

Sleepstation

Clergy  
Support  
Trust

# Your guide to better sleep

Developed by Sleepstation for Clergy Support Trust

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# We're here for you

The coronavirus pandemic has forced changes upon all of us and, understandably, disrupted sleep for many. With restrictions around group gatherings in place, 'going to church' looks very different and those working within churches have faced many challenges.

**We've prepared this guide for Clergy Support Trust to offer our support.** We hope you'll find our advice helpful. Our aim is to reduce the number of people at risk of developing chronic sleep problems as a result of this crisis.

If you're sleeping badly most nights, and things don't improve after implementing the advice in this guide, then please get in touch to discuss how we can help further. This is particularly important if you had a sleep problem before the pandemic.

[support@sleepstation.org.uk](mailto:support@sleepstation.org.uk)

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**Alison Gardiner**  
Chief Executive



# Who are we and how can we help?

Sleepstation is an NHS accredited sleep improvement programme. Our online sleep service is based on extensive research and years of clinical practice. We also have a secure online messaging service, providing access to a team of coaches and sleep experts who can discuss problems in a safe and confidential way. Our online service is a proven alternative to clinic-based sleep services and is just as effective.

We've helped many thousands of people sleep better:

[sleepstation.org.uk/patient-stories](https://sleepstation.org.uk/patient-stories)

In addition to our work with the NHS, we support organisations and employers across the world to make our services available to the people they employ and the communities they support.

We typically help people with long-term (chronic) sleep problems. Sleep problems can become chronic when they aren't addressed quickly enough. We hope that the advice in this guide will help you to manage new sleep problems effectively to stop them becoming chronic.



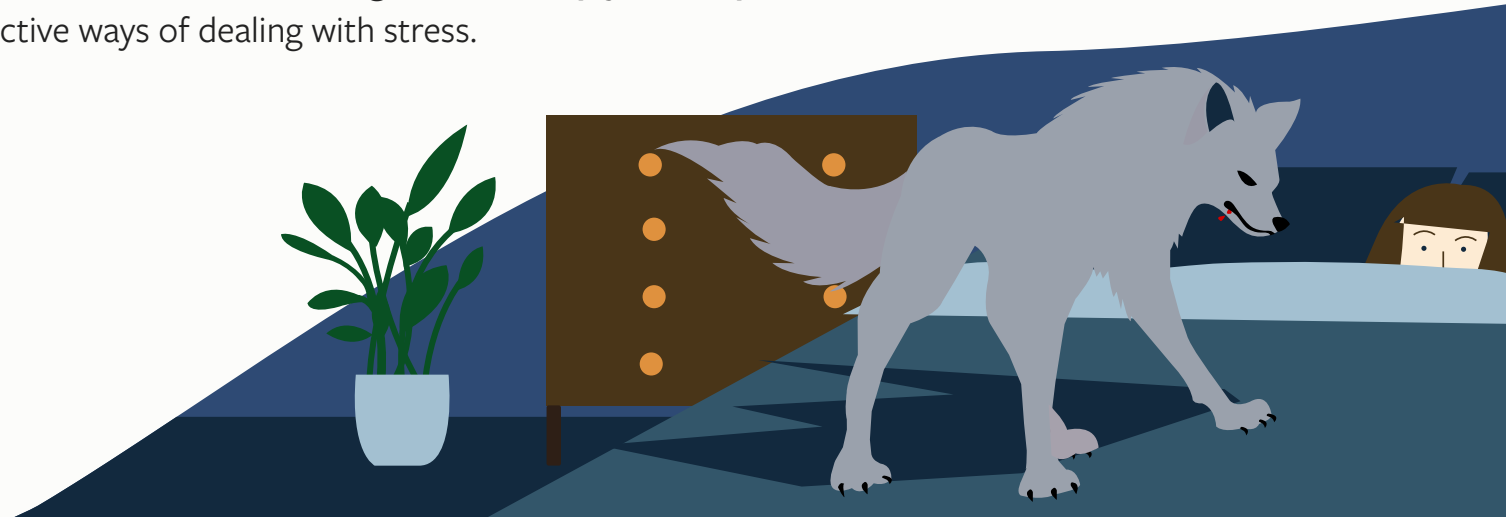
# Were you sleeping well before the pandemic only to struggle with sleep now? There could be an easy fix

During this period of uncertainty, it's perfectly natural to have sleep problems. **We're living through an unprecedented global challenge.** Many of us are experiencing higher than normal levels of stress because of COVID-19.

Stress and anxiety can significantly disturb sleep because they put the brain into a state of arousal (high alert), making it difficult to sleep well.

If there's something to be concerned about, it makes sense for us to be awake so that we can respond to the problem. This is a natural protective response. **We remain alert when we feel under threat, to protect us from danger.** It wouldn't, for example, make sense to be asleep if there was a wolf in the bedroom.

However, COVID-19 isn't a wolf that could creep up on you in the night and being awake isn't going to help you fight it. In fact, losing sleep is probably going to have the opposite effect. **If you're struggling to sleep at the moment, the advice in this guide can help you sleep better** and good sleep is one of the most effective ways of dealing with stress.



