

PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH & RESILIENCY TOOLKIT

A MyWorkplaceHealth Toolkit Designed to Give you Strategies
for Enhancing your Psychological Health & Resiliency



WELCOME TO THE TOOLKIT

Welcome to our Psychological Health and Resiliency Toolkit! Dr. Joti Samra, CEO & Founder of MyWorkplaceHealth has put together a number of our favorite resources to help you develop skills and strategies to enhance your psychological health & resiliency that you can start to use right now. In this toolkit, you will find resources on:

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The Power of Thoughts in Mitigating Stress



Functions of the Stress Response

The stress response (and associated worry and anxiety) is essential for our survival. It is important to remember that the stress response serves several important functions:

- It motivates actions that are essential to our survival (i.e., a fight, flight, or freeze response).
- It communicates to those in our environment that we are dealing with stressors and we need support.

It serves a self-validating function (i.e., tells us something important in our life is changing or is affected, and helps us learn how to deal with recurrent stressors over time).

We are all faced with stressors on a day-to-day basis... “stressors” become “stressful” when we are not sure how to handle an event or a situation or when our worry or anxiety associated with that stress fails to serve an ongoing purpose.

The situations that cause stress for you may not be a problem for your neighbour or friend or colleague, and things that bring stress to that same neighbour or friend or colleague may not worry you at all. It is how you think about and react to certain events that determine whether you experience them as stressful or fairly easy to deal with.



The Power of Your Thoughts

Our thoughts - or the way that we interpret events in our life (past, present, or future)—are integral to whether we emotionally feel stressed. Most of our thoughts are unconscious (i.e., below our level of awareness); however, with practice and over time you can train yourself to be more aware of your thoughts.

When you are having a stress-related thought, ask yourself: “is this thought serving a useful function?” Ask yourself how accurate and valid your appraisal is of a stressful situation.

- When you have had this thought in the past, how often were you right?
- Did what you worry or fear actually happen when you dealt with this stressor in the past?
- What would you say to a close friend in a similar situation?

The Power of Thoughts in Mitigating Stress



We all talk about “how stressed” we are, but we are not always clear about what exactly stress is. Stress can very simply be defined as demands on us (emotional, cognitive, physical) that at any point in time exceed our resources to deal with those demands. Stress comes from both the good and the bad things that happen to us—e.g., a chronic illness, a wedding, a death, and a promotion can all be sources of stress in our lives.

The Stress Response

When we experience a stressor, our body undergoes a series of physiological changes (“the stress response”). There are 3 key stages of the stress response.

Stage 1 - Energy Mobilization

The human body responds to stress by activating the nervous system and specific hormones. The adrenal glands release adrenaline and cortisol, which leads to physiological changes such as increased heart rate, facial flushing, increased blood pressure, and increased rate of breathing. Blood vessels open wider (to allow more blood flow to large muscle groups, putting our muscles on alert). Pupils dilate (to improve vision). The liver releases stored glucose (to increase the body’s energy). Sweat is produced (to cool the body). All of these physical changes prepare a person to react quickly and effectively to handle the pressure of the moment.

Stage 2 - Consumption of Energy Stores

If you do not for some reason move past the first stage, the human body starts to use existing energy stores (e.g., releasing stored sugars and fats). Side effects include feeling driven, pressured, and fatigued. You may begin to engage in behaviours (drinking more coffee, smoking, and/or drinking more alcohol) than is good for you. You may also experience ongoing anxiety, attention/concentration problems, some difficulty with sleep, and be more likely to get sick (colds or the flu).

Stage 3 - Draining of Energy Stores

If stress is not resolved, your body’s need for energy will become greater than its ability to produce that energy, and chronic stress may result. You may experience chronic insomnia, ongoing errors in judgement, and changes in personality (e.g., increased irritability, frustration, anger, depression). You may also develop a serious health condition (e.g., heart disease, ulcers, clinical depression, or anxiety) Consider how important the implications are in the context of the things that matter most to you.

- How high on your priority list of important things does the stressor fall?
- What would be the implications to things that are most important to you? (e.g., family, friends, health)?
- Ask, how much control do you have over the situation?
- Can you do anything about the stressor? If yes, what can you do? Make a plan! If not, then you need to learn to let it go.
- You know the stress response is adaptive and serves a function if it is high on all 3 questions above.

Remaining in the stress state, however, is not helpful: you need to make a plan and take action to resolve the situation.

