Sleep and mental health

Why sleep matters, what happens in your brain, and how to improve it

We've probably all had a bad night's sleep and felt rubbish the next day - that's not a coincidence! Sleep plays a key role in mental wellbeing, affecting how we feel, think and cope with everyday challenges.

Research shows there is a strong two-way relationship between sleep and mental health. Poor sleep can increase the risk of anxiety and depression, while poor mental health can make it harder to sleep. Sleep also affects brain function, hormone balance and the body's response to stress, all of which are closely linked to emotional wellbeing.

The good news is that sleep is something we can support. Small, consistent changes to daily habits can make a meaningful difference over time.

Why sleep matters for mental wellbeing

Sleep is more important than you may think. While you sleep, your brain and body are still active, carrying out important processes that support both physical and mental health.

Sleep helps:

- regulate mood and emotional responses
- support memory, learning and concentration
- manage stress and restore energy

Without enough good-quality sleep, it becomes harder to stay focused, manage emotions and cope with everyday challenges. Over time, poor sleep is linked to a higher risk of mental health difficulties.

Your body clock and sleep cycles

Our bodies follow a natural 24-hour rhythm known as the circadian rhythm. This internal clock helps regulate when we feel awake and when we feel sleepy, as well as influencing hormone release, energy levels and mood.

Light plays an important role in this system. Exposure to daylight helps us feel alert, while darkness signals the body to prepare for sleep.

Each night, we move through different stages of sleep in repeating cycles. These include light sleep, deep sleep and REM sleep.

- deep sleep supports physical repair and recovery
- REM sleep helps process emotions and memories

Together, these stages support brain function, emotional balance and overall wellbeing.

How poor sleep affects mental health

Most people experience occasional sleep problems. A single poor night's sleep may leave you feeling tired or irritable the next day.

However, when sleep problems continue, they can begin to affect mental health more significantly.

Poor sleep can:

- increase anxiety, low mood or irritability
- reduce concentration and decision-making
- affect motivation and energy
- make everyday challenges feel harder to manage

Sleep and mental health can also form a reinforcing cycle. Poor sleep can lower mood and increase stress, which can then make it harder to sleep.

What happens in the brain during sleep

Sleep is not just a period of rest, t is an active process that supports how the brain functions.

During sleep, the brain:

- processes and stores memories
- clears waste products that build up during the day
- regulates hormones linked to stress and mood
- helps process emotional experiences

When sleep is disrupted, these processes become less effective. This can affect mood, thinking and emotional regulation.

Sleep hormones: cortisol and melatonin

Sleep is closely linked to hormones that regulate the body's daily rhythm.

Cortisol, often called the "stress hormone", helps you wake up and stay alert. It is usually highest in the morning and falls throughout the day. When sleep is poor or routines are irregular, cortisol levels can become disrupted, making it harder to relax and switch off.

Melatonin helps signal that it is time to sleep. It is released in the evening when it gets dark. Exposure to bright light, especially from screens, can reduce melatonin production and delay sleep.

Stress can also affect this balance. When the body remains in a more alert state, it becomes harder to fall asleep and stay asleep.

Why sleep matters for young people's mental health

Sleep is especially important during childhood and adolescence, when the brain is still developing.

Young people who get enough sleep are more likely to:

- feel more emotionally balanced
- cope better with stress
- concentrate and learn more effectively

Changes in sleep patterns during adolescence are normal, but consistent routines can still help support better sleep and mental wellbeing.

What you can do to support better sleep

Sleep is influenced by daily habits, environment and routine. The aim is not to eliminate stress completely, but to support the body's natural sleep and stress systems.

Keep a regular sleep routine

Going to bed and waking up at similar times each day helps regulate your body clock and improve sleep quality.

Create a sleep-friendly environment

Reducing screen use before bed, keeping your room dark and quiet, and having a simple wind-down routine can all support better sleep.

Move regularly

Physical activity supports sleep by helping regulate stress hormones, improving mood and supporting the body's internal rhythm. This does not need to be intense to be effective.

Be mindful of caffeine and alcohol

Caffeine can delay sleep, especially later in the day. Alcohol may make you feel sleepy at first but disrupts deeper stages of sleep that are important for mental health.

Try relaxation techniques

Simple practices such as slow breathing, reading or writing down thoughts can help calm the mind and prepare the body for sleep.

Conclusion

Improving sleep is not about getting everything perfect. Small, consistent habits can support better sleep and mental wellbeing over time.

Simple changes, like going to bed at a regular time, reducing screen use before sleep, or spending more time in daylight, can all make a difference.

Sleep is one of the most important foundations of mental health, and supporting it can have wide-reaching benefits for mood, energy and resilience.

Glossary

Circadian rhythm – The body's natural 24-hour clock that controls sleep, energy and hormones.

Sleep cycles – The repeating stages of sleep the body moves through each night.

REM sleep – A stage of sleep where dreaming often occurs and emotions are processed.

Cortisol – A hormone that helps regulate alertness and the body's response to stress.

Melatonin – A hormone that helps control the sleep–wake cycle and signals when it is time to sleep.

Sleep deprivation – Not getting enough sleep over time.

Hormones – Chemical messengers in the body that control processes such as sleep, mood and energy.

Emotional regulation – The ability to manage and respond to emotions in a balanced way.

Mental wellbeing – How we feel, think and cope with daily life.