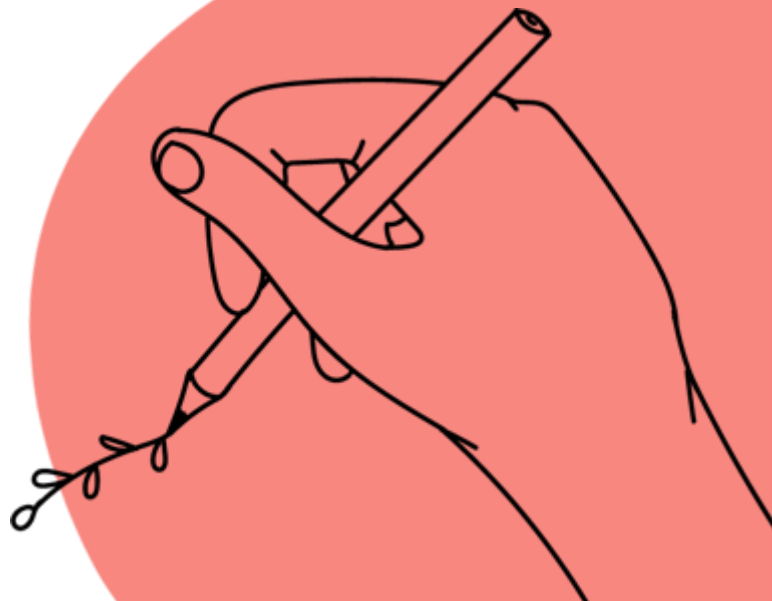


What writing can do for you...

When you want to improve your sleep



By Kate McBarron



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Introduction

Sometimes it seems as though there aren't enough hours in the day. So, we should just get up earlier – yes? Or, perhaps stay up later?

These can be helpful solutions once in a while. When they become a habit, though, the picture is a little different – as I know from experience. Eventually, exhaustion takes its toll, in some shape or form. Then there are those periods in life when we can't sleep at all, no matter how much we try. No sleep, just tiredness. Over time, sleep deprivation affects so many areas of daily life. We are just not built to thrive without enough sleep.

Some people, of course, need more of it than others. I've learnt over the years that I'm not the sort of person who manages well without good-quality slumber. I need to be in bed fairly early and want to fall asleep quickly. Which is, for me, where writing comes in. Writing helps to calm my mind. And I'm not alone in turning to this useful tool at bedtime.

Of course, there are a variety of factors that contribute to healthy 'sleep hygiene'. These may be familiar to you already: go to bed at the same time each evening; dim the lights; make sure your bedroom is cool... The list goes on.

On the subject of lists, while we're here, if you include list-writing as part of your evening routine it could well make the difference between a fretful night and a peaceful one. You can find out more in part four of this booklet.

On the pages that follow, we'll look at why sleep is so important and how writing can help us with this precious pastime. We'll cover expressive writing, lists and sleep diaries & journals and, to finish, you'll find tips on how to make the most of the writing experience.

Whether you already use writing as a wellbeing tool or whether this is your first time experimenting with it, I hope you'll feel inspired to turn to pen and paper (or keyboard and softly-lit screen) to help get a good night's sleep.

1. Sleep is more than ‘switching off’

In our modern society, there are so many reasons to stay awake. How can we possibly fit everything in? If sleep’s only function was to conserve energy, we could perhaps get away with skipping a few hours of slumber each night. However, the reality is far more complex – and fascinating. It turns out that there’s much more to sleep than we realised.

A foundation for our health

You may already be convinced that getting regular exercise and eating nutritious food is important for a healthy life. How about sleep? Perhaps you also view it as one of the ‘cornerstones’ of our health, as sleep researcher Vanessa Hill describes it¹. Or would you be willing to take things even further?

Matthew Walker – professor of neuroscience at UC Berkeley and founder of the Center for Human Sleep Science – highlights just how important sleep is when he comments:

¹ Hill, V. (2023). Interviewed on the *Healthier Together with Liz Moody* podcast, Feb 1st

‘I would say sleep is the foundation on which exercise and nutrition sits. It’s not a third pillar. It’s the foundation for those two other things.’²

Why is sleep so important?

So, what makes sleep so essential? What’s actually going on when we slumber? Sleep science has come a long way in recent years, and experts are now uncovering a myriad of vital processes that take place while we sleep and dream.

