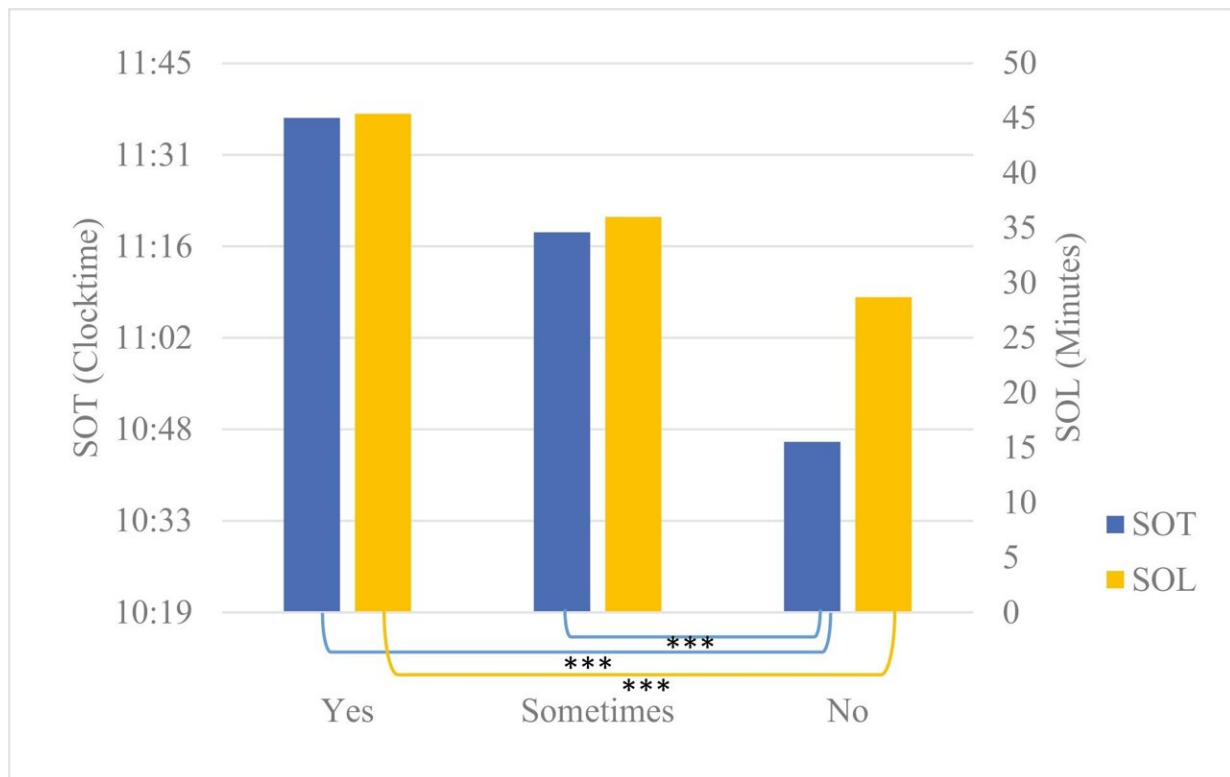


Mobile devices can distract adolescents from negative thoughts before sleep

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Sleep Onset Time and Sleep Onset Latency in adolescents who responded “yes”, “sometimes”, and “no” to the question “Do you use technology to distract yourself from negative or distressing thoughts in the hour before bed?”. SOT, Sleep Onset Time is in hours and minutes; SOL, Sleep Onset Latency is in minutes. Credit: *SLEEP Advances* (2022). DOI: 10.1093/sleepadvances/zpac047

Overuse of mobile devices gets a bad rap but an upside may be their ability to create a distraction and positively affect teenagers' ability to get to sleep, new Flinders University research shows.

Feedback from more than 600 teenagers from age 12 to 18 at South Australian schools between June and September 2019 has led the international research group to point to a more nuanced view on using the wide range of mobile content—led by Youtube, music apps, Instagram and Snapchat—before young people's bedtime.

"Many teenagers struggle with a racing mind when sleep doesn't come easy," says lead corresponding author Dr. Serena Bauducco, a visiting postdoctoral researcher from Örebro University, Sweden.

"This study shows that many adolescents use technology to distract themselves from [negative thoughts](#), which may help them manage the sleep-onset process. Thus, distraction may be one mechanism explaining how sleep affects technology use, rather than vice-versa," the study concludes.

The majority of 631 adolescents surveyed used technology as a distraction from negative or distressing thoughts, with 23.6% answering "yes" and 38.4% "sometimes," according to the study published in the journal *Sleep Advances*.

However, the study did reveal a higher tendency of app use among the young people with existing sleep problems compared to those not reporting a sleep problem, leading researchers to caution that other solutions are needed to help teenagers to fall asleep.

Passive entertainment, via music apps or YouTube video clips, or interacting with peers via Instagram or Snapchat were considered the most popular distractions.

First author of the study, Flinders University psychology graduate Ms Alexandra Daniels, says the complex relationship between sleep and technology is illustrated by a tendency for some adolescents with [sleep problems](#) to more frequently use devices before bed.

"This study helps to provide evidence to suggest that the relationship between teenagers, technology and sleep is much more complex than the previously accepted idea that technology use prior to sleep onset is always negative and harmful," she says.

South Australian child and adolescent sleep expert Professor Michael Gradisar, who conceived the idea behind the study, says the research suggests that recommendations for focused use of certain apps could become an integral part of some adolescents' sleep routines, to help them regulate their negative thoughts.

Flinders University sleep psychology graduate Professor Gradisar, who now focuses on a range of technologies as Head of Sleep Science at Sleep Cycle in Sweden, says good sleep habits from infancy through adolescence is important to set healthy sleep routines into adulthood.

Respondents in the study were asked which app was likely to distract them from any negative or distressing thoughts—from messaging, [phone calls](#), Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, Youtube, Reddit, Tumblr and the Spotify/iTunes/Apple Music, Netflix/Stan, Viber/WhatsApp, gaming app, audiobook or 'other'.

Participants reported multiple technology preferences including mobile phone, iPad, laptop, desktop computer, iPod/MP3 player, television, gaming console or 'other'.

Researchers note the recent rise in popularity of TikTok and other apps in a rapidly changing field.

A [previous study](#) in *Sleep Medicine* by the Flinders University researchers aligned use of phones, laptops and gaming consoles by secondary school students in the hour before bed, or in bed before sleep onset, were associated with increased odds of insufficient [sleep](#) in school nights.

"Evening technology use should be monitored for feasible limits and harm minimization because [technology](#) will remain an integral part of adolescents' evenings," they conclude.

More information: Alexandra Daniels et al, Technology use as a sleep-onset aid: are adolescents using apps to distract themselves from negative thoughts?, *SLEEP Advances* (2022). [DOI: 10.1093/sleepadvances/zpac047](#)

Provided by Flinders University

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