

Why Sleep?

There's a saying that I've heard over and over during my years of working at the high school and college levels, and it goes something like this: "**Sleep, social life, and good grades. Pick two.**" I believe the ubiquity of this saying speaks to two things. First, it is completely accurate that balancing the demands of all three can feel impossible because they all seem to dip from the same limited well of time, attention, and energy. Secondly, sleep, social life, and good grades are all incredibly valuable and important to your quality of life, which makes the prospect of sacrificing any one of them difficult.

I do think that it is possible to find a balance between all three, but that is a conversation for another day. Suffice it to say, the demands on your energy are real, and often the first thing to go is sleep. I would argue, however, that sleep is actually the most critical of that triad because it holds the keys to your success socially, academically, athletically, and your overall health.

- **Sleep helps you academically:** Studies show that better sleep leads to improved memory and recall, improved creativity and responsiveness, and stronger and more sustained attention. Indeed, research has even shown a direct correlation between better sleep and higher grades.
- **Sleep helps you socially:** Studies have shown that sleep improves our ability to evaluate and make moral judgments, more accurately perceive feedback and social cues, and to not overreact to negative experiences. Indeed, sleep has been shown to improve teamwork as well as one's ability to handle adversity when things don't go one's way.
- **Sleep helps you athletically:** In the words of Vince Lombardi, "Fatigue makes cowards of us all." As mentioned above, sleep seems to improve one's ability to respond to adversity and to work within a team. It also improves reaction times, reduces rates of injury, and leads to fewer mental errors. One study of the Stanford basketball team even showed that with extended sleep, players demonstrated faster sprint times and significantly improved shooting accuracy!
- **Sleep helps your overall health:** Sleep has been shown to directly impact mood and immune functioning. Sleep more, be happier, and get sick less often!

Tips for Better Sleep

Convinced that you might benefit from getting better sleep at Deerfield? Good news! There are steps you can take from the minute you wake up in the morning to the moments before you get into bed at night that can reduce the time it takes to fall asleep and have a deeper, more restful sleep, and those steps are listed below.

Now, I know that a boarding school lifestyle makes it virtually impossible to implement all of the following suggestions. There is, however, probably **one thing** that you can find on the list to start changing, so start there. And if that doesn't work, try two or three things. If you're trying a number of changes and you're still struggling with sleep, then you should probably come talk to a counselor; we are trained clinicians who can help you to come up with an individualized plan and teach you some more specialized relaxation techniques. You may also want to consider consulting with the medical staff in our Health Center as there are medications that can aid with sleep, though both over-the-counter and prescription medications come with potential side-effects and risks. And finally, if professional help and medication haven't helped, there are sleep specialists who can study your sleep and diagnose a more physiological sleep disorder if one is occurring.

In the Morning...

- Light helps reset your body clock to its active daytime phase. So when you wake up, **go outside or sit by your window and get some sunlight**. Or if that's difficult, turn on all the lights in your room.
- As soon as you're up, **walk around for a few minutes**. The calves of your legs act as pumps that get your blood circulating, ultimately carrying more oxygen to your brain to help you get going.
- **Never oversleep because of a poor night's rest**. This one is pretty important. Get up at about the same time every day, *especially* on the morning after you've lost sleep. Sleeping late for just a couple of days can reset your body clock to a different and unhealthy cycle, and soon you'll be getting sleepy later and always wanting to wake later.

Throughout the Day...

- **Find time for vigorous exercise** at least 3 to 4 times per week. Most co-curricular activities provide this kind of outlet, which is one major health benefit of the boarding school lifestyle. But even if your co-curricular is not an athletic one, try to find time to get your body moving and your lungs and heart pumping. A tired body and mind usually leads to the most restful sleep. And research has shown the inverse is true, too: daytime inactivity tends to lead to less restful sleep. Just don't exercise too close (say within 4 hours) to your bedtime, however, as exercise can also act as a short-term stimulant.

- **Don't take naps** during the day, as they can undermine your ability to feel tired and ready for bed in the evening (similar to sleeping in after a poor night of sleep).
- **Avoid caffeine** (coffee, tea, chocolate, energy drinks, some sodas) **within 6 hours of your bedtime**. You may even want to consider cutting caffeine out of your diet altogether, or perhaps transitioning from coffee to black or green tea.
- **Avoid drinking large amounts of fluid after dinner.**

In the Evening...

- **Establish a preferred bedtime**, and make that last hour before your bedtime more about winding down and less about being productive or rowdy with friends.
- **Engage in quiet activities during the 30 minutes before your bedtime.** Reading, watching TV, drinking herbal tea, listening to music, meditation, prayer, or a warm shower can help ease you into a relaxed state for sleep. **Making a ritual** out of whatever calms you down (i.e., doing the same thing every night) can also help to create a reliable source of relaxation.
- Often insomnia evokes negative or obsessive thinking at bedtime. If you are a person who can get caught up in your worries, it may be useful to **set aside a 15-20 minute "worry time" at the end of each day**. During this time, write down all the problems concerning you, and if possible brainstorm possible solutions that can be implemented the following day.
- **Try a glass of warm milk or a piece of toast in the hour before you fall asleep.** Going to bed either hungry or full can inhibit sleep. Also, both dairy and light carbohydrates contain the amino acid L-tryptophan, which can help make you feel tired.
- **Stay away from tobacco**, period. It's bad for your health all around. But if you're someone who struggles with tobacco use, do not use it in the 2-3 hours before your bedtime, as nicotine acts as a stimulant.

At Bedtime...

- If you've been experiencing an insomnia jag, **try setting a new bedtime for 30 minutes beyond the time you've been falling asleep.** So if you've been falling asleep at 2 am over the past few days, try staying up until 2:30 am. This will help you be good and tired when you climb into bed. After a day or two of this, you can start to move your bedtime 20 minutes earlier each day until you get back within range of your preferred bedtime.
- **Only use your bed for sleeping.** Make it a calming and pleasant place to relax. Try not to study, eat, surf the web, watch Netflix, talk on the phone, or even read in bed. Then...
- **If you've crawled into bed and you find yourself tossing and turning for 15-30 minutes, GET UP** and do something relaxing in another area of your room. Reading, meditating, and listening to music are three really good things to try to do to calm yourself and become more sleepy. Watching TV is okay for some but stimulating for others. And eating, talking, or getting onto your computer are three things that tend to *energize* people, not calm them down. If you crawl back into bed and are still having trouble sleeping, repeat as necessary.

- **Don't try to count the hours you sleep** (as in, "Oh no, it's 2 am and now I'm only going to get four hours of sleep! This is awful!") To this end...
- **Cover up your alarm clock** once it gets close to your preferred bedtime.
- **Take an inventory of your sleep environment.** Is it dark and quiet enough? Is it too hot or too cold? Is it secure? Make any changes that are necessary (earplugs, lights out, light-blocking window shades, sleep mask, air conditioner, fan, space warmer, etc.) in order to make your sleep environment as ideal as possible.
- **Try not to think about sleep as a life-or-death activity,** and trust in your body's ability to take care of itself. Most people eventually end up getting the sleep they need. Also, studies show that people generally get a higher quality of sleep over the course of a night than they think.
- If you're feeling amped up at bedtime, **try one of the guided meditations available on the Counseling Center's website.**