

# 10 tips for...

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## PUTTING YOU TO SLEEP

**More than one in three Americans** doesn't get enough sleep on a regular basis. That statistic, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), predates the coronavirus pandemic and could well be higher now. Sleep improves our body's immune system, helping to keep us healthy and handle stress better. How many hours of restful sleep we get can be affected by age, environmental factors, personal problems, and a world of stress-inducing events. Try these techniques to ease you toward sweet dreams.

### **one** Consider Your habits

Sleep specialists agree that certain habits contribute to a good night's sleep. For good "sleep hygiene," experts advise that several hours before bedtime, you avoid big or spicy meals, which may cause indigestion. Abstain from caffeine, alcohol, and cigarettes. Alcohol might help initially but when it wears off, you're more likely to wake up. One or two hours before bed, put down the smart phone and stay away from news, email, texts, or other potential stressors. The blue light from screens prevents your brain from releasing melatonin, the hormone that induces sleep. Plus you need time to unwind. Also avoid strenuous exercise in the evening, but do exercise daily.

### **two** Set the Stage for Comfort

Your bedroom should be quiet, dark, and cool at night—between 60 and 67 degrees. Have a good quality, supportive mattress and comfortable pillows. Remove allergens that may bother you. Consider blackout curtains or shades, ear plugs, eye shades, a "white noise" machine, humidifier, fans, and décor that is pleasing to you. Use the bedroom only for sleep, sickness, or sex. Try to stick

to a regular sleep schedule and limit naps to 10 to 20 minutes per day, before 3:00 p.m., or skip naps altogether (if they worsen sleep problems for you).

### **three** Keep Track

A sleep diary can help identify patterns that cause wakefulness. The CDC and the Mayo Clinic suggest keeping a daily log, on paper, for 10 to 14 days. Note the time you go to bed, how often you wake up and for how long, what time you awaken in the morning, naps taken and their length, medications (over-the-counter or prescription) you used, and how much caffeine and alcohol you drank. Review this information with your doctor.

### **four** Practice Self-Compassion

"Self-care is a sleep hygiene skill you can learn," says Michele Fronk Schuckel, founder of the health and wellness coaching arm of Mind Body Medical Associates in Weston. "Notice your inner thoughts that are interfering with sleep. Realize that most worries are about a future time and that you don't need to carry your burdens alone."



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# 10 tips

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technique, helps the body let go of stress, tension, negative energy, and energy blockages, notes Sonya Masur, an artist and energy healer in Dover. Using hands-on or hands-free holistic methods, Reiki practitioners help clients connect to their body's energy to clear energy blockages and achieve balance to reenergize. Sleep happens more easily. One of the first tools Masur teaches is 3-1-3 rhythmic breathing. Use it before bed, or when you wake up during the night. Inhale for

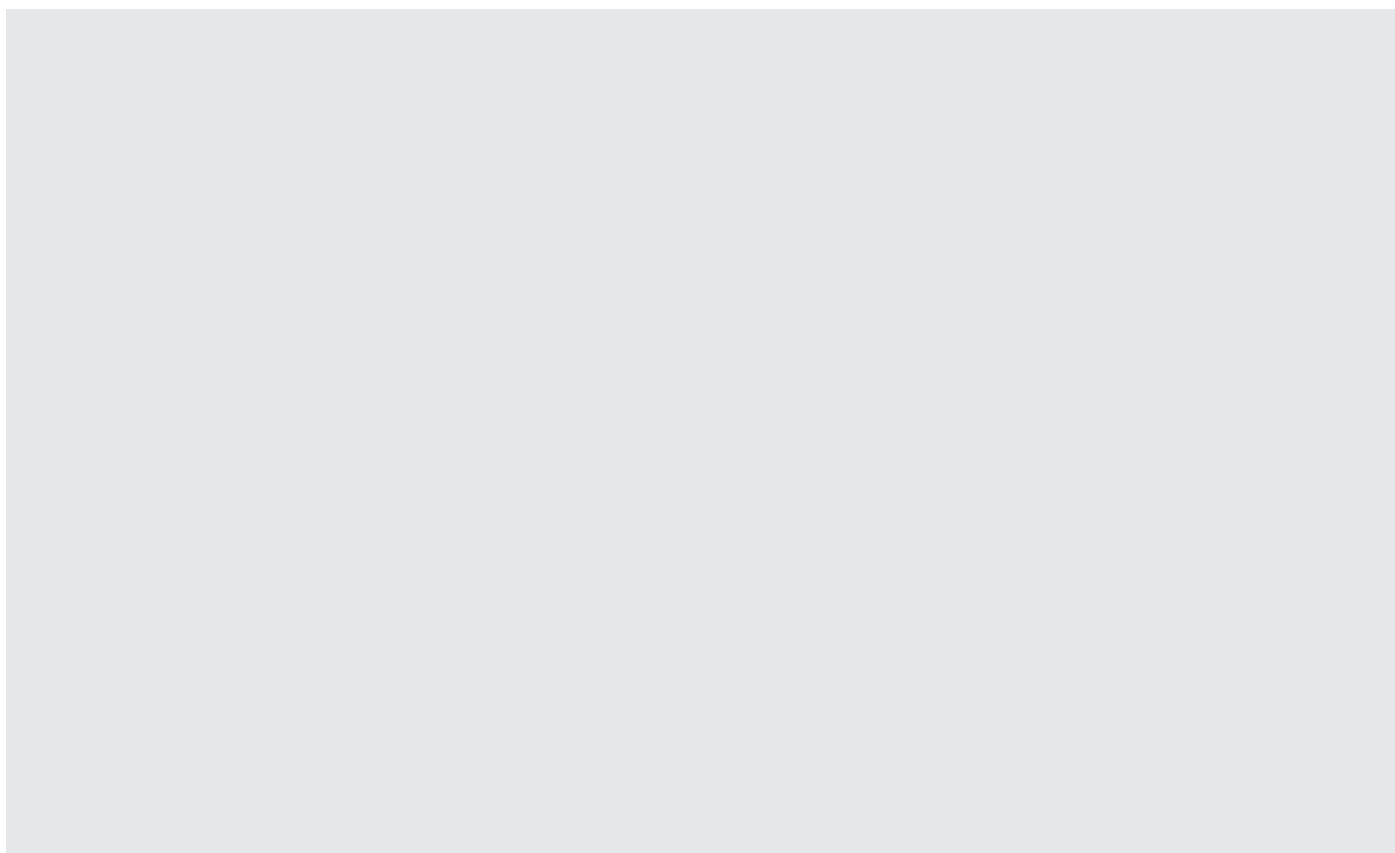
When you express concerns aloud to a partner or friend, things usually don't seem as bad. Many people find prayer helps them by deliberately putting stresses into someone else's hands for the night. Although you can't control what others do (like whether or not they wear a mask or socially

