

## Building Personal Resilience in Twelve Steps

### Step 9: Sleep Well



“One step each week. You will be amazed at the difference it will make”

Scientific and medical evidence shows that having sufficient sleep plays a critical role in good health and wellbeing from infancy through to old age. Quality sleep helps to nurture mental wellbeing, physical health, quality of life, work performance and productivity as well as human safety. In short, lack of proper sleep decreases an individual’s resilience level.

Sleep impacts on how you feel when you are awake because whilst you sleep your body is working to repair and recover, supporting healthy cognitive, heart and organ function to maintain your physical and mental fitness. There is a healing process recuperating from the stresses of the day and a preventative process preparing for the challenges of the future. Clearly for children sleep also supports all-important physical growth and cognitive development as well as sustaining them through highly active and mentally demanding days.

Lack of sleep, or sleep deprivation, has the most serious and dramatic impact. It can cause serious and life-threatening accidents on the roads, in the home and at work; several studies have looked at how reaction time and physical coordination skills are affected by sleep deprivation.

Sleep deficit raises your risk of chronic medical problems such as diabetes, often leads to weight gain and increased risk of heart disease. It wears you down, slowly, pervasively, and perniciously. Studies show that sleep deficiency alters activity in some parts of the brain. If you’re sleep deficient, you may have

trouble making decisions, solving problems, controlling your emotions and behaviour, and coping with change. Good sleep allows us to consolidate our memories, improves our ability to sustain attention and helps us to be creative whilst using our innovation and problem-solving skills.

If it is so important, and given that we have all had a lifetime of perfecting the art of sleeping, why are so many of us sleep deprived? Most of us need between seven and nine hours sleep each night, but recent reports suggest that many of us only achieve around six hours sleep. We have a “sleep debt” of fourteen hours each week which has serious consequences to our wellbeing, our performance, and our resilience.

Sleep problems affect 1 in 3 people so this week we shall focus on this important topic.

**Keep a sleep diary.** One suggestion that may help is just for one week note when you go to bed, when you wake up and any interruptions to your sleep. Also note the other times during the day when you might take a nap and log the time spent asleep. Write everything down and total the number of hours sleep you are having during each 24-hour period. Simply keeping the diary raises your awareness and often points plainly at the issue to be addressed. With the exception of those who have significant sleep disorders due to medical reasons, it is an issue that lies very much within your control if you are prepared to make some changes.

After the week read through your diary and analyse the information:

Do you have a regular or an irregular sleep pattern?

What is the total sleep time every 24 hours?

How many naps during the day or early evening do you need to take?

How alert or rested do you feel half an hour after getting up?

**Take heed of what your body is telling you.** We saw in our *eating and drinking well* article last week that we needed to listen to our bodies more. It's the same with sleep. We can feel we are tired; we can even say it out loud, but we still persist in sitting up late or finishing a specific task. We even say, “I ought to get to bed” and then just continue. We naturally feel tired at two different times of the day - approximately 2pm and 2am.

After you have spent a week keeping a sleep diary start the next week resolved to “take heed of what your body is telling you” and act immediately. As soon as you feel tired, or show the obvious signs, then take yourself off to bed and prepare to sleep. Not catnapping in an armchair, but quality sleep in a quality environment. Cool, comfortable, peaceful, relaxing. *This week listen to your body and take action.*

**Push the margins of your sleep.** If you are one of those people only achieving about six hours sleep each night then for one week push the margins by going to bed 30 minutes earlier than usual, and at the same time getting up 30 minutes later. Keep increasing this as needed until you are close to the eight hours per night. Do it in stages but persist until you have pushed the margins of your sleep and redrawn them.

There will be countless obstacles in your way, of course - you may have children or a lifestyle or even work commitments that make it difficult. But do everything you can to address those issues because if they are depriving you of sleep then this is having serious consequences on your wellbeing. *Start to push the margins of your sleep this week.*

**Create your little bit of paradise.** Organise your bedroom this week to be your little bit of paradise, somewhere you long to be that is comfortable, quiet and uncluttered. Put on fresh bed linen, consider a warm and luxurious bath. Develop a new routine of winding down about an hour before going up to bed and mentally preparing for your sleep. For many, meditation is helpful - letting go of the day's stressors and creating stillness and calm.

Try to avoid the distractions of TV, smart-phone, and even your book. Just snuggle under the covers and enjoy peace, perfect peace. It will probably be a difficult at first, almost unnatural, but persist and start to shape your time of sleep as a time when you can truly switch off and be in your own time and space. *Create your little bit of paradise.*

**Build your new rituals.** Try to keep to the same routine every day of the week, given the very occasional exception, so that your body clock does not have to keep recalibrating itself. Develop bedtime routines that work for you. For some it's a brief non-strenuous walk, for others it's a glass of milk and a biscuit. Read your book or magazine before you go up to bed, rather than in bed, and take that bath or shower at the same time each night or morning. Your body likes routine, so give it a real treat.

Such simple things to do, but in building resilience it is often about taking back control of things that frankly have been neglected by us. We know what we should do but we find it so hard to do it. Be kind to yourself - it will take time. But this week these steps should help you become aware of sleep as a precious asset, move away from sleep debt and to looking after your health - why? because better sleep is the biggest single contributor to living better.

One step each week. You will be amazed at the difference it will make.

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