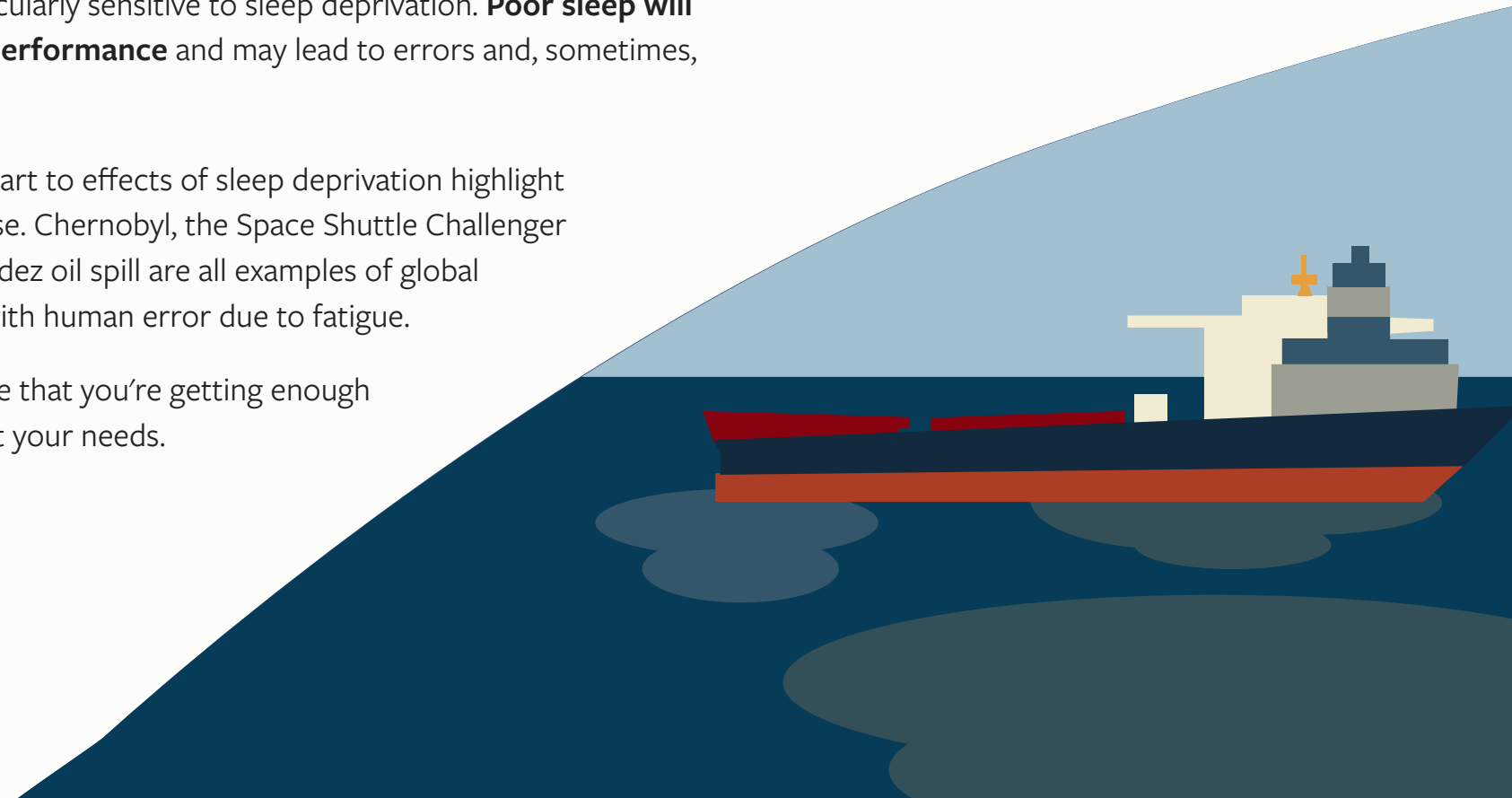
# Good sleep provides a foundation for good work

At the heart of every job are several basic psychological processes - decision making, problem-solving, reasoning, organising, planning, executing plans, reaction time, risk-taking, spatial awareness etc.

Every task you carry out involves one or more of these executive functions. The problem is that the part of the brain responsible for these functions - the prefrontal cortex - is particularly sensitive to sleep deprivation. **Poor sleep will negatively impact your performance** and may lead to errors and, sometimes, catastrophic accidents.

Past events attributed in part to effects of sleep deprivation highlight the devastation it can cause. Chernobyl, the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster and the Exxon Valdez oil spill are all examples of global catastrophes associated with human error due to fatigue.

So, it's important to ensure that you're getting enough good quality sleep to meet your needs.



# It's harder to interpret emotions when you're sleep deprived

Another function that is affected by poor sleep is the ability to empathise with people and interpret their body language and tone of voice.

People have a harder time identifying facial expressions of happiness or sadness when they're sleep deprived compared to when they're well rested. However, our ability to interpret facial expressions of other emotions – anger, fear, surprise and disgust – is not impaired.

**Good sleep is a great asset. It helps you communicate effectively with others and plays a key role in helping you deal with the stresses and strains of the day.**