Thinking traps (also referred to as “cognitive distortions”) are errors in thinking that cause problematic thoughts, which are associated with negative emotions. We tend to fall into these traps when we are under stress. Below is a list of common thinking traps that you may be engaging in without being aware of. As you read through, reflect on your thinking patterns and responses to different situations to assess which of these thinking traps you are most likely to fall into. Increasing our awareness of our thoughts, and revising and refining them is an effective strategy for reducing our experience of negative emotions.

Catastrophizing

Catastrophizing is when you think that a situation is going to have the worst possible outcome despite the odds of that outcome being quite low or there being little evidence to support the possibility of that outcome. For example, you are running late for work for the first time and you think, “I’m going to get fired.” This is catastrophizing because it’s highly unlikely that you will be fired from work for being late once, you’re thinking of the worst outcome for the situation. Similarly, probability overestimating is when you overestimate the likelihood of a particular outcome. For example, you may avoid leaving your house because you think there is a high likelihood that you will be accosted or mugged on the street when in reality this is a very rare occurrence.



Overgeneralizing

Overgeneralizing happens when you make a broad generalization. You label yourself or someone else using little information or when you see a pattern based on a single event. For example, one day at the shopping mall you trip on the stairs and think, “I’m such a clutz.” You are using this one instance to conclude that you are a clutz and ignoring all of the evidence suggesting that you are not (e.g., you walk upstairs every day without tripping). You are overgeneralizing.

Personalization

Personalization is when you assign responsibility to people for something that is not entirely within their control or that are the result of many factors. This can include blaming yourself for something that wasn't completely your fault or blaming other people for something that was, in some way, your fault. For example, your coworker is unable to cover one of your shifts, you think, "it's his fault that I can't attend my friend's birthday." This is personalization because it is not your coworker's responsibility to cover your shift and it is not their fault that you cannot attend your friend's birthday party.

Filtering Out the Positive

Problematic thoughts come up when we fail to recognize the positive aspects of a situation and instead focus on what went wrong. You may feel that one negative outweighs ten positives, and thus you disregard or "filter out" positive information. For example, you hold an important meeting at work to introduce a new project. The meeting goes well and everyone is happy about the plan. However, one employee has a question that you are unable to answer and you have to get back to them later. You feel unhappy and frustrated with yourself that you were unable to answer the question, even though the meeting as a whole was a success. In this case, you've filtered out all the positive aspects of the situation, and are focusing on a small negative.

All-Or-Nothing Thinking

Seeing situations in black and white terms, without acknowledging nuance or gray areas, is all-or nothing thinking. For example, you decide to take a course at the local college and you get a B instead of an A. You think to yourself, "I didn't get an A, I'm a failure." You didn't acknowledge any gray area or consider other reasons for why you may not have gotten an A. Perhaps you had a difficult time balancing work and school or maybe you simply need to hone some of your study techniques. The automatic conclusion that you're a failure is all-or-nothing thinking.

Mind Reading

Mind reading is when you make an assumption about what someone else is thinking with little supporting evidence or confirmation from the person. For example, you make eye contact with someone who is laughing to herself on the bus, you instantly think "she thinks I look funny." That's mind-reading because you are making an assumption about what someone else is thinking with no evidence or confirmation to support your assumption. When people engage in mind-reading, they tend to overestimate the degree to which others' thoughts and actions are directed towards them—more often than not, people are thinking more about themselves and their lives than they are about the strangers on the bus.

1 Identify Your Goal

- Pick a specific behaviour to change. Start with no more than one to two behaviours to change at a time. Define in exact terms what you would like to change.
- Ensure that your goal is measurable. To change your goal, you will have to know where you are headed, and how to determine if you are getting/have gotten there.
- Pick an attainable goal. The goal should be something that, based upon the life you are living, is something that you can achieve.
- Ensure the goal is realistic. You may want to lose 30 pounds, but a realistic goal may be to lose 15 pounds this year and 15 pounds the following year.
- Ensure the goal is time-limited. Set a specific period of time in which you will accomplish your goal. Behavioural change takes a series of steps, and those steps can each be accomplished over a specific period of time. As you accomplish your time-limited steps, you can reward yourself for successes.

2 Identify Your Readiness to Change

- Before you begin, ask yourself questions such as “how ready am I?”... “is this the right time for me to make a change?”...“what are the pros and cons of changing?”.
- Consider the benefits of the change. How can you begin to make the change realistically? What would life be like if you didn’t make the change? Is the change worth it? How or why? How would the change impact your life in a positive manner?
- Consider how the change fits in with other important life values that you hold.
- Prepare to change. Gather the information and tools that you need. Anticipate setbacks. Remember that small change is better than no change. Get support as you start to make the change.
- As you start to change, consider how to build upon the behaviour over time. What other behaviours can you add-in?
- Once the behaviour change has been made, consider how to transition to a long-term maintenance plan. How can you sustain this behaviour change over time?

3 Identify Barriers

- Anticipate setbacks. If you have tried to make this change in the past, what got in the way of being successful? Problem-solve the barriers that you have encountered in the past.
- Identify the pros of not changing the behaviour (this can often help you appreciate why the change has not yet happened). Identify the cons of changing (the reasons the change may be difficult to do).
- Establish a specific contingency plan for each of the barriers you identify.

4 Implement Change

Identifying the following cognitive processes of change can help increase the likelihood of behavioural change:

- Barriers/traps: identify the common barriers you may encounter.
- Increase knowledge: obtain the background information you may need to make the change.
- Identify the consequences of changing and not changing—what are the potential impacts if you both did and did not make the change?
- Understand the benefits of the change—how would the change impact your life in an immediate/meaningful way?
- Identify options—what are the options you have for change? There are often several paths to the same end goal.

Identifying the following behavioural processes of change can help increase the likelihood of behavioural change:

- Substitute alternatives: be flexible and identify different ways you can achieve your overall goal.
- Enlist supports: find a friend or co-worker that may also want to make the change. It can often be easier to make a change when you partner with someone else.
- Reward yourself: make sure you reinforce and reward yourself for small successes!
- Set triggers & reminders: when life gets busy and other stressors enter our lives, it can be easy to let good self-care fall behind.
- Obtain a baseline of your behaviour by tracking your usual activity for a week. This can often help you identify patterns in your day and times when it would be easier to implement the change.
- Identify and actively work to change habits that you may have gotten into that are not conducive to achieving your goal. (cont'd)

- Approach behavioural change gradually. Make small, specific changes.
- Make a schedule with yourself to build the activity into your day-to-day life.
- Follow the “double-time” rule: schedule double the time you think it would take to achieve the change.

5 Revisit & Revise

- Do not get discouraged by setbacks. If you are not on track with the changes you identified, work to identify the barriers. Were your expectations too high? Was the specific goal you set too ambitious?
- Revise your goal as necessary.
- Expect and visualize success!

6 Reward Yourself

- Set milestones that can help you track your progress.
- Ensure that you schedule regular rewards for each milestone that you achieve

Four Stage Breathing



When under stress, we tend to engage in more shallow, rapid breathing. This can amplify the intensity of any unpleasant or negative emotions we are experiencing by sending a signal to the brain that we may be in some sort of imminent physical risk. Shallow breathing can make us feel physically unwell and in fact, can release hormones and chemicals into our system that over time can lead to illness.

When we are thrown into stressful situations, we often have little immediate control. We can, however, work actively on our thoughts and physical reactions in an attempt to control our reactions to the stressors and reduce the length of time we experience an unpleasant emotional reaction.

One of the most effective and immediate strategies for regulating your mood in the moment is to actively work on slowing down your breathing. Most people are unaware of this, but when we are sitting or standing (and not under any physical exertion) the average person tends to only need about five to six full breaths (inhale + exhale) per minute. This translates into one full breath on average every ten seconds.

Practice slowing down your breathing by:

- Sitting in a relaxed position (uncross arms and legs, and sit back comfortably in a chair).
- Inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth.
- Think about for distinct (but connected) stages of each breath, each separated by a slight pause:
 1. One inhale to fill up most of your lungs (mini-pause)
 2. A second, smaller inhale to fully 'top up' your lungs (mini-pause)
 3. One exhale to release most of the air from your lungs (mini-pause)
 4. A second, smaller exhale to fully 'push out' the rest of the air from your lungs (mini-pause)

Look at a clock or a watch with a second hand, and try to slow your breathing so that a full breath takes no less than ten seconds. Try this for five minutes. Notice how you feel.

For the rest of your day, practice four-stage breathing for at least one minute every hour. You may want to remind yourself to do this every hour on the hour. Over time, start to be aware of (and slow down) your breathing when you are in situations that create a sudden increase in stress. You may find that this is a simple but powerful first step to managing negative emotions.

Benefits of Gratitude



Expressing appreciation for what one has is known as gratitude. It can refer to both simple, everyday politeness—such as saying “thank you” when somebody holds the door open—as well as to more long term appreciation, such as being appreciative of your friends or family. But gratitude is more than just etiquette. Studies have shown that people who frequently express gratitude seem to experience greater mental and physical health; they sleep better and have more energy and motivation (e.g., Wood et al., 2009). This is likely because living a life of gratitude shifts our focus away from what we lack and toward what we already have. Gratitude serves not only to remind others of your appreciation for them, but also to remind yourself of the good things in your life—this is a core tenet of positive psychology. By practicing gratitude every day, you can help yourself to become a more optimistic and fulfilled person.



