

Sleep, Diet, Lifestyle

Foundations of healthy living

When faced with stressful life events our bodies tend to react in ways that often create chemical and behavioural changes which lead to problems with sleep. When under pressure and coping with difficult circumstances we also often neglect to maintain a healthy diet and balanced lifestyle.

It is amazing how often people who are in the midst of coping with stressful situations and experiencing some anxiety or depression forget to manage their sleep, diet and lifestyle appropriately.

Sleep, diet and lifestyle are critical areas which can either help or hinder a person's ability to cope.

Sleep

Sleep is one of the most vital and critical behaviours necessary for human survival. Much research has shown that when humans are denied sleep for long periods of time they can suffer major psychological and physical problems which, if prolonged, can cause irreversible damage.

I'm sure most of us can remember a time where not enough sleep made us irritable and difficult and made concentrating on things at work or with family quite hard at times. Many people with psychological difficulties find their condition improved significantly after their sleep pattern was restored. Research has shown that an improved sleep pattern can assist in the recovery from depression.

Tips: Getting a Good Night's Sleep

- Go to bed when you are sleepy and get up at the same time every morning. Try to avoid sleeping in longer trying to make up for "lost sleep" as this will alter your sleep/wake cycle. Avoid taking naps during the day.
- Do not lie in bed worrying about issues. Write things down and make time during the day for problem solving.
- If you can't sleep then, after about 10 minutes, get up and engage in a healthy relaxing activity such as listening to your favourite music, and practicing breathing and relaxation techniques. Return to bed when you feel sleepy again.
- Avoid the use of alcohol, cigarettes and caffeine products such as tea, coffee, and cola soft drinks after about 4pm. Avoid having more than 2-3 caffeine drinks during the day.
- Regular exercise during the day can improve sleeping patterns.

(Ref: World Health Organisation TPP, 1997)

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Diet

Diet is another important aspect of coping with life successfully. Eating a balanced diet, getting appropriate nutrition and limiting bad foods and substances can help prevent burnout and assist in recovering from difficult life problems, as well as improve our ability to maintain our physical health and fight off disease and infection.

Research has well established the link between nutrition, diet and physical illness. More recently research has shown the effect of a poor diet (ie., excessive consumption of caffeine (tea/coffee), alcohol, simple sugars and other food products) on stress problems such as depression, anxiety, stress, and problems with mood, attention and concentration.

Tips: Maintaining a Healthy Balanced Diet

- Make sure you eat regular meals at planned times during each day. Avoid skipping meals or neglecting to eat during busy periods.
- Even if you have lost your appetite try not to disrupt your normal eating pattern. Still sit down to eat your breakfast, for example, at your regular time even if you just have a nibble as your body will still be experiencing its normal routine which is important to maintain.
- Avoid snacking excessively between meals and avoid unhealthy snacks. Plan ahead to make sure you have plenty of healthy foods available to eat when you feel like having morning or afternoon tea (you may need to try a few healthy foods to find some you really like).
- Avoid consuming more than 2-3 caffeine drinks (ie., tea and coffee) each day and never after 4pm.
- Learn more about healthy diets from experts. Remember, generally speaking in a healthy diet you EAT MOST - fruits, vegetables, breads, cereals, grains and seafood; EAT MODERATE amounts of chicken, lean meat, nuts, eggs and dairy products; and EAT LEAST amounts of sugar, fats, alcohol and salt.
- When shopping for food, buy foods consistent with your dietary goals. Limit the amount of "junk" food - if you don't buy it you won't eat it. Avoid grocery shopping when you are hungry.
- If you do choose to loose or gain weight - ALWAYS seek professional advice and support to ensure you plan will work and you will not adversely affect your health.
- Enjoy eating - make it a fun and pleasurable activity each day.

(Ref: Stanton, 1993)

Lifestyle

Not only do we need to eat well and get enough sleep. We also need to exercise regularly and do activities that keep our bodies fit and healthy. Research has shown that exercise can assist in helping people cope with depression and also has been shown to be important in regulating sleep/ wake cycles, and helping anxious or stressed people with sleeping problems improve their sleep.

Lifestyle is also about activities we engage in. Do we organise routine in our lives to assist in regular meals and times for rest or are things less predictable placing strain on our bodies

ability to cope? Are we too busy or not busy enough? Being too busy creates vulnerability to burnout. Not being busy enough can make us worry about problems excessively and become less focused and potentially leaves us with less meaningful activity and a lack of meaning and purpose to life.

Tips: Balancing Your Lifestyle

- Plan regular times each day for exercise. Use lunch breaks to go for walks and get some time outdoors. Generally speaking healthy adults need at least one hour's energetic exercise each week. Ideally plan for at least three sessions of 20 minutes energetic physical activity per week.
- Develop interests and hobbies consistent with improving fitness and lifestyle. Take an interest in active sports and hobbies which allow active time in the outdoors. Learn more about nutrition and cooking. Enhance your culinary skills - hold dinner parties with friends.
- Develop friends whom you can share interests with. Remember you may need to develop a range of friends who may appreciate different aspects of who you are. Diverse friendships allow for a variety of experiences and a broad social base for you to grow and develop across all areas of you life.

(Ref: Barteck, 1998; Csikszentmihalyi, 1992)