can be particularly hard on your back. To help lessen the stress on your back you can place a pillow under your hips. You can also use a pillow under your head if it is comfortable to do so.
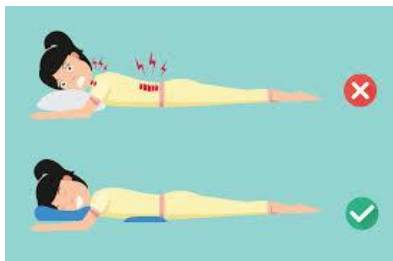
Where you have limited pillows, a rolled up towel or small cushion can be used instead.

References & Further Reading

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