‘Your brain is incredibly active during stages of sleep – in fact, during some stages, it’s up to 30% more active than when you’re awake,’ says Walker. ‘Then downstairs in your body there is a radical overall ... it’s like hitting the reset button on your WiFi router, but it just takes seven to nine hours to do.’³

Dr Aric Prather, a professor of psychiatry and behavioural sciences at the University of California, offers another image to help explain the function of sleep:

‘Good sleep boosts the immune system. It regulates metabolism. It makes you happier. It makes you a better, more empathetic partner and a more patient parent. It can

² Walker, M. (2022) Interviewed on the *ZOE Science & Nutrition* podcast, Dec 8th

³ Walker, M. (2022) Interviewed on the *ZOE Science & Nutrition* podcast, Dec 8th

improve your productivity and creativity at work and boost your energy so you can actually squeeze in that extra (or first!) workout during the week. It sharpens the mind and can actually clear toxins out of the brain that build up over time, including those thought to play a role in neurodegenerative disease – I sometimes call sleep “the dishwasher of the brain.” But just like a dishwasher, you have to let it run the whole cycle.’⁴

Knowing that sleep is important is just the start, of course. If we’re struggling to drift off and want to improve the situation, we need to know *why* our sleep is being disrupted in the first place. In the next chapter, we’ll look at what the experts say on this issue.

⁴ Prather, A. A. (2022). *The Seven-Day Sleep Prescription*

2. Why can't we sleep?

Sleep should be so easy; human beings have been doing it for thousands of years. So, why are we struggling to such an extent these days? According to experts, our modern society has distorted some of the vital cues that our bodies would usually use to transition us from wakefulness to sleep. Meanwhile, the distractions and stressors we find ourselves facing during the day can take their toll on our night-time activity too.

Factors affecting our sleep

We are all very different and our sleep needs and patterns can vary hugely – due to our biology and due to our lifestyles. As a society, however, it seems there is no doubt that some of our common practices are making sleep more difficult. Here are just some of the factors contributing to poor sleep, according to the experts.

The increase of artificial light

“ Once upon a time, human sleep cycles were yoked more firmly to the natural world—we woke with the morning light and wound down into sleep as the sun disappeared. Then we discovered fire, and everything went downhill from there.

Aric Prather⁵

Professor Russell Foster, an expert in circadian rhythms, explains the crucial role of light within our sleep-cycle in his book *Life Time: The New Science of the Body Clock, and How It Can Revolutionize Your Sleep and Health*. Light helps to regulate our internal ‘master clock’, which in turn helps to regulate our sleep. When our natural pattern of light and dark is disrupted (for example, through the use of artificial lights in the home at night or the restriction of natural light in the morning) then our master clock and our sleep patterns can become disrupted too.

‘For most plants and animals, the most important signal that aligns or “entrains” our circadian rhythms to the day/night cycle is light, and especially light at sunrise and sunset,’ says Foster.⁶

⁵ Prather, A. A. (2022). *The Seven-Day Sleep Prescription*

⁶ Foster, R. (2022). *Life Time*

Our modern lifestyle can play havoc with this natural process. Aric Prather comments: ‘We’re awash in artificial light beaming at us from lightbulbs, phones, and laptop screens long after our distant ancestors would have been deep into their sleep cycles. If our natural biological rhythms were allowed to be the boss of us, maybe falling asleep and waking up would be as effortless for us as it is for the flower.’⁷

The issue of artificial light is worth considering when you are writing. Find out more about writing in the evenings and when using a keyboard & screen in part six of this booklet.

The issue of overstimulation

From smartphones to late-night conversations, our lives offer many sources of stimulation. We can easily find ourselves being *over*-stimulated and for this to be the case far beyond the time we are supposed to be closing our eyes and falling asleep.

Technology is often viewed as one culprit here, although it is not necessarily a source of overstimulation in its own right. It’s how we use technology that makes all the difference.

⁷ Prather, A. A. (2022). *The Seven-Day Sleep Prescription*

Foster comments that if we are using a device at bedtime that encourages us to be ‘interactive’ then it will make us more alert and will delay sleep as a result.⁸

Technology is not the only potential source of over-stimulation, of course. The people close to us can be sources too. Dr Rangan Chatterjee highlights his own experience with this on his podcast ‘Feel Better, Live More’ during a conversation with Foster. Chatterjee says he has learnt over the years that it helps his sleep if he avoids emotional stimulation in the evening. He also explains how he has had to educate the people around him about this so they can support him with it.⁹

Foster adds: ‘It’s very difficult because, of course, towards bedtime is the only time when many couples get the chance to talk about stuff, but of course it can be charged.’¹⁰

Speaking from his own experience, he recommends carving out time for emotional discussions at another point in the day to help avoid overstimulation just before bed.

