

Why Sleep is Essential to Mental Health

One of the pillars to optimal health and wellbeing—sleep is an essential bodily function. Without it, brain activity deteriorates, impacting your concentration, mental clarity, and irritability.

We spend a third of our lives asleep. It remains one of the constants of our routine throughout life. But everyone's different. The amount of sleep you need will be unique to you. The NHS state that most people need an average of six to nine hours of sleep each night. So it's worth spending some time to work out what the perfect evening dose is for you.

It was the Dalai Lama who proposed that 'sleep is the best medication'. And for good reason, as, aside from making us feel groggy and grumpy, poor sleep is linked with poor mental and physical health too. We'll dive a little deeper into this connection below.

The sleep-mental health cycle

You can imagine the link between sleep and mental health to be something of a cycle; the two are inextricably linked. Poor sleep leads to poor mental health. Poor mental health leads to poor sleep. And vice versa.

We're all familiar with how one bad night's sleep can leave us feeling depleted of energy, lacking in concentration and generally under the weather. Problems sleeping can lead to low mood, poor relationships and decreased energy for exercise. In turn, this kind of lifestyle increases your susceptibility to mental health problems.

Getting the sleep we need helps us process emotions, make decisions and consolidate memories. And there is no substitute for that. These things are essential for us to maintain good mental health and feel equipped to ride the ups and downs of life. Good sleep helps us prevent and recover from mental health conditions.

On the flip side, when we're struggling with our mental health, sleep is inclined to be affected too. Depending upon the mental health challenges you're facing, there's a range of ways your sleep might take a hit.

- **Anxiety** - If you're suffering from anxiety, you might experience racing thoughts, a raised heart rate and headaches, making it difficult to drift off to sleep.
- **Depression** - Symptoms of depression include finding it difficult to fall asleep at night and waking up very early in the morning.
- **Stress** - While stress isn't a mental health condition itself, it has a tremendous influence on mental health. Sleep too takes a knock when our stress levels are on the up.

Top tips to a great night's sleep

Save the bedroom for sleeping
Try to avoid spending too much time in your bed when you aren't sleeping or sleepy. If you often roll around in bed for hours on end, you might start to associate sleepless nights with that space. Try to only get in your bed when you are actually ready for sleep. This tip might help you to avoid negative associations with your sleep space.



Set up your sleep space

Get the environment right. Keep your bedroom at a comfortable temperature and the light levels low. Scents like lavender, camomile, clary sage and rose can also help you drift off. Treat yourself to soft pillows, blankets and sheets. Set up a cosy sleep space that you look forward to getting into.

Worry list

If a racing mind is what keeps you from drifting off at night, try to write down your worries on a piece of paper. A worry list helps ease the pressing tension of thoughts and release them from the grips of your mind.

Switch off

Most of us will have heard that the blue light emitted from electronics keeps us up at night. This kind of light reduces melatonin production that helps us sleep and feelings of sleepiness. So try your best to switch off from the screens as early as you can, and if you do use your phone, laptop or TV, try to turn the brightness down or see if there's a night mode option you can use. All these small changes add up.

Insomnia

The tips above should help most people maintain a healthy sleep schedule. But if you are suffering from insomnia regularly, you might need some extra help from your GP. There is a range of treatment options available including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. Don't be afraid to reach out and get the support you need.

Achieving your Goals

Goals guide progress and meaning —both of which are vital to a happy and healthy life. Your goals provide purpose and a path to follow. And achieving these goals provides a sense of fulfilment incomparable to other short-lived pleasure pursuits. Achieving your goals is never going to be easy. Because it's doing the hard work that makes the destination all the more worth it. So in this article, we'll look at some of the key components of goal achievement.

Setting the right goals

There are certain goals that people tend to gravitate towards, like losing weight or saving money. But these outcomes aren't always guaranteed to bring happiness to everyone. Ensure you're setting yourself up for success by taking stock of the goals you want to work towards. Pick goals that align with your values and the life you want to lead. What gets you excited? What's worth sacrificing for?

These questions will help you narrow your focus and pick goals that make you feel good when you achieve them.

Actionable aspirations

If you want to make headway towards your ambitions, you'll need to align your attention to the specifics. How are you going to get to where you want to be?