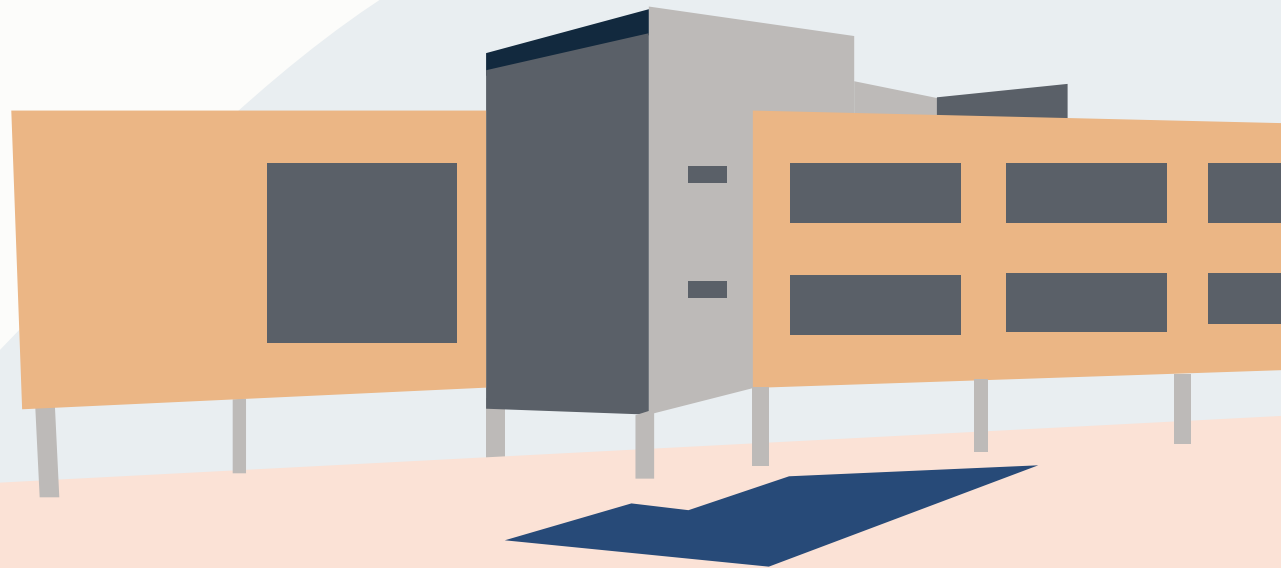
# Small changes can make big differences

**This guide provides practical advice to help you sleep better.**

The advice in this guide is evidence-based and very effective. We know, from many decades of research in this area, that small changes can make big differences. You may not have to change too much but it could make a big difference to your sleep.



This guide has been prepared by **Dr Neil Stanley, our Director of Sleep Science.** Neil has been involved in sleep research for 38 years. He started his career at the Neurosciences Division of the RAF and later became Director of Sleep Research at the University of Surrey. He has published 38 peer-reviewed papers.



# Get some sunlight

**Try to spend at least 30 minutes each day in natural sunlight.**

- Exposure to sunlight (especially morning light) improves sleep.
- We get Vitamin D from sunlight and certain foods.
- Vitamin D can help protect against acute respiratory infections.

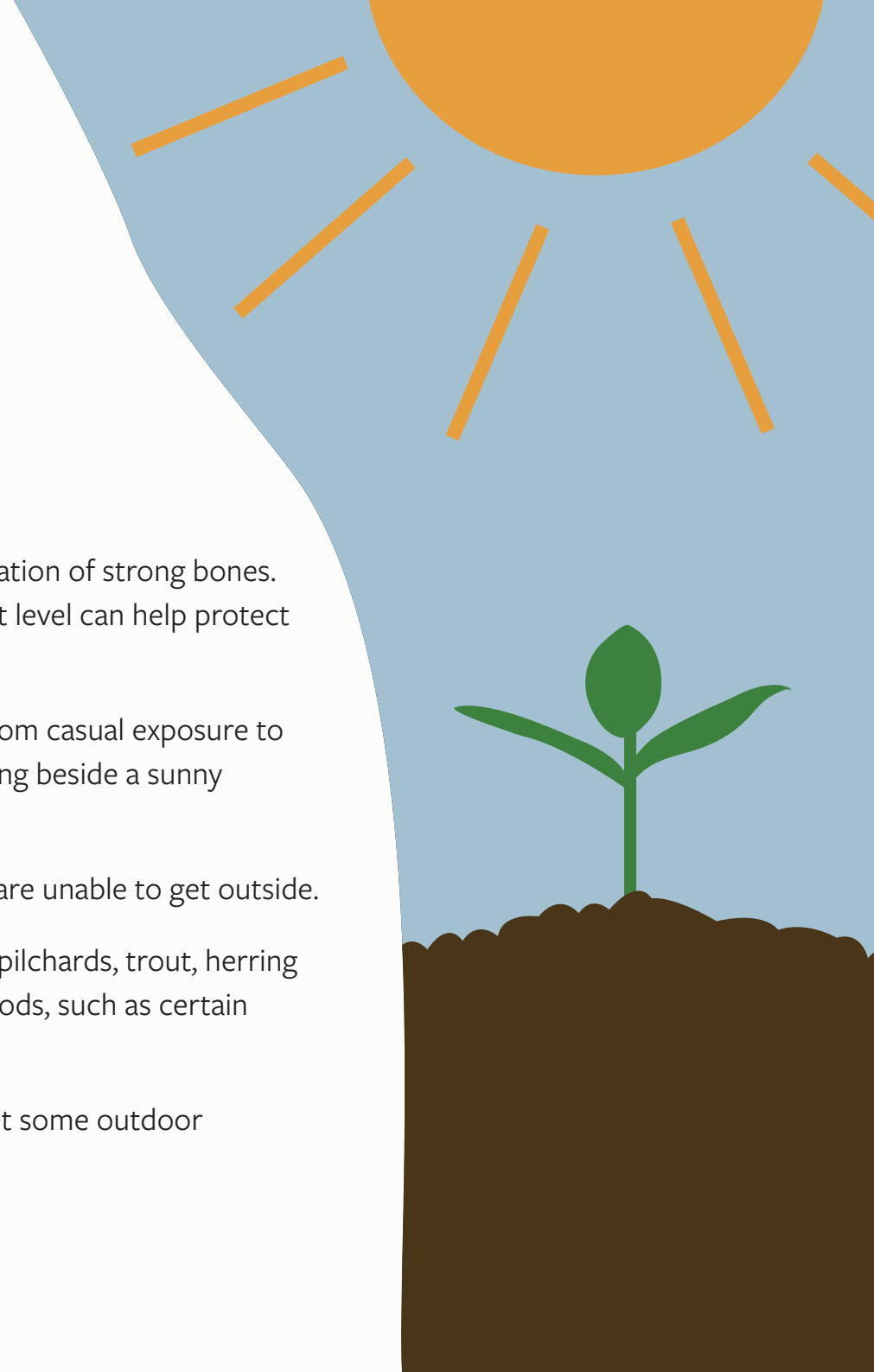
Vitamin D helps us absorb calcium which is a critical mineral in the formation of strong bones. Significantly, there is also data which shows that Vitamin D at the correct level can help protect against acute respiratory infections (1).

