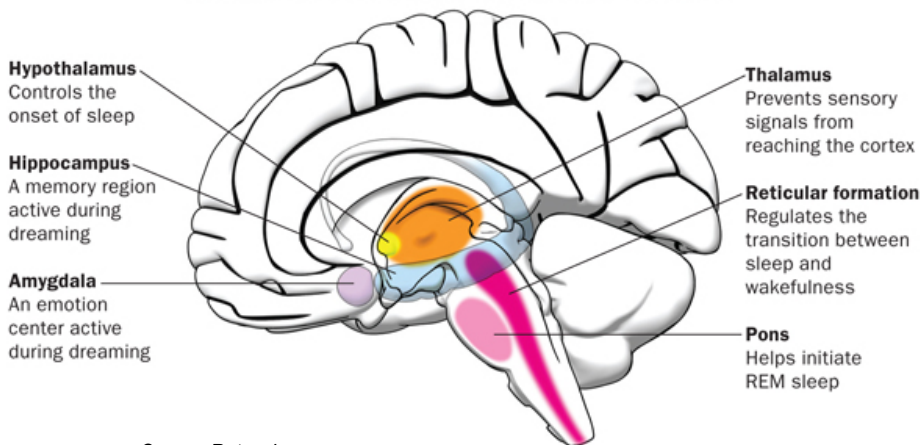


To start with, a basic understanding of sleep, and what happens in our brains when we sleep, is needed for you to learn how to best improve your amount and quality of sleep.

How Sleep Works

What part of your body makes you go to sleep? That's right, it's the brain of course. But which part of the brain? Can you tell your brain to go to sleep? Nope. Because sleep is governed by parts of the brain that we have absolutely no direction or control over. The Brainstem sits at the back of your neck at the point where your spinal cord meets the brain. This part of the brain does not think, it serves basic functions that keep us alive, such as helping to regulate temperature and other involuntary actions such as breathing and swallowing. The brainstem is the part of the brain that "goes to sleep". In order to do so, it receives input from other parts of our brain, including the hypothalamus which sits deep in the middle of our brain and (among other functions) links our nervous system to the pineal gland, which releases hormones that encourage our brain to be either alert or asleep throughout the course of a day. Overthinking at bed time stimulates the cortex (the white shell in the picture below), making it virtually impossible for the brain to prepare for it's "shut down" mode.

Central Brain Regions Involved in Sleep



George Retseck

And that's only the start of it. There are various "stages" of sleep which occur in cycles throughout the night, including REM sleep (where we dream) and non-REM sleep in which our brain sorts and stores memories and sensory input that we accumulate throughout the day.

Sleep is like a clean, sort, and sweep on the brain, and that is why we really struggle if we don't get good sleep. Our bodies adjust naturally to changes in our routine, our circumstances, and our input and stimuli during the day and especially in the lead up to bedtime. The body's own "circadian rhythm" dictates our own cycle of sleepfulness vs. wakefulness, and you would know if you have ever been jet-lagged that it takes a few days to re-set our circadian rhythm once it has been disrupted. This is very important to understand – it will take *at least a few days* of consistent effort to improve our sleep.

Because we can't tell our brains to go to sleep, it is very important that we pay attention to "setting the stage" to encourage sleep to occur. It is a bit like leading the horse to water in the hope that it will drink. The way we "lead our brains to sleep" is by using the sleep hygiene suggestions over the page.

About You and Your Sleep

We are all different. Some people can get by comfortably on 4 hours sleep per night, while the vast majority of us with that little sleep will begin to struggle with concentration, performance errors, irritability, increased stress, and our overall day-to-day functioning. What's more, research has shown that we are not always good judges of our own capacities when sleep-deprived, but it is more obvious to those around us or when we are asked to complete performance tasks in controlled conditions.

It may be helpful for you to spend some time reflecting on you as a sleeper.

- How did you sleep as a baby? As a toddler and young child? Did it come easy or more difficult?
- Are you a light sleep or a deep sleeper?
- Do you snore or have sleep apnoea?
- Do you suffer from nightmares or distressing events or thoughts?
- Are you frustrated about sleep to the point that you worry and obsess about sleep?
- Are you a "morning person" or a "night person" naturally? Now but also how about in the past?
- What has comforted you and helped you sleep in the past (as an infant or child, or at some other point in life)?
- When you have felt rested from sleep, how many hours on average would you get, and did you have a routine?

Answering these questions might help you to see what has worked in the past for you, and might give you some hints about what to try again.

Some Other Sleep Suggestions

Sleep Associations	<p>Ensure that your bed is only used for sleep and sex</p> <p>Give your sleep space a makeover, choosing calming colours and textures</p> <p>Ensure your bedroom has an even and cool temperature, is quiet, dark and pleasant</p> <p>Keep a sleep diary to see what patterns are occurring and problematic associations</p> <p>Think about using a "snuggle buddy" just like a child's blankie or teddy</p>
Sleep Routine	<p>Give yourself a bed time and a wake time</p> <p>Stick to these strictly for at least a week, even over the weekends</p> <p>Avoid daytime naps</p>
Sleep Preparation	<p>Do light exercise at some point in the day</p> <p>Ensure you are getting enough sunlight during the day</p> <p>Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and eating big meals before bed</p> <p>2 hours before bed time, avoid any stimulating activities</p> <p>1 hour before bed time, turn off all electronic devices and dim your lights</p> <p>Do the same routine every night before bedtime (e.g., shower, toilet, drink, bed)</p>
Troubleshooting	<p>If you don't fall asleep within half an hour, get out of bed briefly then go back to bed</p> <p>If worries keep you up at night, write them down and tell yourself "not now, it's bed time"</p> <p>Do any planning or life admin tasks earlier in the evening to avoid worry</p> <p>A relaxation or meditation script may be helpful</p> <p>Deep breathing exercises help your body be physically calm and more likely to sleep</p> <p>Progressive muscle relaxation exercises help shake off the physical stress of the day</p> <p>Turn off any clocks that face you to avoid worry and calculating the time</p> <p>Avoid trying to fall asleep, this only activate our thinking brain and disrupt the whole cycle</p> <p>Try visualisation exercises using a relaxing place or a repetitive, routine, boring activity</p>

Other good resources: