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External Factors

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Sleep is influenced by a lot of different factors. In fact, some sleep issues may be caused by nothing more than overlooking the impact of external factors on our sleep patterns.

Of course, whatever factors may be influencing your sleep, whether they are internal or external, it is always up to you to act, to improve your sleep patterns, and therefore your health. Remember that while sleep disorders may be tough, they are treatable.

The most important external factors that influence sleep are:

Light

Remember how the circadian rhythm works? Our internal clock is pretty much set to the sunrise and sunset, which is why it comes as no surprise that light affects the quantity and quality of our sleep.

Light influences our internal clock.

It makes us sleepy when it's dark and also informs the brain that it's time to wake up when it's bright. It has worked like that for thousands of years since daylight allowed hunters and gatherers to complete their respective tasks.

Of course, things are a little more complicated now. Since the invention of the lightbulb, we find it increasingly harder to follow our inner clock's calling. Nowadays, we live surrounded by screens –bright, shiny screens – that inadvertently changes our sleeping patterns by tricking the brain into thinking it is still daytime and making it difficult to prepare for sleep.

Tip

Avoid using your smartphone while in bed, as well as computers and other electronics. Watching TV in bed is not a good idea either. The blue light, emitted from screens, arouses you and prevents you from sleeping.

Instead of engaging with your electronics, try unwinding for 30-60 minutes, before bedtime. Dim the light, have a warm cup of tea (not black) or milk, take a warm bath; simply put - try to relax. This will get you ready for a healthy and steady sleep throughout the night.

Sound

Sound can affect how you sleep too. Just like all senses do, hearing helps us perceive the world around us, to communicate, and to acknowledge if we are safe or in some possible danger.

In contrast with some of the other senses, we can't voluntarily shut down our ears. While this can make for a wonderful inner alarm system, it can also turn into a problem when we're awakened by our upstairs neighbors, the garbage truck, or a barking dog, which our sleepy brain interprets as threats, when they're just regular noise.

Even though not everybody is easily awakened by noise, it sure is one of the external factors that we can pay attention to, to improve our sleeping habits.

Tip

Write down the noises that bother you at night, and come up with a plan to reduce them. While some may be solved by a simple change, such as closing your windows at night, others may not be under your control.

Obviously, you can't keep fighting with your neighbors over the noise they make, and you can't stop a dog from barking. That is why the most effective solution for your sleep and peace of mind may be earplugs or a white noise machine.

Temperature

The temperature of the room you sleep in plays a very important role. At first glance, it may not seem as obvious as light and sound. However, surely you can think of at least one night, when you were bothered either by heat, resulting in sweaty, uncomfortable nights, or were too cold and shivered all night. Naturally, both alternatives disrupt the sleep cycle.

A nice, steady temperature –studies have suggested around 65° Fahrenheit or 18° Celsius–

makes for the best environment to sleep in. Since our bodies' internal temperature fluctuates, as the stages of sleep progress, sleeping in a cool room helps maintain a steady asleep.

Tip

Purchase a thermometer for your bedroom and try to regulate the temperature, so that it is always moderate. This may not be easy at first, especially if you are used to sleeping in a heated bedroom, but getting used to the new conditions will be easier that you might think. If you sleep with pajamas – choose them wisely. The type of material and the amount of cloth could influence your body's temperature, while you sleep. Aim for natural, light material.

Your Bed and Environment

All of our senses are involved in getting a good night's sleep, including the sense of touch. Are your sheets, your pillow, and mattress cozy and comfortable? If the answer is "no", you should consider investing in bedding, that will excite you about going to bed. Being comfortable in bed, in addition to sleeping in an environment that soothes and relaxes you, could make a huge difference. Also, avoid having bright colors and shiny objects in your bedroom. If you can, select warm, natural hues.

Tip

Quality bedding might not be cheap, but consider what you spend on your mattress, pillows, and sheets, as an investment in your health. It may surprise you what a difference that can make.

Although you might not always be in full control of external factors, such as light, sound, and temperature, there's still plenty you can do to adapt to the environment and control your reactions to it.

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