It Connects us to Others

Expressing gratitude serves to remind us of all the people that are important to us: friends, family, classmates, and colleagues, for example. We feel closer to those whom we are grateful for because our gratitude reminds us of how much they mean to us.

This can lead to self-improvement because of a sense that we don't want to let these people down – our goals cease to be strictly personal in nature, instead they expand and become relevant to the people we are close to. Consider a young woman who is grateful for her dad, who taught her how to drive; when it comes time for the driving exam, she no longer wants to do well just for her own sake, but also to show her father that he taught her well.

Another reason why connectedness helps us is simply that it reminds us of our more general support network. Being aware of every person, pet – or even every object – that helps us through our daily lives leaves us with more confidence and makes us feel as though we can take on greater challenges.

A common misconception regarding gratitude is that it encourages people to accept the status quo, resulting in reduced ambition and motivation. However, studies have shown the opposite; that gratitude actually encourages people to work toward their goals (Emmons & Mishra, 2011). Why might this be the case? Below is a list of reasons why gratitude has positive effects and why you should strive to actively express gratitude in your day-to-day life.

It Elevates us

“Elevation” refers to the wholesome, warm feeling we experience when witnessing acts of kindness.

People who feel elevated are often inspired to perform similar acts of kindness. Recent studies have shown that expressions of gratitude can lead to feelings of being uplifted, moved, and – in other words, just as witnessing kind acts causes elevation, so does expressing gratitude to others. By elevating ourselves through gratitude, we motivate ourselves to improve our lives, and perhaps also the lives of others.

It Humbles us

While gratitude does remind us of all the help and support that we have, it also reminds us of the help and support we need. By expressing gratitude, we become aware of the fact that we aren’t infallible, that we aren’t perfect, and that that’s okay!

Because gratitude leads to such humility, we become more inclined to seek and accept help for our problems, and to put more effort into accomplishing our goals – instead of trusting an often-misguided sense of confidence that everything will be fine with no intervention on our part.

Lastly, humility also encourages us to repay those people that have helped us, perhaps by helping them in turn.

It Indebts us

While gratitude certainly leads to positive feelings of elevation, humility, and connectedness, it can also lead to the often-uncomfortable feeling of indebtedness – the feeling that we owe something to the people we’re grateful for.

Although indebtedness isn’t ordinarily a pleasant emotion, it can serve to motivate us to better ourselves. We have an innate drive to reciprocate acts of kindness or support that we receive from others and “pay off” any perceived debts, even if the people we’re indebted to have no such expectations.

Thus, much like the other emotions, feelings of indebtedness possess an important function: They motivate us to be prosocial and to reciprocate kindness. This prosociality and reciprocity operates in a feedback loop, encouraging others to continue to offer kindness and support to us because they know they can count on us to do the same.