Writing can, of course, be a source of stimulation too. Tips for dealing with this are available in part six of this booklet.

⁸ Walker, M. (2022) Interviewed on the *Feel Better, Live More* podcast with Dr Chatterjee, Ep. 292

⁹ Chatterjee, R. (2022) Speaking on the *Feel Better, Live More* podcast with Dr Chatterjee, Ep. 292

¹⁰ Walker, M. (2022) Interviewed on the *Feel Better, Live More* podcast with Dr Chatterjee, Ep. 292

The effect of stress

Stress is, in some ways, a very broad term. There are plenty of causes and manifestations of stress in our lives. When defined as ‘the physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors’¹¹ it is easy to see how many things in our modern world could fall under this umbrella. Stress, in itself, is not always a bad thing. Aric Prather comments that, on the whole, our bodies are built to be good at handling stress. Stress even sparks renewal, by triggering ‘a cleanup process’ where the body gets rid of cells that are no longer useful or needed¹². With this in mind, he cautions us not to let our worries about not-being-able-to-sleep become a cause of stress itself. ‘Don’t get caught in the loop of thinking “I was so stressed today, I’ll never be able to fall asleep,”’ Prather advises. ‘Today’s stress will not preclude you from getting great sleep.’¹³

There will be, however, certain types of stress that cause issues for us at bedtime and this is where the sleep-stress link is worth knowing. ‘Your body’s stress response, and how you manage stress, can impact your sleep,’ comments Prather. ‘But even more powerfully, your sleep determines how well you handle stress. It’s a cyclical relationship.’

¹¹ American Psychological Association, ‘Stress’, APA Dictionary of Psychology, Dictionary.apa.org

¹² Prather, A. A. (2022). *The Seven-Day Sleep Prescription*

¹³ Prather, A. A. (2022). *The Seven-Day Sleep Prescription*

In his book *The Seven Day Sleep Prescription*, Prather goes into detail about the two-way relationship between sleep and stress – and why it is so important that we are aware of this. ‘It is actually good news,’ Prather says, ‘we have two opportunities for intervention’. In his own clinic, Prather has experienced plenty of success by helping individuals to ‘wiggle the needle a little bit in each direction’ in order to reap the dual benefits offered by improved sleep and lower stress-levels. It becomes a positive spiral, instead of a negative one.

For some people, however, the issue is more fundamental, rooted in a life problem that needs to change. Prather comments: ‘Your sleep is your well of resilience. It’s what provides you with the armor you need for the slings and arrows that life flings at you. So if there’s something in your life that’s causing enough stress that it’s chronically disrupting your capacity to get the sleep you need, we need to deal with it.’

In part five of this booklet, we’ll look at how journaling can help to decrease stress and pave the way for sleep.

The role of rumination and worry

Many experts recognise the role that worry and rumination play in disrupting our sleep – whether you wake in the middle of the night going over an issue in your head or have trouble falling asleep in the first place.

It is worth noting that rumination and worry have slightly different definitions. As Aric Prather explains, rumination is ‘when you replay events from the past you wish had gone better,’ whereas worry ‘is more future-focused’.¹⁴

According to Prather, rumination is ‘one of the major pathways that perpetuates insomnia’. In a study conducted by Prather and colleagues, it was found that people who have a tendency to ruminate are more likely to be in a constant state of high-alert, which in turn leads to difficulties falling asleep¹⁵. This concept that rumination keeps our minds aroused is, says Prather, at the heart of the issue.

Worry, meanwhile, can cause similar problems. In a paper written by researchers Michael Scullin and Donald Bliwise, the authors say: ‘Bedtime worry, including worrying about

¹⁴ Prather, A. A. (2022). *The Seven-Day Sleep Prescription*

¹⁵ Prather, A. A. (2022). *The Seven-Day Sleep Prescription*

incomplete future tasks, is a significant contributor to difficulty falling asleep.’

Scullin comments, in a separate article, ‘There is this hundred-year-old idea that when a task isn't completed yet, it just rests at this heightened level of activation in your brain. It is hard to shut it off and hard to keep it from popping back into your mind and that disrupts sleep.’¹⁶

Writing can be a useful tool in the fight against rumination and worry. In part three of this booklet, we will explore expressive writing as a way to tackle worry. In part four, we'll look at two list writing activities that can also help.