More than 90% of the Vitamin D requirement for most people comes from casual exposure to sunlight (2). We can't photosynthesise Vitamin D if we're indoors, so sitting beside a sunny window won't work.

Our food can also be an important source of Vitamin D, especially if we are unable to get outside.

Foods that contain Vitamin D include: oily fish such as salmon, sardines, pilchards, trout, herring and kippers and also cod liver oil, egg yolk, meat, offal and milk. Some foods, such as certain breakfast cereals, are also fortified with Vitamin D.

It is essential for good physical, mental and emotional health that you get some outdoor exposure to daylight or eat foods that contain Vitamin D.



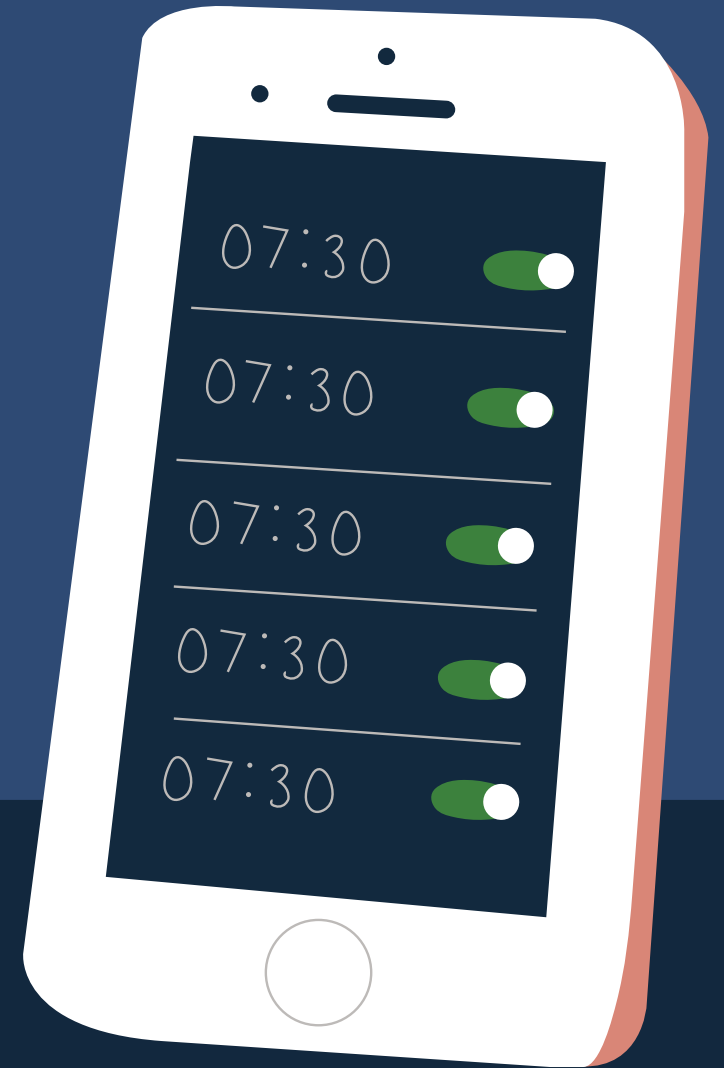


# Try to maintain a routine, if possible

We understand that this might be the hardest thing to do, given that many of the measures being introduced in response to this crisis aren't under our control. However, you can improve your sleep and reduce anxious feelings by:

- Getting up at the same time each day (if you're not working variable shifts).
- Exercising regularly (pick something you enjoy).
- Making sure to get outside in the daylight each day (while maintaining a good distance from others).

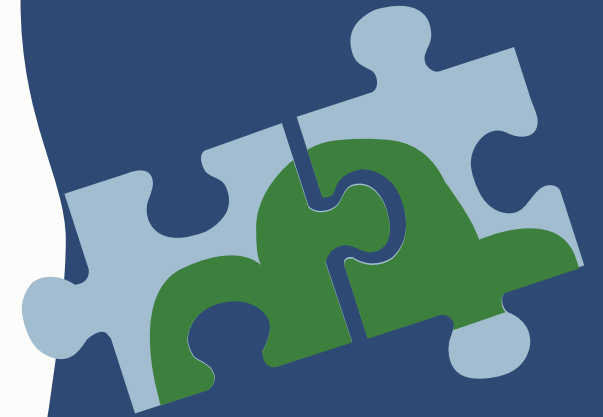
**The body craves consistency** and having a regular wake up time can improve sleep.



# Quieten your mind

A quiet mind is key to falling asleep. **Anything that helps you achieve a quiet mind will help you sleep.** Sleep is a very individual thing - **if something helps you get to sleep and stay asleep then don't change it.** What works for someone else may not work for you. Do whatever works for you.

- Many people find it helpful to focus on their breathing. Breathe in and out slowly and deeply while visualising a tranquil scene.
- Exercise can provide an outlet for frustrations and releases mood-enhancing endorphins. For many people, yoga can be particularly effective at reducing anxiety and stress.
- Read a book, but nothing too taxing.
- Do a puzzle.
- Chat to a loved one.
- Listen to your favourite music as it can lower blood pressure and quieten your mind.