Gratitude & Intention Tracker

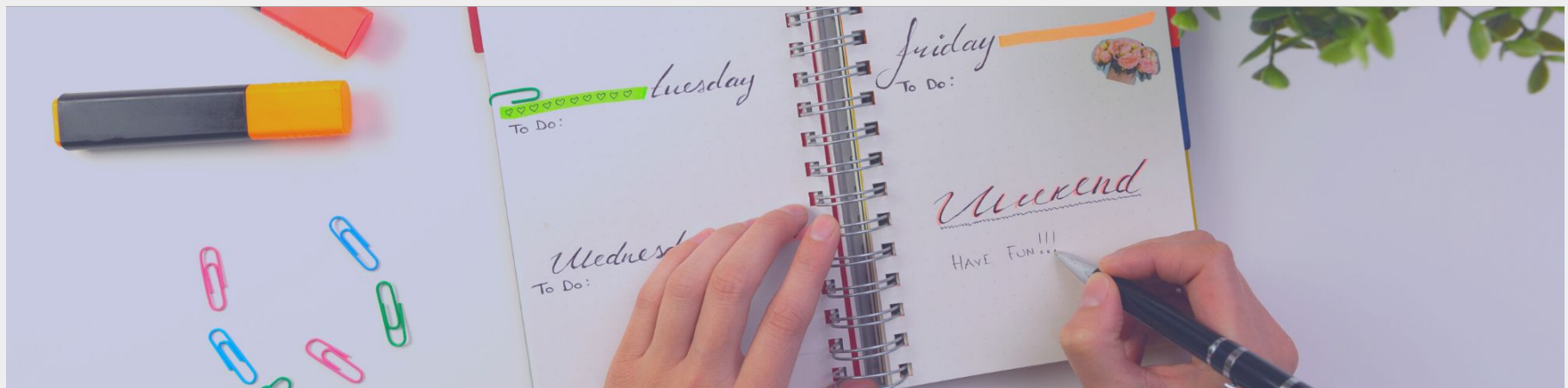


Chances are you've heard the stereotype associated with New Year's resolutions—everyone makes it their goal to go to the gym a certain number of times per week, so they get a membership, work out in January, and then fail to meet their resolution for the rest of the year. Resolutions are rigid commands, often things that we don't truly enjoy doing, and thus we lack the motivation to maintain them.

Intentions are subtly—but crucially—different. Rather than a specific order that you attempt to follow to the letter, an intention is a broader goal. For example, while a resolution might be “I will lift weights four times per week,” an intention might simply be “I will become more physically fit.”

Intentions work better than resolutions because, by their very definition, they are things that you want to do. When you arbitrarily set a resolution to go to the gym, you might not even enjoy the act of going to the gym—otherwise, you wouldn't need to set a resolution for it! The reason you would make such a resolution for yourself is because you want to become more physically fit, not because you want to go to the gym.

By clarifying intentions for yourself instead of setting resolutions, you can cultivate a lifestyle of working toward them in a variety of ways that work for you, instead of trying to force yourself to do things that you don't really want to. You might not enjoy going to the gym, but after clarifying your intention of becoming more physically fit, you'll find that you start to do other things to further that goal (e.g., taking the stairs instead of the elevator, changing your diet, or going for a walk during your lunch break).



Gratitude & Intention Tracker



Day Example	Three Things You're Grateful For <i>Waking up in a warm bed, my loving brother John and a cup of coffee</i>	Today's Intention <i>I will actively engage in conversations with others</i>
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Understanding the concept of mindfulness is not easy. Popular culture might have led you to believe that mindfulness is about sitting still, closing your eyes, and trying to clear all thoughts from your mind. In truth, mindfulness is about focusing intently on the present moment; it is something that can be applied in your day-to-day life and does not require you to set aside a special time for it. Below are some facts about mindfulness and tips on how to get started.



Mindfulness Facts

Mindfulness-based therapy has been shown to be an effective treatment for anxiety and depression.

By non-judgmentally accepting thoughts about the past and future, you will minimize the impact they have on the present moment. Depression is often rooted in thoughts about the past, while anxiety is often rooted in thoughts about the future.

Mindfulness is a skill.

Like anything else that you set out to learn—piano, tennis, sewing—you cannot expect to master it right away. Do not be alarmed if it seems difficult at first, or if you don't start seeing results right away. Just keep doing your best!

Mindfulness is not meditation.

While meditation can be used as an exercise to learn mindfulness, it is not the end-goal. The end-goal is to apply the practice of mindfulness to the activities in your daily life, allowing you to get more out of them without being bogged down by worry and regret.

Mindfulness is a sensory and mental exercise.

Sensing and experiencing the present moment to its fullest is one aspect of mindfulness; the other is non-judgmental acceptance of that world, as well as any thoughts that pass through your mind. Most of us have very good senses—it's the mental part which can be difficult.

Mindfulness Tips

Now that we know what mindfulness is, as well as its benefits, here are some important tips to keep in mind as you're starting out.

Immerse your senses.

If you're playing the piano, focus on how every key feels beneath your fingers and the sounds they make when pressed. If you're having a conversation with a friend, focus on every word they say, as well as their body language. Whatever your current activity is, think about your five senses and try to engage them—naturally—with that activity. If one of your senses is not really relevant (e.g., taste has no relevance to a piece of music) then do not pay attention to it.

Don't judge.

Many thoughts will come into your mind as you go about your daily life. This is unavoidable—our brains are always working on an immense amount of things. The important thing to keep in mind when practicing mindfulness is to let these thoughts pass without judgment. For example, one day during band practice, you might become aware of the thought “I have an exam tomorrow.” On its own, this thought does not cause anxiety or take away from the present moment. It is only once you begin to apply judgments to this thought, such as “I'm not prepared for that exam, and I really need to study” that it starts to become problematic.

Breathing is something you can always focus on.