Sleep disorders

Most people will have a bad night's sleep once in a while, and there can be many reasons for this. Some quick self-care activities might be all that's needed to get back on track. However, for anyone who has a recognised sleep disorder it will not be so simple. Sleep disorders can be defined as ‘conditions that affect sleep quality, timing, or duration and impact a person's ability to properly function

¹⁶ Scullin, M. (2021). Quoted in ‘People Who Did THIS Before Bed Fell Asleep 37% Faster’, Sleep.com

while they are awake. These disorders can undermine quality of life and contribute to other medical problems.’¹⁷ They include insomnia, sleep apnoea, sleepwalking and restless leg syndrome.

If you think you are suffering from a sleep disorder, it is always best to reach out to a professional sleep expert who can provide the appropriate support.

Otherwise, there are things many of us can do for ourselves to set the scene for a restorative night’s sleep. Writing is one activity that can potentially help, as we’ll find out in the chapters that follow.

¹⁷ Sleep Foundation (2022). ‘Sleep disorders’, [Sleepfoundation.org](https://www.sleepfoundation.org)

3. Expressive writing

When we use the phrase ‘expressive writing’ this can, in general terms, mean any piece of writing that focuses on expressing thoughts and feelings. There is another definition, however. It relates to a writing activity that has become popular with researchers over the years. Time and again, this activity has been shown to offer physical and mental health benefits – including, in some cases, improved sleep.

A ground-breaking discovery

In the 1980’s, Dr James Pennebaker – a social psychologist in the US – was working at Southern Methodist University in Texas. Together with a colleague, Sandra Beall, he created a research study to look at the effects of an intervention that became known as ‘expressive writing’.

In the original study, participants were invited to write for 15 minutes a day over four consecutive days. Some were asked to write about a traumatic experience and some were asked to focus on superficial or irrelevant topics.

A number of months later, the researchers followed up with their participants. The people who had written about a traumatic experience in an emotional way reported improved moods and a more positive outlook, and – incredibly – their medical records revealed that their physical health seemed to have improved as well.

These were astonishing results. In Pennebaker’s own words he says: ‘I’ll never forget the initial thrill of finding that writing about traumas affected physical health.’¹⁸

Pennebaker and others went on to test the findings of this initial study and the results have been replicated many times over, in numerous different contexts. Expressive writing has been shown to offer benefits across a whole host of areas, including cancer treatment, the management of asthma and rheumatoid arthritis, post-surgery recovery, working memory, job satisfaction, anxiety reduction, school performance and more.

A path to reduced worry and improved sleep

A number of expressive writing studies have measured the effect of writing on sleep, whether relating to quality, quantity or the time taken to drift off. In a few cases,

¹⁸ Pennebaker, J. (1997). *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*

dedicated sleep-focused studies have been conducted, while in others sleep was one factor of many.

In a 2002 study, for example, researchers investigating a phase II trial of vaccine therapy for renal cell carcinoma discovered that expressive writing helped patients to sleep better and for longer.¹⁹

The following year, another group of researchers published their study exploring whether writing about worries and concerns would help poor sleepers²⁰. They focused, in particular, on encouraging participants to express and process their emotions. The result? The group who took part in the expressive writing activity fell asleep more quickly.

More recent studies have included exploring expressive writing to reduce insomnia²¹ and to reduce sleep difficulty for college women²². Both showed that writing in this way could help to improve sleep.

So, what's going on? Pennebaker and his colleague Joshua Smyth, in their book *Opening Up by Writing It Down*, suggest

¹⁹ de Moor, C., Sterner, J., Hall, M., Warneke, C., Gilani, Z., Amato, R., & Cohen, L. (2002). A pilot study of the effects of expressive writing on psychological and behavioral adjustment in patients enrolled in a Phase II trial of vaccine therapy for metastatic renal cell carcinoma

²⁰ Harvey, A. & Farrell, C. (2003). The Efficacy of a Pennebaker-Like Writing Intervention for Poor Sleepers

²¹ Mooney, P., Espie, C. & Broomfield, N. (2009). An Experimental Assessment of a Pennebaker Writing Intervention in Primary Insomnia

²² Arigo, D. & Smyth, J. (2011). The benefits of expressive writing on sleep difficulty and appearance concerns for college women

that expressive writing may be able to support sleep by improving working memory. This refers to ‘the ability of people to hold several ideas in memory at the same time.’ They explain that when we are able to make sense of an emotional event (through expressive writing, for example) then our mind is freed up. It is ‘no longer working overtime to figure out the complexities of a major upheaval, it can idle in the ways it was designed to do. Instead of sorting through complex emotions and experiences, the traumatized person can now go to sleep more quickly with higher-quality sleep.’

Have a go...

Try writing about your *thoughts and feelings* in this activity from Dr James Pennebaker:

‘I want you to write about any experience that you’re worried about, that keeps recurring in your mind. Set aside three or four days, find 10 or 15 minutes, and just sit down and write. And the only rule I have is to write continuously. Don’t worry about grammar or sentence structure or spelling.’²³

²³ Pennebaker, J. (2023). Interviewed on ‘Just One Thing with Michael Mosley’, BBC Radio 4, Mar 15th

Writing tips

- Consider writing earlier in the day, rather than just before bedtime, to avoid being overstimulated while trying to get to sleep.
- Remember the flip-out rule: ‘If you feel as though you cannot write about a particular event because it will push you over the edge, then don’t write about it,’ say Pennebaker and his colleague John F. Evans. ‘Deal only with those events or situations that you can handle now’.²⁴
- Writing can bring up unexpected thoughts and emotions. Allow yourself some decompression time at the end of each writing session, so you can settle and refocus if needed before you carry on with your day.

For more guidance, take a look at the writing tips in part six of this booklet.

²⁴ Pennebaker, J. & Evans, J. (2014). *Expressive Writing: Words that Heal*

An attitude of gratitude

While many expressive writing studies have focused on writing about traumatic or troubling issues, there are a growing number that concentrate on writing in a positive way. If you prefer the idea of this, you may wish to try the writing activity on the next page.

The activity is from a study published in 2011 by researchers Nancy Digdon and Amy Koble²⁵. Participants were asked to complete one of three sleep interventions – one of which was labelled by the researchers as a ‘gratitude’ activity.

The study found that participants who completed this gratitude intervention experienced reduced worry-levels before sleep, an increase in total sleep time and improved quality of sleep.

²⁵ Digdon, N. & Koble, A. (2011). Effects of Constructive Worry, Imagery Distraction, and Gratitude Interventions on Sleep Quality: A Pilot Trial

Have a go...

‘People’s moods at bedtime can affect how easily they fall asleep. When people are under stress, it is common to be preoccupied with worries and concerns, and to ignore recent positive experiences. If people shift their attention so that they spend more time thinking about positive events, then people should be in a better mood at bedtime and be able to fall asleep more easily.

‘Over the next week, we ask that you schedule a daily 15-minute session in the early evening when you can write about a positive event that has occurred lately, or that you anticipate in the near future. Write about the event itself, and about how you felt at the time ... We are asking you to write about events rather than just think about them because the intervention is more effective when done in writing than just in your head. Writing leads to a deeper level of processing that has a more prolonged effect on moods.’

In this chapter, we have looked at writing expressively as a way to improve sleep. In the next part of this booklet, we will explore how writing lists can support us with our slumber.

4. The power of lists

Lists are wonderfully versatile. From shopping lists to gratitude lists, you can use them to help with practical tasks and to support your wellbeing. When it comes to improving sleep, they can also help us put worries to bed – for the night, at least, if not for longer. Here, we look at two types of lists that come recommended by sleep experts.

The to-do list

There are plenty of reasons we might decide to put together a to-do list at some point during the day. According to a 2018 study²⁶, writing one at night can be helpful too. The study compared writing to-do lists with writing a list of completed activities.

The researchers explain that, ‘Traditionally, sleep research and clinical practice have focused on bedtime rumination about past events, but bedtime worry about future events may be at least as important.’ They go on to explain that incomplete tasks have a tendency to keep our brains busy, which can lead to additional thoughts and worry.

²⁶ Scullin, M. et al (2018). The Effects of Bedtime Writing on Difficulty Falling Asleep: A Polysomnographic Study Comparing To-Do Lists and Completed Activity Lists

For the study itself, participants were split into two groups. The first group was invited to spend five minutes writing down everything they had to remember to do ‘tomorrow and over the next few days’. The second group was invited to focus on activities that they had completed that day or over the previous few days. Both were told they could write their thoughts as a paragraph or in bullet points, but they had to use up the full five minutes – even if they had relatively few tasks in mind. All the participants were then monitored overnight in a sleep research laboratory.

