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sleep sanctuary

Adjust your bedroom for a better night's rest

By Heather Larson

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME you had a satisfying night's rest? Sleeping well, just like healthy eating and exercising, is essential to feeling your best during the day.

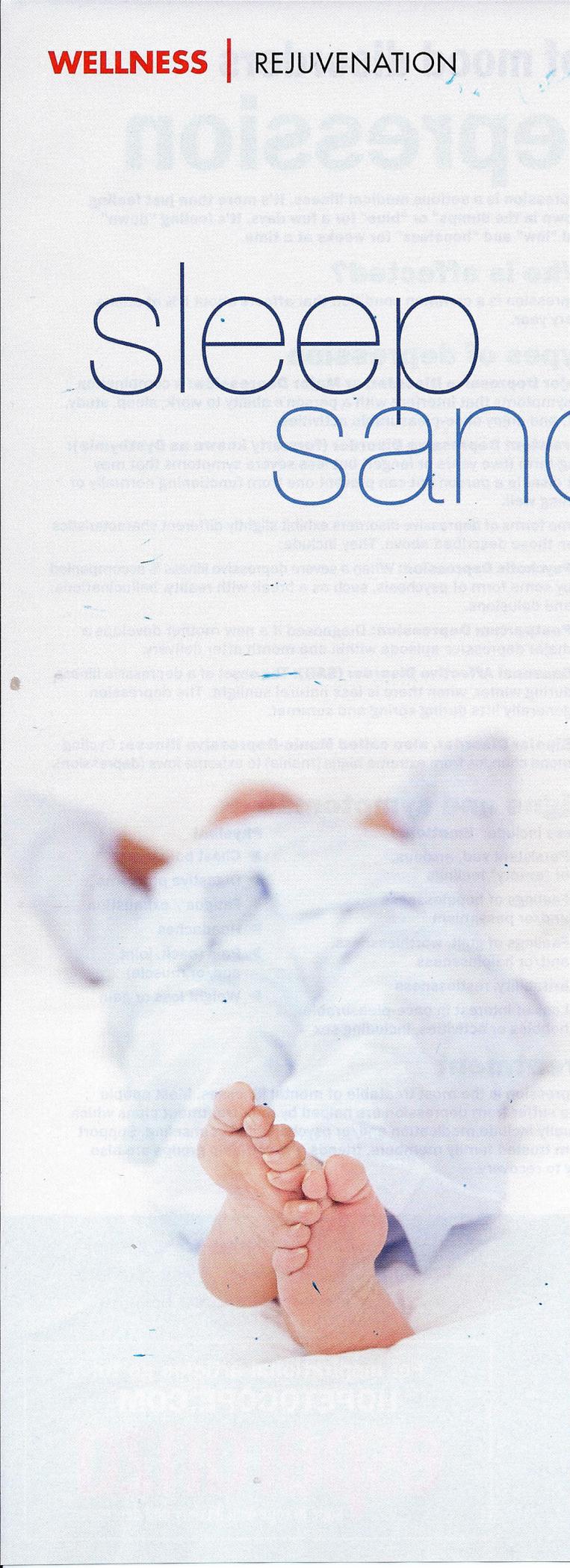
(Not to mention that chronic lack of sleep plays a role in depression—and contributes to obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease, according to the World Association of Sleep Medicine.)

Roughly 30 percent to 40-percent of adults in North America sleep less than seven hours a night—the recommended magic minimum. Many of us need a full eight or nine hours to keep our brains and bodies operating at peak.

Of course, various body and brain disorders—and the medications used to treat them—can interfere with good sleep. But you may not realize that your bedroom can also have a huge impact on the quality of your rest.

“The number one barrier to sleep disturbance is your environment,” says Charles Samuels, MD, medical director of the Centre for Sleep and Human Performance in Calgary, Alberta. “You need darkness, a comfortable mattress, the right temperature, no noise, and no technology in the bedroom.”

According to the Virginia-based National Sleep Foundation, you should take four major characteristics of your sleeping quarters into consideration: light, sound levels, temperature, and comfort in bed.



We've pulled together some easy-to-do, economical techniques from sleep experts and interior designers to help you create a bedroom sanctuary. And remember that a sanctuary is a sacred place. The only people who should be in your bed are you and your sweetie. Letting kids snuggle in will disturb your slumber. And close the door to pets, too.

"The bedroom needs to be for you and only you," says Samuels.

1 GO TO THE DARK SIDE

Natalie Dautovich, PhD, the current National Sleep Foundation Environmental Scholar and an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Alabama, says darkness is the most dominant external signal that encourages sleep. Lower or dim the lights around you an hour or two before bedtime to put your body on the path to conking out.

When you're tucked in, you want the bedroom to be pitch-black. All light in the room should be extinguished. If you have a digital clock that emits a glow, turn it to face the wall. (In fact, Samuels believes you shouldn't be able to see a clock from bed because checking the time is a big barrier to sleep. Keep the clock under the bed if necessary, he insists.)