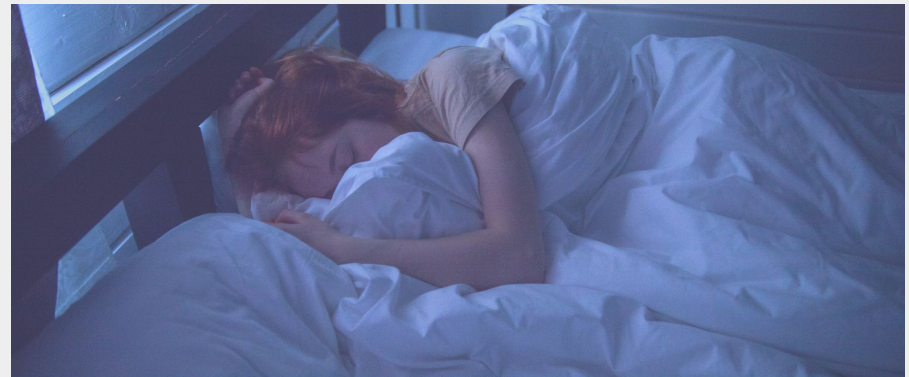
You may find yourself wanting to practice mindfulness in the absence of an immediate, meaningful task to focus on. In these situations, you can always focus on your breathing—how does your chest feel as it expands and contracts? How do your mouth and nose feel as air comes in and out?

Avoid 'autopiloting'.

The greatest pitfalls of mindfulness are the activities where we tend to zone out and lose focus, such as driving or cleaning. These tend to be repetitive or mundane tasks that we do not enjoy. Try to keep yourself focused and 'in the moment' even during these tasks.

The Sleep Cycle

- Sleep is a core physiological function that impacts many other important areas of functioning (e.g., energy, mood, appetite, motivation, concentration, efficiency).
- The average adult needs 6-9 hours of sleep. Consistently getting less than 6 hours per night leads to a range of health consequences, and consistently getting more than 9 hours leads to excessive lethargy and fatigue.
- We have 2 main types of sleep: (1) REM (rapid eye movement) sleep is characterized by dreaming and is the state in which restoration of our brain and body functions occurs, including energy conservation and memory consolidation; and (2) non-REM sleep, which is characterized by 4 stages of sleep that progressively deepen from light to restful to deep sleep. We cycle through Stages 1, 2, 3, 4 and REM throughout the night. Each cycle takes approximately 90 minutes, and throughout the night we increasingly spend a longer period of time in REM (which leads to sleeping being “restorative”, or restful).
- Sleep patterns are impacted by a range of factors, including stress levels, low mood and depression, worry, physical health conditions, medications, and worry about sleep.
- Our bodies are very resilient and can recover from chronic sleep debt within a few days to a week.



Common Sleep Problems

- Insomnia is characterized by difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep and/or early morning awakenings. Individuals with insomnia feel unrefreshed upon awakening and feel fatigued during the day. The most effective treatment for insomnia is cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) that focuses on thoughts/worries about sleep and behavioural sleep patterns (and impact on emotional state).
- Restless leg syndrome is a sensory disorder characterized by an irresistible urge to move one’s legs (and sometimes arms) due to uncomfortable, tingling, or creeping sensations. Treatment includes the minimization/reduction of caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol; iron replacement; exercise/stretching; and, warm baths or cold packs. (cont’d)

- Narcolepsy is a rare sleep disorder characterized by frequent periods of sleepiness (both gradual and sudden sleep attacks), sometimes associated with cataplexy (muscle weakness). Treatment includes stimulant pharmacotherapy and stress management.
- Sleep apnea is a common but underdiagnosed, possibly life-threatening sleep disorder that primarily impacts men who are overweight, have a thick neck girth, and are heavy snorers. The primary feature of obstructive sleep apnea is a partial blockage of airways causing abnormal breathing patterns and sleep disruptions (e.g., repeatedly stopping breathing in the night). Treatment includes weight loss; minimization of alcohol; and treatment by a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine at bedtime.
- Cognitive-behavioural treatment (CBT) is the most effective treatment for sleep problems, as well as associated mood and worry issues.
- Worry and anxiety are a normal part of life but is one of the strongest factors that impact sleep. If you are finding that worrying is preventing you from sleeping, it can be helpful to keep a “worry log”— get out of bed, write down your worries, and ask yourself three key questions: “what is the evidence for this worry?”; “what is the problem to be solved?”; and, “what can I do right now?”
- Relaxation strategies (e.g., diaphragmatic breathing, visual imagery, progressive muscle relaxation) can help with sleep onset and maintenance.