The researchers found that participants fell asleep faster after writing a list that focused on future events, as opposed to past ones. They also noticed that the length and detail of the to-do lists was significant. Michael Scullin, an assistant professor of psychology and neuroscience, director of the Sleep Neuroscience and Cognition Laboratory at Baylor University and lead researcher on the project, commented: ‘The more to-do list items that one wrote, the faster they fell asleep.’²⁷

When commenting on the technique in his own life, Scullin says: ‘I don’t actually do this every single night; I do this on nights I can tell that I need it. There is some calibration

²⁷ Scullin, M. (2018). Quoted in ‘The Connection Between Writing and Sleep’, Psychologytoday.com

involved in that — figuring out when you need it and when you don't — so my recommendation to people is to try it for a few nights and see if it seems to help and if so, keep that pad of paper by your bed.'²⁸

The 'constructive worry' list

Aric Prather is author of *The Seven-Day Sleep Prescription: Seven Days to Unlocking Your Best Rest*. In his book, Prather recognises that our capacity as humans to travel through time 'using just our thoughts' has huge advantages. We can learn from our experiences, enabling us to grow and improve, and we can imagine and bring to life wonderful possibilities ahead of us. However, as Prather highlights, all this comes with disadvantages too, including a tendency to ruminate on the past and worry about the future²⁹.

When worry and rumination start disrupting our sleep, one possible answer is to write a 'constructive worry' list. For Prather, this is about putting unfinished business from the day aside so you are free to sleep at night.

In an article written for CNBC, Prather outlines what to do:

²⁸ Scullin, M. (2021). Quoted in 'People Who Did THIS Before Bed Fell Asleep 37% Faster', Sleep.com

²⁹ Prather, A. A. (2022). *The Seven-Day Sleep Prescription*

‘On a piece of paper, create two columns labeled as “Problem” and “Solution.” Come up with a short list of current issues you’re dealing with. Focus in particular on what you’re likely to ruminate about tonight. Under “Solutions,” come up with the next one or two steps you could take to tackle each issue. Remember, the goal is to chart out a plan for how to get started with actionable steps for tomorrow, or within the next few days. You are not solving it completely. Then fold the paper up and put it next to your bed. Say to yourself: “I have a plan”.’³⁰

In his book, Prather comments that this technique can be particularly helpful if you find yourself waking up in the night to worry. Instead of trying to solve problems there and then, you can remind yourself that you have a plan. You can feel reassured that there is nothing more you need to do on the matter now – it can wait until the morning.

This concept of addressing worries before sleep in a constructive, solution-focused way is backed up by research.

³⁰ Prather, A. (2022). ‘A psychologist says this is the No. 1 “sleep killer”—and it takes just 15 minutes to fix’, CNBC.com

In the 2011 study³¹ mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the sleep interventions that participants were asked to complete was a constructive worry writing activity. It was found that this approach reduced worry-levels before sleep, increased total sleep time and improved the quality of sleep for participants.

Whether you choose to write a to-do list or constructive worry list, you can harness the power of list-writing to support you at night time. In the next part of this booklet, we will look at the benefits of sleep diaries and journals. Which will you decide to go with? Let's find out.

³¹ Digdon, N. & Koble, A. (2011). Effects of Constructive Worry, Imagery Distraction, and Gratitude Interventions on Sleep Quality: A Pilot Trial

5. Will you start a sleep record?

Whether you want to track your sleeping habits or unburden your mind, keeping a written record can be helpful. There are various ways you could do this, and each offers plenty of flexibility. Here, we look at sleep diaries and sleep journals.

Which to choose: a diary or a journal?

The terms 'diary' and 'journal' are often used interchangeably. When it comes to sleep, however, it can be helpful to separate them out:

- **A diary** can be viewed as a place to record daily events and happenings. This is likely to be more objective, focusing on facts and figures.
- **A journal** can be viewed as a place where you explore your thoughts and feelings. This is likely to be more subjective, focusing on opinions and perceptions.

Quite often, of course, there is overlap. In a diary, you might wish to write your feelings about not being able to sleep, just as in a journal you might want to record the time you

went to bed. However, the core function of your diary or journal will be slightly different. You'll get a clearer view of what this looks like in practice in the sections that follow.

Keeping a sleep diary

A record of your sleeping habits can be useful if you are keen to improve your night-time rest. Keeping a sleep diary will help you to become more familiar with your own patterns and behaviours. It might reveal aspects of your day or night routines that are actually harming your chances of a good sleep.

This type of diary is also extremely helpful when consulting a professional about a sleep issue. It will allow them to quickly become familiar with your individual situation, help them to diagnose a specific sleep disorder if appropriate, and enable them to create a treatment plan.

Over time, if you keep adding to your diary while having treatment, this will help you to monitor your progress and assess its effectiveness. You can also use your diary to help work out which interventions are making the biggest difference.

