

Building Resilience: One Step at a Time

Sleep and Wellbeing

Sleep, emotional wellbeing, and mental health are closely connected. The research indicates that sleep deprivation is not only a symptom of traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression but may contribute to these difficulties. At the same time, Americans are notoriously sleep-deprived. Those with stressful conditions, anxiety, and depression are even more likely to be yawning or groggy during the day. Studies in adults and children suggest that sleep problems may raise the risk for, and even directly contribute to, the development of some psychiatric disorders. Chronic sleep problems affect 50% to 80% of patients in clinical services, compared with 10% to 18% of adults in the general U.S. population.

Sleep problems are pervasive in anxiety, depression, and chronic stress patients. Neuroimaging and neurochemistry studies suggest that a good night's sleep helps foster mental and emotional resilience, while chronic sleep deprivation sets the stage for negative thinking and emotional vulnerability.

How sleep affects mental health

Every 90 minutes, a regular sleeper cycles between two major categories of sleep — deep sleep (quiet sleep), and REM sleep (rapid eye movement). During "quiet" sleep, body temperature drops, muscles relax, and heart rate and breathing slow. The deepest stage of quiet sleep produces physiological changes that help boost immune system functioning.

REM (rapid eye movement) sleep is the period when people dream. Body temperature, blood pressure, heart rate, and breathing increase to levels measured when people are awake. Studies suggest REM sleep enhances learning and memory and contributes to emotional health.

Researchers have discovered that sleep disruption affects levels of neurotransmitters and stress hormones, impairing thinking and emotional regulation. As a result, insomnia may amplify the effects of traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, and vice versa.

How can you improve your sleep, well-being, and mental health? Following are a few simple considerations.

Lifestyle changes. Most people know that caffeine contributes to sleeplessness, but so can alcohol and nicotine. Alcohol initially helps some people fall asleep, but the effects wear off in a few hours, and people wake up. Nicotine is a stimulant which speeds heart rate and thinking. Controlling the use of these three, and especially avoiding them before bedtime, is an important first step.

Sleep hygiene. Many experts believe that people "learn" their sleep problems over time. They can also learn how to sleep better. Good "sleep hygiene" is the term often used to include tips like maintaining a regular sleep-and-wake schedule, using the bedroom only for sleeping or sex, and keeping the bedroom dark and cool. Keep free of distractions like the computer or television. Limiting screen time before sleep is also recommended since many screens – phones, tablets, computers, and TVs – emit mostly blue-based light. This light stimulates areas of the brain in ways that may interfere with sleep. Some experts also recommend sleep retraining: staying awake longer to ensure sleep is more restful.