Mood, Worry & Sleep

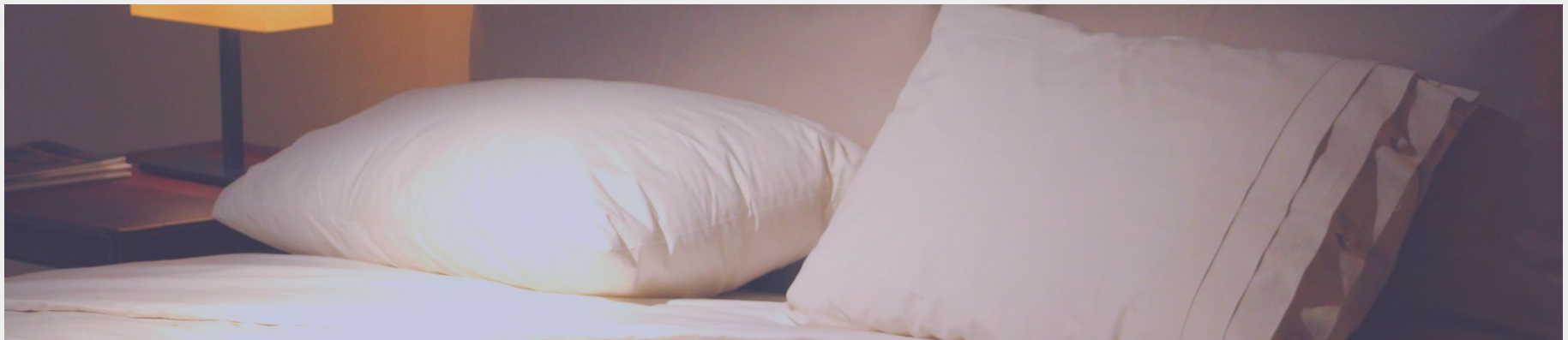
- If you are having trouble identifying contributors to sleep problems, it can be helpful to keep a sleep diary for one to two weeks (e.g., track your diet, work and leisure activities, level of stress, and bed/wake times). Keeping a diary can help identify patterns and factors that are impacting sleep that you may not otherwise be aware of.
- Depression and anxiety are the most common psychological health conditions and will impact one out of four adults at some point in their lives. Depression and anxiety both significantly impact sleep.



Effective Sleep Hygiene Principles

- Having a consistent, fixed wake-up time (even on weekends!) is one of the most important factors in building a consistent sleep pattern. Expose yourself to outside light (e.g., open blinds) upon waking.
- If you are having sleep problems, do not nap! Naps interfere with the restorative value of sleep later on that night. The best strategy is to get into bed earlier that evening.
- Do not have caffeine after 12 PM to 1 PM (the half-life of caffeine is five hours—which means that five hours after having caffeine, 50% of the caffeine is still left in your body; it takes another 5 hours to have the caffeine be reduced in half, to 25%).
- Do not smoke or exercise two to three hours before bedtime.
- Even one drink of alcohol interferes with sleep quality and makes sleep less restorative.
- Create a relaxing bedtime routine; have decaffeinated tea or a warm bath. Make a clear distinction between daytime (alert) activities and bedtime (relaxing) activities.
- Make your bedroom environment comfortable and conducive to sleep (e.g., get comfortable pillow and bedding; keep room temperature moderate; darken the room).
- Restrict your bed for two activities—sleep and sex. Do not watch TV, eat, talk on the phone, argue, or use your computer while in bed.

If you can't fall asleep within 15-20 minutes, get out of bed and do not get back into bed until you are sleepy (not just tired).



Frequently Asked Questions About Sleep

How many hours of sleep does a person need?

The average adult needs 6-9 hours of sleep. Consistently getting less than 6 hours per night leads to a range of health consequences, and consistently getting more than 9 hours leads to excessive lethargy and fatigue.

What causes poor sleep?

Stress, low mood, worry, sleep conditions (e.g., sleep apnea), health conditions (e.g., pain), medications, and worry about not getting enough sleep can all be contributors to poor sleep.

Is there an ideal set bedtime?

The most important thing is to have a fixed and regular wakeup time (as our wakeup time ‘resets’ our internal biological clock). It is important to go to sleep when you are sleepy (not just tired).

If I can't fall asleep should I lie in bed, count sheep, or just remain quiet until I fall back asleep?

No—get out of bed if you can't fall asleep within 15-20 minutes. Your bed should serve as a conditioned stimulus for sleep (i.e., it should trigger the sleep state); so, you want to avoid doing anything other than sleep (and sex) in bed. Lying in bed and worrying associates the state of worry with your bed, which interferes with sleep.



I can fall asleep okay but have poor sleep later in the night—does that mean that I don't have insomnia?

