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Wired, Tired, and Sleep Deprived

Kept awake by a buzzing brain or a faulty sense of time? These strategies are a great start for putting ADHD symptoms to bed.

by Nancy Ratey, Ed.M.

Why So Tired?

Many adults with attention deficit disorder complain of restless nights and exhausted mornings. Sometimes, ADHD medications cause adverse reactions, other times your racing brain keeps you up. Just as there is no one reason for ADHD-related sleep disturbances, there is no one solution that works for everyone. Here are several options from *ADDitude's* experts.

Is Your Medication Keeping You Up?

ADHD medications can spark sleep problems in some adults. If you suspect that this is the case, talk with your doctor about fine-tuning your treatment. On the other hand, some ADHD experts believe that taking a stimulant 45 minutes before bedtime can shut off a buzzing brains. "About two-thirds of my adult patients take a full dose of their ADHD medication every night to fall asleep," says William Dodson, M.D., a psychiatrist based in Denver.

Do Your Own Sleep Study

You won't know what's causing your sleep problems until you spend time tracking them. Sleep-tracking apps like Sleep Bot Tracker Log and Sleep Cycle for smartphones can tell you what changing variables affect sleep—how watching the news before turning in, for instance, can disrupt sleep versus reading a book you enjoy, or whether getting exercise in the morning might be better for settling you into sleep than doing it later in the day.

Curb Caffeine, Increase Activity

Studies show that drinking coffee or caffeine too close to bedtime can prevent you from getting to sleep—and cause you to toss and turn when you do finally fall asleep. Many people don't drink coffee after 1 p.m. Regular daytime exercise has been shown to set you up for a sound night's sleep. Just don't do it too close to bedtime, which can have the opposite effect.

Kill the Light

Light activates the ADHD brain and keeps you awake longer. Prepare for sleep by shutting off or dimming lights by 9 p.m. Put overhead lights on a dimmer switch to gradually lessen the intensity of the light, and don't spend time in front of a bright TV or computer screen after 9 p.m.

Slow Down Your Brain

Once you're in bed, with lights off, use ADHD-friendly tools to help you relax—a white noise machine, earplugs, or soothing music can all slow down racing thoughts. Another solution: Concentrate on relaxing one muscle at a time, starting with your feet and moving up toward your head, breathing out each time you reach a new muscle group.

Create Wake-Up and Wind-Down Routines

Waking up on time depends on going to bed on time, and getting a full night's rest. Develop routines to help you wake up happier and faster in the morning and wind down at night. These get-to-sleep and wake-up routines can be simple—showering and listening to music each night, having coffee and reading the paper each morning.

Be Consistent

Wake up and go to bed at the same time every day. This will increase the quality of your sleep by letting your body get into a daily rhythm, something that especially benefits adults and children with ADHD. Not everyone requires the same amount of sleep, but consistency is the key, so work with your family to establish a sleep routine you can stick with.

Get Your RDA of Sunlight

Many ADHDers' internal clocks are off, which may be causing them to fall asleep later and get up much later than most people. You can reset your internal clock by getting a dose of sunlight first thing in the morning. If getting outside in the morning is a challenge, use a light box, usually recommended for Seasonal Affective Disorder, for about 30 minutes each morning. Let the light shine indirectly—never directly—toward your eyes.

Natural Treatments for Sleep

To calm a racing mind or a restless body before bed, ADHD expert Sandy Newmark, M.D., recommends taking the herb valerian. Talk with your doctor about the right dosage for you. Newmark has also found that over-the-counter melatonin brings on sleep for some of his ADHD patients. Once again, talk with your doctor about a specific dosage that might work for you.

Avoid Sleep Traps

Know your ADHD sleep traps and avoid them. If talking on the phone, watching TV, or checking e-mail keeps you up past your bedtime, post signs reminding you to stick to your schedule. Ask for help from family, so they know not to distract you from your goal.

Set a Bedtime Alarm

Program a wristwatch with an alarm, or set an alarm clock, to go off one hour before bedtime, so you know that it's time to start preparing for bed. If you often find yourself watching TV late into the night, place the alarm clock in another room, so you will be forced to get up to turn it off.

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