distance), you can control how you feel about it and your reaction. Talk to yourself as you would when helping a good friend."

## five Breathe 3-1-3

Reiki, an ancient Japanese natural healing

three seconds, hold for one, exhale for three. Do this for seven rounds. Practice when you are relaxed so it becomes natural, says Masur. "You are teaching your body to overcome our fight-or-flight response to stress. It helps your body sink into its natural river of peace."



## six Do a Nightly Brain Dump

Right before bedtime, pick up a pen and notebook (use paper, not a device). Write down everything you've been thinking about, advises Masur. "Pour it out in one long sentence, with or without paragraphs. Or use bullets. Style and grammar don't matter. A 'brain dump' works because often we wake up thinking. We're still on the gerbil wheel, with issues that keep coming back. This clears your head."

## seven Meditate Daily

Although we can't shut our minds off altogether, we can reduce anxiety through meditation. Putting aside distractions, paying attention to the moment, you can choose what to focus on. Meditation can be done anywhere—walking outdoors or doing the dishes, etc. Teens can meditate while focusing on music, observes Schuckel. Numerous books, apps, YouTube videos, and websites can get you started. Some are free, others are available for a fee. Among apps, Masur recommends Mindful.org, InsightTimer.com, HeadSpace.com, or Calm.com, which offer such instructional tools as meditation videos and guided exercises, plus soothing music and stories. Begin each day by relaxing, says Masur. Go outside, close your eyes, consciously breathe as you feel the earth's energy rise up from your feet through your body. Ask yourself what you want your day to feel like.

## eight Listen to Soothing Sounds

At bedtime, turn out the lights and turn on a sleep-inducing podcast. There are many to choose from. Whispering voices narrate rambling stories. Lullabies, chanting monks, birdsong, crickets, or waves ease listeners into dreamland. Slow Radio (BBC Radio 3) soothes with half-hour curated soundscapes. Snoozecast.com narrators combine yoga-like calmness with readings from a wide variety of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction selections.

## nine Boost Melatonin

Our bodies naturally produce melatonin, a hormone that works in tandem with our circadian rhythms to regulate the sleep-wake cycle. Exposure to excessive light at night, as from computers or smart phones, can delay melatonin production and release. Together with sleep hygiene, over-the-counter synthetic melatonin can safely help most people

dealing with insomnia or disruptions like a shift change or jet lag. It's most effective for short-term problems.

## ten Still Can't Sleep?

Sometimes the cause is a serious health concern. Insomnia, narcolepsy (excessive daytime sleepiness), restless legs syndrome, or sleep apnea

(interruption) are sleep disorders that warrant discussion with your health care provider. As cause or effect, insufficient sleep may also be linked to any of several chronic diseases and conditions, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity, and depression. As part of treatment, your doctor may prescribe a sleep study, which can be conducted by the Newton-Wellesley Hospital Sleep Center or another Boston area hospital.