What to do

- The easiest way to get going with a sleep diary is to use an existing template. There are lots available online. The 'Resources' section at the end of this booklet offers some options as a starting point.
- Add to your sleep diary for at least one week – longer if possible – so you have enough information to work with. You will want to be able to spot patterns and habits.
- When completing your diary, the Loughborough Sleep Research Centre recommends that you don't worry about giving exact answers. An estimate will do.³²

Keeping a sleep journal

There are plenty of reasons to keep a sleep journal. Given the focus on thoughts and feelings that they encourage, journals are a great place to process your emotions. If you are writing expressively (as discussed in part three of this booklet) you may find yourself organising and dealing with emotional aspects of daily life in a way that brings benefits

³² Morgan, K., David, B. & Gascoigne, C. (2007). '10 Rules for Improved Sleep Hygiene', NHS.uk

at bedtime – from drifting off more quickly to having better quality sleep.

If you choose to add positive writing into your practice, such as focusing on things you are grateful for or on positive thoughts and feelings more generally – then you can enjoy a host of benefits, including at night. Research suggests that optimism is associated with better quality sleep and longer sleep³³. Positive writing has also been shown to lower anxiety and perceived stress levels³⁴, and to increase happiness³⁵. All of these are beneficial for sleep.

Meanwhile, a sleep journal offers you the chance to notice patterns in your thoughts and habits. Once you identify specific thoughts and habits that are helping and hindering your sleep, you can take action accordingly.

³³ Hernandez, R. et al (2019). The Association of Optimism with Sleep Duration and Quality: Findings from the Coronary Artery Risk and Development in Young Adults (CARDIA) Study

³⁴ Smyth, J. et al (2018). Online Positive Affect Journaling in the Improvement of Mental Distress and Well-Being in General Medical Patients With Elevated Anxiety Symptoms: A Preliminary Randomized Controlled Trial

³⁵ Seligman, M. & Steen, T. (2005). Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions

What to do

- Firstly, there are no set rules when it comes to journalling so feel free to approach it in whatever way seems most natural.
- You may decide to write every day, every few days or whenever the mood takes you. If a significant amount of time has gone by since you last entered anything into your journal, then don't worry. It will welcome you back whenever you're ready!
- Overstimulation just before bed can disrupt sleep – as explored in part two of this booklet. So, try to steer clear of writing anything too taxing or emotional just before going to sleep. You may wish to focus on some positive or neutral writing instead.

Whether you want to record your habits in a sleep diary, to keep a regular sleep journal or to use writing on an ad hoc basis to support your slumber, the choice is yours. In part six of this booklet, we'll cover tips to help you get the most from your writing and you'll find guidance on how and when to write.

6. Tips for writing to improve your sleep

Writing, as we've seen, can be a useful tool when you are seeking to improve your sleep. You can get the most out of the experience by following the tips outlined below. There are also some decisions for you to consider, such as how and when to write. One of the great things about writing for wellbeing is that there's no such thing as getting it wrong. The choice is in your hands, so you can feel free to use writing in whatever way works best for you.

Top tips for using writing as a wellbeing tool

You can help to make your writing experience as effective and enjoyable as possible by keeping these tips in mind:

- **Write without judgement** – The writing you do to support your sleep is for your benefit, so remember to be kind to yourself. You can leave your inner critic behind and write without judgement. What you write and how you present your words is totally up to you. If you wish, you can ignore spelling, punctuation, grammar and handwriting. The important thing is to get your words down on the page.

- **Be aware of your emotions** – Sometimes writing can stir up feelings or memories we are not expecting. Keep an eye on your emotions as you write and if you begin to feel uncomfortable then stop and take a moment to decide whether it is sensible to carry on. You may wish to change focus and write about something more positive, or you may prefer to pause your writing altogether and come back to it another day.

Should I use pen & paper?

Perhaps, in an ideal world, we would all be in a position to write by hand and to do so in an appealing journal using a comfortable pencil or pen. From a habit-formation point of view, having a journal or pen sitting by your bedside can serve as a useful ‘cue’ that kick-starts your mind and body into action – your brain knows that ‘this is the time to write’, and the habit loop will have been triggered.

In truth, however, there are many reasons why this scenario might not be possible. As a practitioner, I believe it is best to remove as many barriers to writing as possible. So go with what you have. If your mind is racing, grab whatever is nearby – anything that’s convenient to write with and on. Then jot down a to-do list or try splurging your thoughts and

feelings onto the page until you feel calmer. Seize the moment and see what happens.