# Wind down properly before bed

Go to bed when you are sleepy and not when the TV programme you are watching finishes. Our preparation for sleep often involves nothing more than turning the TV off, having a pee, brushing our teeth and then getting into bed. We expect to fall asleep and we're constantly surprised when that does not happen.

One of the most important things you can do is to establish a regular and relaxing bedtime routine. This will signal to the body that it is time for sleep and will allow you to put the stresses and worries of the day behind you.

You should spend at least 30 minutes winding down before bed. Once you are in bed, because you are relaxed, you should gently drift off to sleep. You mustn't try to fall asleep: the harder you try, the more worked up you will get because you aren't falling asleep.

- Give yourself at least 30 minutes to wind down before bed.
- Only get into bed when you're properly sleepy.
- Don't try to force yourself to sleep - it won't work.



# Put your day to rest before you get into bed

- Don't open the gas bill just before bed or argue with your partner as you switch the light off (remember when your granny said 'don't go to bed angry' - she was right).
- It's best to **avoid potential stressors**, such as news updates, too close to bedtime.



# Distract yourself

Distraction is a powerful technique that you can use to quieten your mind and get a better night's sleep. Simple distraction techniques include:

- Mouthing out a meaningless word (like 'the') over and over while in bed. Repeating something meaningless over and over in your mind can block out unwanted thoughts that might be keeping you awake.
- Picking a category (e.g. blue things) and thinking of all the things you can in that category. Switch category if you need to.
- Thinking about the good things that have happened during the past day. Even during this crisis, we can find positivity around us if we look for a positive thread.
- Accepting your thoughts as they are and not trying to fight them.
- Thinking of something that will steer you away from your worries, rather than something that will lead you back to them.

All of these techniques are forms of thought blocking and you can read more about how and why they work on our articles page:

[sleepstation.org.uk/articles](https://sleepstation.org.uk/articles)



# The bedroom

The bedroom should be **a sanctuary reserved for sleep** and the sleep environment needs to be pleasant and relaxing (get rid of the TV and computers). Avoid doing daytime activities in the bedroom.

It should be **dark** - either use heavy curtains or an eye mask, and it should be as **quiet** as possible. If this is difficult, then consider using comfortable earplugs.

The **bed should be comfortable** and as **big** as you can fit into your bedroom. A standard double shared by two adults gives each adult less space than they would have in a single bed.

The bedroom should not be stuffy, as **fresh air is good for sleep**, and it should be neither too hot nor too cold.

Many experts say that **the ideal temperature for the bedroom is 16-18°C** (60-65°F) although this is, again, a matter of personal preference.



# Under the covers

It's not just the room temperature that is important for getting a good night's sleep. The temperature in your direct sleeping environment - i.e. under the duvet - is equally important.

This temperature should be as close to a thermo-neutral temperature (approximately 29°C) as possible.

**During the night the body needs to lose heat** and this is done mainly through the head and face - the only bits that usually stick out from under the duvet. A cool bedroom facilitates this heat loss.

However, if the room is too hot or you're too hot under the duvet, then it's more difficult for the body to lose heat and this will cause disturbed sleep. The same is also true if you're too cold as this means the body has to work hard to maintain its optimal temperature and again this can disturb sleep.

**Achieving an optimal temperature under the bed covers is essential.**



# During the night

The bed should be reserved for sleep and intimacy only. Spending long periods of time in bed awake can break the association between bed and sleep.

**Don't lie in bed awake.** If you're tossing and turning for more than 30 minutes at the start of the night - or 20 minutes during the night - then it may be helpful to get out of bed and do something else.

**Only go back to bed when you feel sleepy again.**

If you still don't fall asleep then get up, do something else and go back to bed when you are sleepy.





# In the morning

**The body craves consistency.** Having a regular wake up time can help improve your sleep.

When we get up at different times each day, the body can't prepare properly for waking. When we wake at different times each day, or are woken up unexpectedly, we're more likely to feel groggy in the morning. This feeling can last for the first few hours of the day.

Establish a fixed wake time - **get up at the same time every morning.**



# Fact check - sleep and immunity

It's vital that the immune system functions at full capacity to prevent infection and fight disease (3).

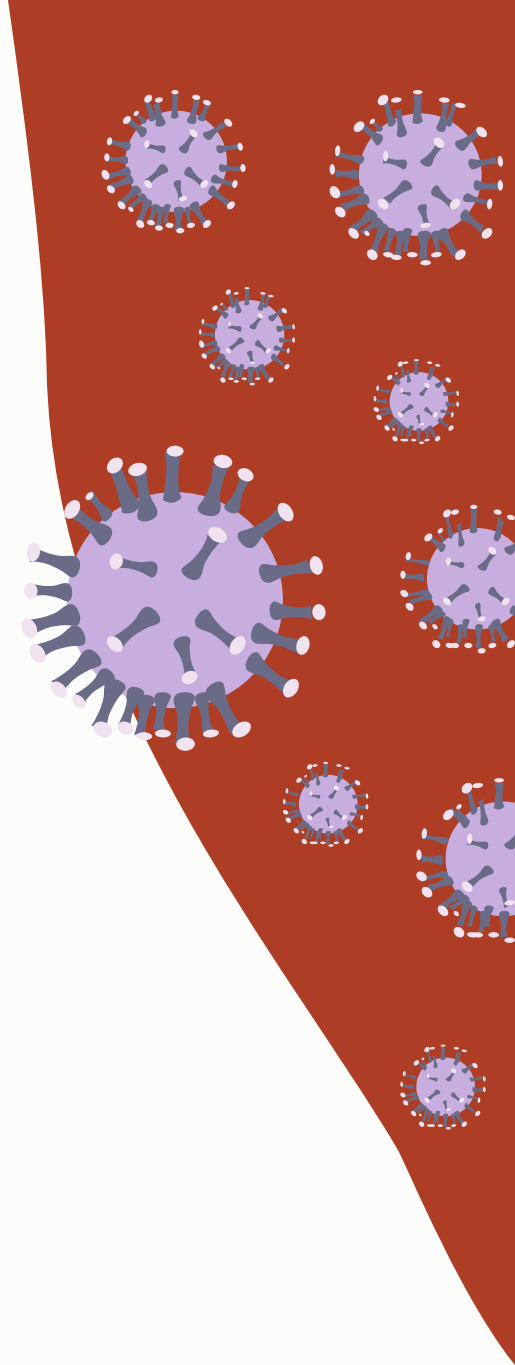
Good sleep ensures that the immune system is at its strongest. However, good sleep only contributes to a healthier lifestyle in conjunction with a nutritious diet and moderate exercise.