Insomnia can present in several different ways—difficulty falling asleep, difficulty staying asleep, early morning awakening or sleeping an adequate number of hours yet waking up feeling unrefreshed or tired.

I find having a drink or two of alcohol helps me sleep better; is this okay?

If you have sleep problems, no! Even one drink can impair the quality of sleep and its restorative value. Alcohol can help you initially fall asleep, but the quality of that sleep will be poorer than the quality if you have no alcohol.

If I'm having sleep problems, should I track how many times I wake up and for how long?

Tracking patterns in your sleep can be okay if you do the tracking in the morning. “Clockwatching” interferes with sleep, so you should turn your clock away from you so you can't see what time it is when you wake up in the night, as this can add to the anxiety.

Frequently Asked Questions About Sleep



If my sleep has been impaired for months, how long will it take for me to catch up?

Most people will catch up on a sleep debt within a few days (i.e., 3-4 days). It is a myth that we need weeks or months to catch up on impaired sleep; our body simply doesn't make up for sleep debt in that way.

I have a big deadline coming up—is it okay for me to ‘cheat’ on my sleep?

It depends on how sensitive you are to sleep disruptions/problems—many people have no problem cheating on the amount of sleep they need for a short while (e.g., a few days at a time) as long as they can catch-up on their sleep later that week or on the weekend.

Because snoring is such a common problem among men, it can't be harmful, can it?

Heavy snoring (particularly when associated with multiple awakenings in the night) can be a sign of a serious condition called sleep apnea. If you are a heavy snorer, experience excessive daytime sleepiness, and wake up coughing/gasping in the night, see your family physician and request an “overnight oximetry” (a simple test that can help with screening for sleep apnea).

Is it true that older people need fewer hours of sleep?

No—with age the number of night-time awakenings often increases, but the overall need for sleep (6-9 hours) remains the same. Do sleeping pills work? Yes, sleeping pills can work for many people on a short-term basis, but it is important to keep in mind that sleeping medications are only approved for and intended for short-term (i.e., maximum 5-10 days) use. It is much more important to identify the underlying cause(s) of your sleep problems and work to solve these.

Does melatonin work?

Yes, there is evidence that many people will benefit from taking up to 3mg of melatonin, taken half an hour to an hour before sleep.

What is the best treatment for sleep problems?

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) approaches are the most effective solution for chronic sleep problems (assuming there is no underlying physiological or medical condition contributing to the sleep problem). CBT focuses on helping to identify the underlying causes and triggers of sleep problems and works to problem-solve those. There is a heavy focus on thinking patterns (worry/anxiety) and behaviours that interfere with sleep.



MyWorkplaceHealth, a full-suite global workplace consultancy, provides customized strategies and solutions to enhance workplace mental health, helping you and your organization adhere to industry best practices and the tenets of the CSA Z1003 National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health & Safety (PH&S) in the Workplace, ISO 45003, and the US Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being. Investing in psychological health and safety strengthens an organization's economic stability and reputation as an employer of choice - but more importantly, at MyWorkplaceHealth we believe it's just the right thing to do.

Dr. Joti Samra - a national thought leader on issues relating to psychological health, wellness and resilience - is the CEO & Founder of MyWorkplaceHealth and its sister company the Psychological Health & Safety (PH&S) Clinic, a virtual counselling and resilience/leadership coaching practice. Dr. Samra is a highly-regarded expert in psychological health and safety (PH&S). Over the past two decades, she has been involved in numerous national initiatives that have contributed to policy change in Canada, and is a Founding Member of the CSA Technical Committee that developed the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health & Safety in the Workplace (CAN/CSA-Z1003-13/BNO9700-803/2013). This Standard is the first of its kind in the world, and shaped policy development for workplace PH&S at the International ISO level. Dr. Samra is the lead Research Scientist who created Guarding Minds at Work: A Workplace Guide to Psychological Health & Safety in which the psychosocial factor frame adopted by the Standard was developed. She also developed the Psychologically Safe Leader Assessment, an assessment and action planning resource that aligns leaders' skills with CSA Z1003 requirements.

Dr. Samra and her team are also the developers of comprehensive, 15-hour PH&S Certificates for People Leaders and Employees which align with ISO/ANSI continuing education standards and IACET principles.

MyWorkplaceHealth has extensive expertise in helping organizations implement initiatives related to workplace PH&S including implementation of the CSA Standard; providing leadership development, training & coaching services across a broad range of areas, including emotional intelligence, psychologically safe leadership and mental health awareness; and, providing a breadth of services to enhance employee psychological health, wellness and resilience. Reach out to learn more!

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