Dautovich recommends blackout curtains or shades to block light infiltration from street lamps and the morning sun. Denise Ashmore, a designer and principal at ProjectTwentyTwoDesign in Vancouver, suggests layered window treatments for a more pleasing look.

"Place a sheer over your blinds to give you some visual softness and help muffle sounds," she says.

2 QUIET, PLEASE

Any changes you can make to reduce ambient noise will help you sleep better.

"The ideal would be to live in the middle of nowhere and eliminate all sounds," says Dautovich. "Unfamiliar noises tend to wake us up."

Mask sounds if you can't eliminate them. For example, you can put a towel over a ticking clock to mute the noise.

"Having the room cool when trying to fall asleep helps us move into deeper stages of sleep, but you don't want to be shivering and uncomfortable," Dautovich says.

4 FIND THE HUE FOR YOU

Color makes a big difference in your boudoir. Red and orange, whether on your walls or used in the décor, tend

“The number one barrier to sleep disturbance is your environment.”

A sound machine helps by generating a steady "white noise" that soothes the ear. Fans, air purifiers, and small fountains also block out distracting noises.

3 KEEP YOUR COOL

The body's core temperature influences sleep cycles. As that internal temperature cools, it cues us to sleep, Dautovich says. (This is why experts suggest taking a hot bath 90 minutes before bedtime, since you literally chill out after soaking in the warm-water.) Conversely, a natural rise in body temperature towards morning helps us wake up and be alert.

Generally, keeping your nighttime environment between 60 and 68 degrees Fahrenheit (15° - 20° C) encourages rest, but only if you find that comfortable.

to stimulate. Interior designer Robin Wilson, president of Robin Wilson Home in New York City, says that's the reason fast food restaurants often use red or orange as a dominant color.

"That's because they want you to hurry up, eat and leave," says Wilson.

For bedrooms, she recommends earthy colors, pastels, blues, greens, neutrals, or one of the 96 shades of white. You want colors that calm and relax. Black is also banned from this space.

5 SEE WHAT MAKES SCENTS

Aromas can affect our ability to sleep, says Dautovich. Scents that we associate with calmness and relaxation help prepare the mind and body for rest.

Unpleasant odors or ones that have negative associations can prevent good sleep because they promote mental and physical agitation.

Although lavender is a traditional aroma to promote relaxation, Dautovich says, "I recommend trying different scents and tracking their effect in your sleep diary [see box at right] until you find one that suits you."

6 REDUCE SURFACE TENSION

An uncluttered space leads to an uncluttered mind, or so the theory goes. Ashmore says keeping everything picked up and flat areas cleared off eliminates "visual noise" in the room.

"Nobody wants to meditate, practice yoga, or try to sleep while staring at a pile of dirty clothes," says Ashmore. "Use closet organizers, drawer organizers and a night stand with storage to keep the surfaces in the room clean."

Wilson discourages having a bookshelf in the bedroom because they invite clutter. If you have to have a messy place, she says, make it the closet.

In fact, Wilson urges having as few pieces of furniture as possible: bed, dresser and nightstand, and maybe a stool or ottoman so you can sit down when putting on your shoes.

Sometimes the configuration of the room limits where the bed can be placed. Whenever possible, Wilson says, "try to make it so when you walk into the room, the bed doesn't cover the entire room."

She adds, "If you have a queen-size room, don't have a king-size bed."

7 BUILD A BETTER BED

Take a tip from Goldilocks and buy a mattress that is "just right" for you. Even if you like the mattress you have, it's time to go shopping if you've had it more than seven years. Samuels says to make sure the mattress you select can be returned if you don't like it.

“The bedroom needs to be for you and only you.”

Replace pillows every three years, Wilson says, and wash them every three months.

For bed linens, choose comforting textures that feel pleasant against your skin, says Ashmore. Thread count doesn't matter so much, but buy the best sheets you can afford. Egyptian cotton is generally considered the gold standard. **e**

HEATHER LARSON IS A FREELANCE WRITER IN TACOMA, WASHINGTON.

Dear diary

Whether you choose to implement one of these tips or all of them, it's a good idea to make changes gradually so you can track how each alteration either helped or hindered your nighttime rest. That's where a sleep diary comes in.

A TYPICAL SLEEP DIARY STARTS WITH THE BASICS:

what time you went to bed and what time you got up in the morning. Then consider how often you woke during the night, how long you were awake, and what disturbed you. Factor all that in for your total hours of sleep.

ADD CATEGORIES FOR:

- what you were doing in the hour before going to sleep.
- whether it was easy or hard to fall asleep.
- how rested you felt in the morning.

For a really sophisticated record, you can also track your daytime patterns of exercise, consumption of caffeinated drinks, and drowsiness or naps.