**If you're sleeping well, getting more sleep will not additionally strengthen, or boost, your immune system.** However, if you're regularly struggling to sleep, then there are many reasons why you should try to resolve that situation. Improving your immune function is just one of them.

The only time that additional sleep/bed-rest is really important is if you're infected. Extra rest gives your body the best chance of fighting and beating the infection.

Worrying that you'll weaken your immune function - and increase the chances of contracting coronavirus - if you don't sleep well is a sure-fire way of disturbing your sleep.

It should be noted that, to date, there is no scientific evidence that sleep alone offers any additional protection from infection from COVID-19.



# What to do if you're feeling anxious

Anxiety is part of everyday life. It warns of potential danger and, as a result, anxiety can often be beneficial. However, repeated and persistent anxiety, either real or imagined, can become a problem in terms of maintaining good physical, mental and emotional health.

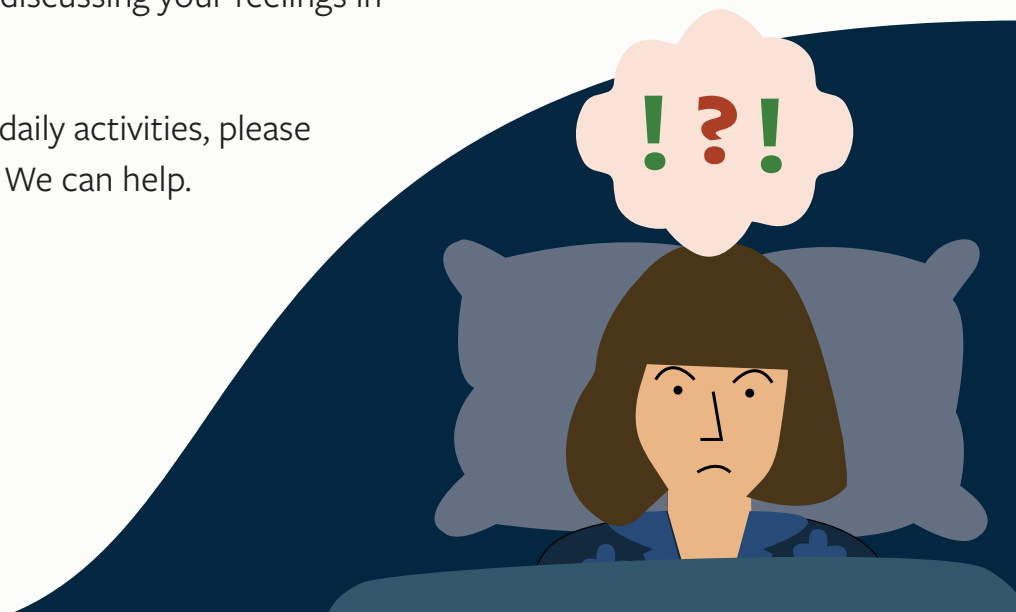
Severe feelings of anxiety affect both our waking lives and our sleep. **What's worse is that poor sleep exacerbates feelings of anxiety.** It's a vicious cycle.

Anxiety causes sleeping problems as it places the mind on high alert. It is more difficult to fall asleep when your mind is racing. Anxiety can also be a problem if you wake during the night - or wake early - as it will make it harder for you to fall back asleep.

## Tell others how you're feeling

Don't be afraid of discussing your feelings with a close friend or relative along with **qualified professionals**. Anxiety can feel severe, but it is extremely treatable and discussing your feelings in this way can help immensely.

If your anxiety is severe and persistent and it is affecting your sleep and daily activities, please contact your GP. If it's *only* affecting your sleep then please let us know. We can help.



# Ways to manage anxiety directly

## Check the news less frequently

While it's important to be aware of the latest health advice and also to stay informed about what's happening across the world, it has been reported that spending more than three hours each day focusing on stressful situations is linked to:

- Increased anxiety
- Heightened feelings of depression
- Worse sleep quality

**To reduce the likelihood of experiencing any of the symptoms listed above, we'd recommend that you:**

- Limit the time you spend watching news.
- Check the news no more than twice a day.



## Use official sources

Each country has a different approach to managing the pandemic and this advice has changed over time. It will remain important to stay aware of the official advice for your area.

Those living in the UK can keep up to date with advice from the UK Government [here](#).

In most areas, you can also register to receive email alerts. In the UK, you can [sign up for e-mail alerts](#) from the UK Government to be notified when the situation changes, without having to check news outlets too frequently.

