Sleep: What To Do and What Not To Do, According to Arianna Huffington

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From the beginning of time, people have struggled with sleep. As a result, we've accumulated a staggering body of wisdom about it—techniques and tips passed down from generation to generation. And we could fill a decent-size library (or a really spacious thumb drive) with all the sleep advice that's been amassed in just the last decade in the wake of all the new scientific research.

There is no silver sleeping bullet that's going to do the trick for everybody. People's reasons for not getting enough sleep are deeply personal, specific to their lives and circumstances. And those reasons shift over time. Still, for those looking to improve their sleep life, it makes sense to begin with some of the scientifically proven general principles for good sleep habits.

Let there be (less) light!

Light suppresses the production of melatonin, which signals us to sleep. So we should take steps—even before we climb into bed—to turn down the lights and make our bedroom the kind of calming, quiet, dark space that will coax us toward sleep. The National Sleep Foundation advises using low-wattage incandescent bulbs in your bedroom. Mathias Basner, MD, PhD, of the University of Pennsylvania echoes this advice. "Turn off the lights in the bathroom, and instead use the light from the hallway while grooming before bed," he tells me. "Bathroom mirror lights can be excessively bright and thus suppress melatonin excretion. Also, turn the lights down during the late evening, and try not to expose yourself to bright light from the TV, e-readers, etc., late at night."

The blue light that is killing your sleep

We also know that blue light, the sort given off by our ubiquitous electronic devices, is especially good at suppressing melatonin—which makes it especially bad for our sleep. Staring at a blue-light-radiating device before

you go to bed can serve as “an alert stimulus that will frustrate your body’s ability to go to sleep later,” says George Brainard, PhD, a circadian-rhythm researcher and neurologist at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia. “When you turn it off, it doesn’t mean that instantly the alerting effects go away. There’s an underlying biology that’s stimulated.”

When we ignore this fact, says Dan Siegel, MD, a clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA, the result can be a vicious cycle: “People are exposing their eyes to this stream of photons from these objects that basically tell your brain, ‘Stay awake. It’s not time to go to sleep yet.’ So it’s 10 p.m., it’s 11 p.m., it’s midnight—you’re checking for emails, you’re looking for texts—those light beams tell your brain, ‘Don’t secrete melatonin, it’s not time to sleep.’ And you’re up at 12:30, 1, you’re checking some more because you’re up, so why shouldn’t you check? Now, you go to bed at 1, you wake up at 6 because it’s time to go to work, that’s five hours of sleep.” Sound familiar?

The problem is that our relationship with our devices is still in that honeymoon phase where we just can’t get enough of each other—we’re not yet at the stage where we’re comfortable being apart for a few hours or taking separate vacations. In fact, a 2015 survey showed that 71 percent of Americans sleep with or next to their smartphones. We should think of light, especially blue light, as an anti-sleeping drug or a stimulant—something few of us would willingly give ourselves each night before bed. Gently escorting our smartphones out of our bedrooms at least 30 minutes before we fall asleep is the best option to mitigate this.

It’s getting hot in here

Then there’s the matter of temperature. According to a study by researchers from the Clinique du Sommeil in Lille, France, the ideal sleeping temperature is 60°F to 66°F. The National Sleep Foundation recommends 65 degrees and says that sleep is actually disrupted when the temperature rises above 75 degrees or falls below 54 degrees.

> “When we feel relaxed and comfortable in our environment, we’re more likely to feel sleepy.” —Natalie Dautovich, PhD

As Natalie Dautovich, PhD, an environmental scholar at the National Sleep Foundation, says, a small drop in body temperature can prompt sleep signals to our brains: “We know that a cool bedroom environment is key to getting a good night’s sleep. We also know there are a lot of positive associations between fresh air and relaxation, and when we feel relaxed and comfortable in our environment, we’re more likely to feel sleepy.”

Let’s get physical: exercise and sleep

We also sleep better when we make time for regular physical activity in our lives. A study from Bellarmine University and Oregon State University found that “regular physical activity may serve as a non-pharmaceutical alternative to improve sleep,” at least for those who meet the basic recommended guidelines of 150 minutes per week of moderate exercise. And researchers at the University of Pennsylvania showed that those who

walked for exercise got better sleep and that, as lead author Michael Grandner put it, “these effects are even stronger for more purposeful activities, such as running and yoga, and even gardening and golf.” In other words, move your body!

Eat right, sleep tight (eat wrong, up all night long)

With food and drink, it’s more a matter of what to avoid than what to take in. The obvious and all-too-common obstacle to a healthy sleep diet is going between caffeine and sugar all day, so we end up tired but wired at night.

Most people know not to have coffee after dinner, but, in fact, caffeine’s power has a longer effect on our bodies than we think. A 2013 study from Wayne State University and Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, Michigan, concluded that when taken even six hours before bed, caffeine can decrease sleep by as much as one hour. “The risks of caffeine use in terms of sleep disturbance are underestimated by both the general population and physicians,” the researchers concluded. In other words, our caffeine cutoff time should begin well before evening.

Would you like to come up for a nightcap?

The next stop on our tour of sleep-related misconceptions is the nightcap. Many people believe that a quick drink before bed helps them get to sleep—and the ritual has been endorsed by authorities like Winston Churchill and James Bond alike. What they don’t realize is what happens in

their body afterward. According to a 2015 study from the University of Melbourne, alcohol does indeed initially act as a sedative. But later in the night, it changes allegiances and acts as a sleep disrupter. “The take-home message here is that alcohol is not actually a particularly good sleep aid, even though it may seem like it helps you get to sleep quicker,” said study author Christian Nicholas. “In fact, the quality of the sleep you get is significantly altered and disrupted.” A study from the London Sleep Centre confirmed this, finding that “at all dosages, alcohol causes a more consolidated first half sleep and an increase in sleep disruption in the second half of sleep.”

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