

How stress can affect your sleep

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Stress not only harms your well-being but it also can prevent you from getting a reasonable amount of sleep. A Baylor College of Medicine sleep expert explains how stress can interfere with your nighttime schedule and ways you can sleep more when life becomes busy.

"Stress can affect sleep in different ways," said Dr. Annise Wilson, assistant professor of neurology and of pulmonary, critical care and [sleep medicine](#). "What we commonly see is insomnia."

Wilson explains that people who are stressed think excessively about responsibilities such as work, family and finances. For teens and [young adults](#) in school, this [stress](#) often focuses on exams and other important assignments. When one attempts to fall asleep, those thoughts continue and cause numerous disruptions in [sleep patterns](#).

"High levels of stress impair sleep by prolonging how long it takes to fall asleep and fragmenting sleep. Sleep loss triggers our body's stress response system, leading to an elevation in stress hormones, namely cortisol, which further disrupts sleep," Wilson explained. "Research has shown that sleep plays an important role in learning and memory. Chronic sleep deprivation also has been associated with decreased metabolism and endocrine dysfunction. "

It can be difficult to reach the recommended 7 to 9 hours of sleep when your mind is still active from daily responsibilities. Modifying your nighttime behaviors are the first step to feeling less stressed in the evenings and being able to fall asleep more efficiently, Wilson said.

"Stimulus control therapy and improving sleep hygiene are well-validated methods to enhance sleep," Wilson said. "If you find it difficult to turn your mind off, one technique we recommend is jotting down your thoughts before bed. Also, there are a lot of apps that can guide you through meditation and breathing exercises."

She also advises relaxing activities such as warm baths and yoga before bed to help you wind down after a long day. Other factors that can impact your sleep include [screen time](#) before bed, drinking caffeine late in the evening and excessive [light exposure](#) in the bedroom.

"Creating an optimal sleep environment is crucial," Wilson said. "One modern issue is the [blue light](#) emitted from smartphones, tablets and other electronics, because that particular wavelength is quite activating and can affect melatonin secretion. There are blue light filter apps available, and on the iPhone there is a pre-installed setting to eliminate it. But ideally, just limit screen time."

Wilson also advises carving out a sufficient amount of time for sleep and finding ways to offload daytime responsibilities when possible, such as using delivery services and strategic planning. She also notes the importance of keeping a consistent sleep schedule throughout the week by sleeping the same hours on weekdays and weekends.

While insomnia can be caused by excessive stress, Wilson notes that insomnia also can be related to other medical conditions, such as superimposed sleep apnea, mood disorders and chronic pain.

Not receiving an adequate amount of sleep throughout the night can cause daytime impairment, Wilson said, which can be dangerous when driving or operating heavy machinery. While many attempt over-the-counter remedies such as melatonin to address their sleeping troubles, Wilson advises visiting a professional when significant daytime impairment occurs or insomnia becomes a long-standing.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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