*When you check for information also matters. If done too close to your normal bedtime, there's a risk of becoming psychologically aroused, experiencing poorer sleep and a worsening of anxiety.*



## Avoid rumours

Social media is a great way to keep in touch with loved ones, especially for those who are practising social distancing or are self-isolating. However, many of us will be aware that not all news is accurate and some news can be fake.

If something has appeared in your feed that seems worrying, you might want to fact check it to reassure yourself. You can do this using a variety of websites, such as:

- [hoaxorfact.com](https://hoaxorfact.com)
- [factcheck.org](https://factcheck.org)
- [snopes.com](https://snopes.com)



# How much sleep do I need?

Individual sleep need is like height - we are all different and it is, to a large degree, genetically determined.

The sleep *you* need is, essentially, the amount of sleep that allows you to feel awake, alert and refreshed during the following day. If you feel sleepy during the day then you are probably not, for whatever reason, getting the sleep that you need during the night.

**Check in with how you're feeling about two hours after waking each day for a week. If you're generally feeling good, then you're likely to be getting enough sleep.**



# The 'eight hour' myth

Given the ubiquity of this 'fact' it may come as a bit of a surprise to learn that **eight hours is not the recommended length of sleep and never has been.** The current recommendation for sleep duration in adults, according to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, is more than seven hours. The National Sleep Foundation states that less than six hours of sleep or more than 10 hours of sleep are 'not recommended' for adults (26-64 years).

**These recommendations place the ideal range between 7-10 hours.**



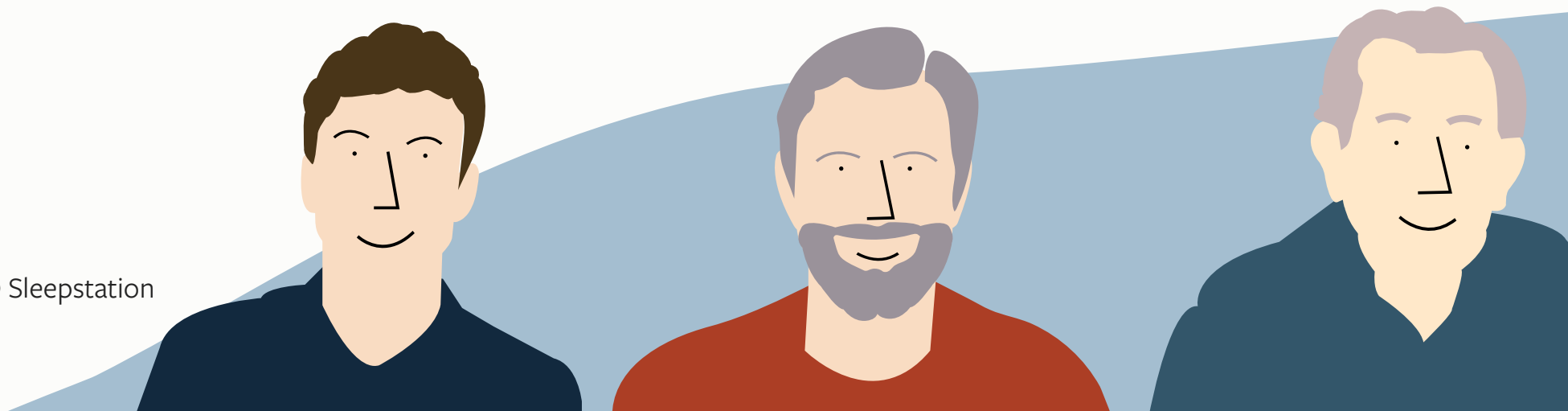


# Sleep as we age

**One of the great myths about sleep is that people need less sleep as they grow older.** Actually, while our sleep patterns may change over time, the need for sleep becomes fixed in early adulthood and does not greatly change across the course of our lives. Essentially, **an 85-year-old needs the same amount of sleep as they did when they were 25.** What changes as we get older is the opportunity to get the sleep we need.

As we age, our deep, restorative, slow wave sleep (SWS) becomes progressively less and our sleep becomes less refreshing. In men, it generally begins around the mid-30s-40s, while in women it starts in their 50s.

Children have a lot of deep sleep. It is vital for growth, memory and learning and most children can sleep anywhere, through anything. If they do wake there is a great deal of biological pressure for them to go back to sleep.



As the proportion of deep slow wave sleep gradually reduces as we age, increasingly greater portions of the night will be spent in lighter stages of sleep and sleep will become more easily disturbed. There will also be less biological pressure to fall back to sleep if you're woken.

Our sleep is further compromised as we get older because there are more things to wake us and keep us awake – for example pain, bladder problems and anxiety. Think about it: you get up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, you empty your bladder and get back into bed. And then you are awake for the next hour and a half. It is not the bladder you have just emptied that is keeping you awake so is it pain, anxiety or a snoring partner?

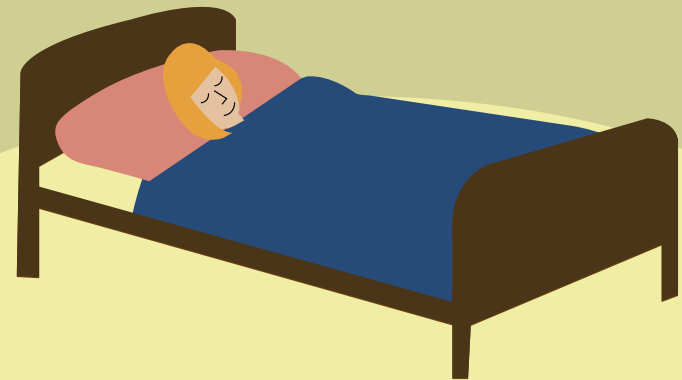
In addition to the changes in sleep architecture, there are changes to our body clock whereby **older people tend to become sleepier in the early evening, go to bed earlier and wake earlier in the morning.**

Waking without feeling refreshed leads many older people to feel they're suffering from sleep problems. In truth, much of what they feel could be accounted for by the natural changes in their sleep. The problem is compounded if the older person also naps during the day. They may sleep less at night as a result and this could compound the belief that they have a sleep problem.