If you choose – or need – to use a computer or mobile device for your writing, then do consider the brightness of the screen if you are writing in the evening. This is covered in the next section.

When should I write – morning or evening?

The question of when to write does come down to personal preference. For some people, there are lifestyle factors or life commitments that mean one or other option is more achievable.

Writing and overstimulation at bedtime

It is worth bearing in mind, however, the advice from earlier in this booklet about avoiding too much stimulation just before bedtime. With this in mind, you may wish to consider doing more emotional writing activities earlier in the evening or in the day.

As Michael Breus, a clinical psychologist, diplomate of the American Board of Sleep Medicine and fellow of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, says: ‘In my

experience, a “worry journal” is best done after dinner since it can involve bringing up emotional topics, which you do not really want to think about before bed.’³⁶

If you *are* planning to write in the evening near bedtime, then you might find it more helpful to focus on positive or neutral writing, rather than on a writing task that could prove to be taxing or an emotional burden. A short gratitude list or a description of ‘three good things’³⁷ that happened today along with their causes, are quick-wins. Or, if your to-do list is unlikely to trigger you on an emotional level, then you can spend time on this – as explored in part four of this booklet – just before bed.

Writing and light at night

For evening writing, it’s also worth considering the lighting in your space. Bright lights – either from lightbulbs around you or a screen if you’re using one – may cause disruption as your body winds down for sleep.

When it comes to the issue of screens and ‘blue light’ at night, experts seem to be divided. However, according to Professor Russell Foster in his recent book on circadian

³⁶ Breus, M. (2021). Quoted in ‘People Who Did THIS Before Bed Fell Asleep 37% Faster’, Sleep.com

³⁷ Seligman, M. & Steen, T. (2005). Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions

rhythms, a small amount of this light will not have a major impact on your sleep pattern.³⁸

Glaring lights in the evening, particularly over an extended period of time, could be a problem, however. So, go for soft lighting – overhead and on your screen – whenever possible.

What next?

Throughout this booklet, you've been introduced to a variety of writing activities that you can turn to when you want to improve your sleep. You may wish to dive straight in! Or, if you're unsure what to try first then have a go at the activity on the next page...

³⁸ Foster, R. (2022). *Life Time*

Getting started: writing prompt

This activity is designed to kick-start your journey with writing to help improve your sleep. Give it a try and see where your words take you...

- First, take a look at the following pairs of words:

Light / Dark

Early / Late

Warm / Cool

Intense / Relaxing

Work / Rest

Sound / Silence

- With the theme of 'sleep' in your mind, choose one pair of words that catches your attention. Go with your instincts, without thinking too much about it.
- Now, write about the pair you have chosen, without stopping, for five minutes. Write anything and everything that comes to mind.
- When you have finished, reread your writing. What do you notice? Does anything surprise or intrigue you? What insight or action could you take away from your writing today?

Resources

Books

Expressive Writing: Words that Heal (2014) by James W. Pennebaker and John F. Evans

Life Time: The New Science of the Body Clock, and How It Can Revolutionize Your Sleep and Health (2022) by Russell Foster

Opening Up by Writing It Down, How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain – Third Edition, (2016) by James W. Pennebaker and Joshua M. Smyth

The Seven-Day Sleep Prescription: Seven Days to Unlocking Your Best Rest (2022) by Dr Aric Prather

Why We Sleep: The New Science of Sleep and Dreams (2017) by Matthew Walker

Podcast episodes

Feel Better, Live More with Dr Chatterjee, 'The new science of the body clock and how it can revolutionise your sleep and health with Professor Russell Foster', 7th Sep 2022

Healthier Together with Liz Moody, 'Genius hacks to fall (& stay!) asleep, eliminate morning grogginess, get deep sleep & more with Vanessa Hill', 1st Feb 2023

Just One Thing with Michael Mosley, 'Write it out', 15th Mar 2023

ZOE Science & Nutrition, 'The secrets of good sleep', 8th Dec 2022

Sleep diary templates

The Loughborough Sleep Research Centre:

<https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/insomnia/Documents/sleepdiary.pdf>

The Sleep Charity:

<https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/The-Sleep-Charity-Sleep-Diary.pdf>

By Kate McBarron in partnership with WriteWell Community

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WriteWell Community is the world's first online community helping people to use writing as a self-care tool to boost positivity and mental wellbeing. Through activities, bite-sized classes, courses and events, individuals can add simple but effective strategies to their wellbeing toolkits. WriteWell is an initiative by the Professional Writing Academy.

writewellcommunity.com

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