

# Sleep on it



THE DOCTOR IS IN  
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**W**e are maybe the only people who came to Israel with a 30-year warranty on our mattress, something unheard of today. That said, our springs have sprung and we're in the market for a new mattress.

Sleep is important, and what you sleep on and how you sleep are very important, given that it is how you spend probably one third of your life.

Researching mattresses can be a full-time job. Thirty-five years ago, we had three choices – soft, medium or hard – all with coils. Today, the number of choices is overwhelming – foam, spring, hybrid, latex, visco, poly this and poly that, on top, in the middle, with different depths, numbers of firmness and gauges, varying greatly in cost and each having its own pluses and minuses.

If you have body parts that need pampering, sleep cold or hot, you could spend weeks trying to determine which, if any, mattress is really any better. You are told it's a personal preference.

The pièce de résistance is that many places let you take your mattress home for a month and try it out. Who would have thought? And who has the energy to send it back and try another, when you already tried 10 in the store?

We are all so tired, but none of us is sleeping that well. Why is that and what can we do about it?

If we didn't have enough to think about between COVID and the war in Europe, there are always issues – big and small – that can keep us from falling asleep and keep us anxious or awake at night.

My siblings and I must all be farmers at heart, because by 6 a.m. at the latest we are all up and ready to get on with our day. I'm always surprised, though, to see how many people are awake between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m., or at least that is the last time they looked at their phones. Are they going to bed very late, or up during the night and, if so, on their phones? Why?

As I write this, my phone's bedtime reminder just let me know that I have to begin winding down and get into bed. I appreciate it; just two minutes before, I checked my watch in anticipation of this quiet chime. The reminder sets the stage and signals my body to get "ready," in the same way that our growling stomachs let us know it is mealtime. We all benefit from a routine, and one involving sleep, when we are all so busy, is no exception.

I have written about "sleep hygiene" before because good-quality, restorative sleep recharges our batteries and energizes us, both physically and emotionally.

We all can use that now. Too many people go to bed tired and wake up exhausted. Poor sleep hygiene can be extremely detrimental to our physical and mental health, impedes social relationships, decreases job performance, impacts driving, anger, attention, alertness, cognitive performance, memory, sexual interest, weight, energy level and just about everything important in your day-to-day functioning.

Whether your problem is getting into a good sleep routine, falling asleep, staying asleep, waking too early, staying awake during the day, nightmares or sleep apnea, chronic sleep issues can actually be life-threatening.

WITH THE world's population not getting nearly enough good-quality sleep, and general anxiety being at the highest I have seen in years, I hope these suggestions will serve as a reminder to take whatever steps you can to get your sleep under control.

1. Establish a good sleep routine by setting a bedtime reminder and heading to bed and waking up around the same time each day.

2. Set the stage for sleep. Sleep only in your bedroom. Make sure your bed and pillows are comfortable and your bedroom is well ventilated, quiet and dark. Establish presleep rituals such as a warm bath or a few minutes of reading (but not on a screen!).

3. Use your room only for sleep, illness and intimacy. Keep your television out of your bedroom and don't fall asleep on the couch with it on. If you get tired, go to bed!

4. Avoid stress, especially at bedtime, by examining your day (during the day), to see where you are overscheduled and what you can change. Address underlying



(Kate Stone Matheson/Unsplash)

*Too many people go to bed tired and wake up exhausted*

causes of worry, anxiety and depression, which may result in insomnia, hypersomnia and early-morning awakening.

5. Clear your head before you go to sleep. Keep a notebook next to your bed, write down thoughts that keep you awake and then "let them go" or designate a specific time to worry. Get out of bed for a short while if you can't sleep.

6. Pay attention to your tech time. Doom-scrolling for hours at night will not lead to peaceful sleep. Studies strongly advise dumbing down all technology at least an hour before bedtime.

Keep your devices, and especially your phone, out of the bedroom. Texting and tweeting result in hyperarousal, and intermittent light and noise are thought to have a detrimental impact on your nervous system, preventing the onset and continuation of sleep. Turn off all bells and whistles. Both your body and brain need time to wind down and completely relax.

7. Buy yourself an inexpensive alarm clock. If you are a clock-watcher, turn your clock around during the night. Checking it just increases anxiety and will bring you to a higher state of arousal, hindering your return to sleep.

8. Learn mindfulness meditation and allow yourself to find a "place" for your worries. Remind yourself that thinking at 3 a.m. solves nothing. Everything can wait until the sun comes up, when life will generally seem more manageable.

9. It is important for both adults and children to ensure that the conditions under which they fall asleep are the same as when they awaken during the night. Everyone wakes during the night. If your sleep quality is good, you probably won't remember (or if you are a child, you won't signal to your parents). If you fall asleep with the light on, a bottle in your mouth, or in someone's arms, you are more likely to move into a less deep sleep or wake completely when you awaken in the middle of the night if conditions are different.

10. If you do wake at night to go to the bathroom, remind yourself as often as needed with a simple mantra "don't think." This helps keep your thoughts in sleep mode as you do your relaxation breathing and simply notice your body from head to toe.

11. Have a daily plan with routine times for meals, chores and exercise. If you nap, do so early in the afternoon and keep

it short, under an hour.

12. Maintain a healthy diet. Don't eat heavy or spicy meals before bed and avoid caffeine and alcohol when tired or when on sleep medication. Reduce evening liquid consumption if it interferes with your sleep and don't snack during the night.

13. Exercise regularly, but not close to bedtime, and get outdoors during the day and enjoy plenty of sunlight.

SLEEP IS not just a time-out from our busy lives. Reducing our sleep deficit must be seen as a priority, if we care about ourselves, our families and each other. We must examine how to enhance our quality of life through the provision of more leisure time, something many grew to appreciate in the past few years.

While everyone suffers from occasional sleep disruption, if your sleep continues to be a problem seek help. Working together with a clinical psychologist specializing in treating sleep issues can be of enormous help in enabling you to make the most of your shut-eye.

After you complete a thorough sleep history and sleep diary, issues such as chronic pain, hormonal changes, and other physical and emotional symptoms can be rapidly assessed as a first step in understanding the exact nature of your sleep problem.

Treatments involving muscle relaxation, breathing techniques, mindfulness exercises, and cognitive behavioral therapy, which helps address maladaptive thoughts and poor sleep habits, all offer excellent non-medicinal alternatives, often equal to, or more effective than, medication, and with fewer side effects. Sleep medication should be used sparingly at most and rarely for more than a few weeks.

Making the most out of the sleep you get is critical given that we seem to have so much more to do with so much less time to do it. Wishing you only sweet dreams. ■

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