To narrow the focus effectively, many people opt to use the SMART method, which ascertains that all goals should be:

Specific
Measurable
Achievable
Relevant
Time-bound

Think about how you'll lay out your goal, measure it, achieve it, why you want this and when you'll be able to get there. Breaking your goals down in this way helps you think about the habits you'll need to adopt each day to get where you want to be.

Paint the picture

Set your goal in stone by writing it down in as much detail as possible. You can also draw an image if you're more of a visual person. Whatever helps you start to visualise more clearly where you want to be.

Position this note where you can see it daily as a reminder of what's important. It can also help to tell people about your goal and what you're working towards. Everyone is different, so you'll need to find what works for you. But try to paint the picture of your goal clearly and revisit this regularly.



What smaller goals will make your big goal attainable?

When it comes down to it, it's the small actions you make each day that will accumulate over time to get to where you need to be.

To achieve any goal, you need a method and a means of getting there. And this can be as detailed as you like. If we take the example of saving money, we can see the actions and habits we need to build are:

- Opting for cheaper alternatives
- Not spending from savings accounts
- Paying off all debts
- Choosing cheaper social activities

Enjoy the process

There are always going to be goals to work towards, ways to improve and methods of moving forward—and we have to take responsibility and accountability for this to make progress. However, we must stop to admire the view along the way. Balance your desire for improvement with acknowledgement of the good things you are already doing, and make time for the things you enjoy still too. This work-life-improvement balance will allow you to enjoy the process without constantly pushing yourself, putting yourself down for mistakes or risking burnout.

Maternity, Paternity & Adoption rights



Expecting a baby can be a very exciting time but this doesn't come without its uncertainties. Understanding what rights, you have can be reassuring and provide that level of certainty you need.

Under Employment law, women have maternity rights when taking time off from work when having a baby. Maternity refers to the period after the birth and is linked to maternity leave in the employment context. In a non-work context, protection against maternity discrimination is for 26 weeks after giving birth.

Maternity Leave

Women are entitled to 52 weeks of maternity leave in which they will be eligible for once they have given their employer the correct notice as well as being classed as an employee. During their maternity leave, women are entitled to maternity pay. Employers may provide their own maternity pay at an enhanced rate, in which their employees may have to meet set criteria for, to be eligible. If they fall outside the scope of eligibility or an employer doesn't offer enhanced maternity pay, the pregnant employee will be entitled to statutory maternity pay.

Currently statutory maternity leave is 52 weeks. Employees do not have to take the full 52 weeks of leave but must by law take 2 weeks leave after their baby is born.

Maternity Pay

Statutory maternity pay is currently paid for up to 39 weeks. Employees are entitled to 90% of their average weekly earnings for the first 6 weeks and then £156.55 or 90% of their average weekly earnings (if this figure is lower) for the next 33 weeks. To be eligible for statutory maternity pay, employees must:

- Have worked for their employer for 26 weeks by the 15th week before their due date
- Earn at least £123 a week on average

If an employee does not meet this criterion or is classed as self-employed, then employees may be entitled maternity allowance.

Paternity Leave & Pay

Male employees are entitled to paternity leave and pay. Usually this consists of 1-2 weeks of paid leave. Unlike maternity leave, paternity leave must start after the birth of the baby and end within 56 days of the birth.

Statutory paternity pay is currently at £156.66, although an employer has discretion to allow for further leave or an enhance paternity pay scheme for their employees.

Eligibility for paternity pay and leave is the same as maternity pay and leave.

Adoption

When employees are looking to adopt a child or go ahead with a surrogacy, the employees are entitled to statutory adoption leave and statutory adoption pay. The employees are also entitled to shared parental leave and pay. Statutory adoption leave is 52 weeks. However, only one parent would be eligible for this, and the other could look to take paternity leave.

Adoption leave can start up to 14 days before the date the child starts living with you. Alternatively, it can start within 28 days if a child is being adopted from abroad, or it can start on the day that the child is born/the day after, if a surrogate has been used. Statutory adoption pay is the same as statutory maternity: 90% of weekly earnings for this first 6 weeks and then £156.66 for the next 33 weeks, totalling to 39 weeks of pay. Similarly, to maternity and paternity pay, the employer has discretion to allow for a company adoption pay scheme.

To be eligible for adoption pay and leave, employees must provide proof of adoption or surrogacy, whether that be an overseas or UK adoption. They must also have been working for the employer for at least 26 weeks and provide the correct notice.

With all types of leave, employees are protected in the way that they are entitled to pay rises, accrue holiday as usual and have the right to return to work.