**The fact that it is more difficult to get good sleep as we get older does not lessen the importance of trying to get the best sleep we can throughout our lives.**



**Remember, you can't  
find sleep, so try not to  
chase it. You have to let  
sleep find you and it will.**

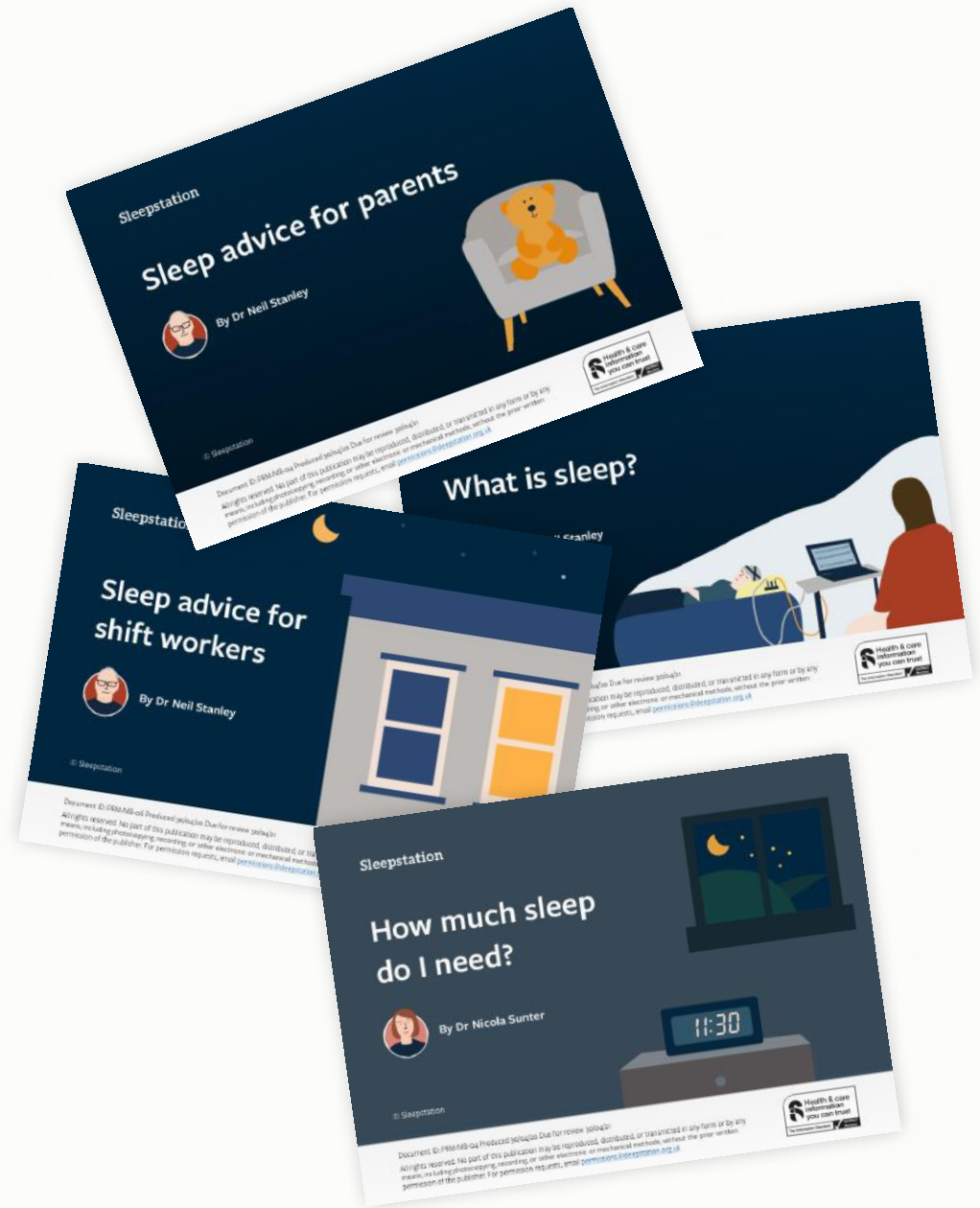


# Other guides in this series

If you've found this guide helpful and would like to request a copy of any of the other guides in this series please email [support@sleepstation.org.uk](mailto:support@sleepstation.org.uk) to request your copy.

- Children's sleep - advice for parents
- Sleep advice for shift workers
- What is sleep?
- How much sleep do I need?

If you've applied the advice in this guide and are still struggling to sleep, we can help. Please call us on 033 800 9404 or email [access@sleepstation.org.uk](mailto:access@sleepstation.org.uk) to request access to our online sleep improvement programme. NHS, employer funded, charity funded and private access options are available.



# References

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2. Martineau, A.R., Jolliffe, D.A., Hooper, R.L., Greenberg, L., Aloia, J.F., Bergman, P., Dubnov-Raz, G., Esposito, S., Ganmaa, D., Ginde, A.A. and Goodall, E.C., 2017. Vitamin D supplementation to prevent acute respiratory tract infections: systematic review and meta-analysis of individual participant data. *BMJ*, 356, p.i6583.
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