

How to keep COVID-19 stress from ruining your sleep

Source: [CBC.ca](https://www.cbc.ca)

The strains of worry and upended routine during the COVID-19 crisis aren't exactly helping people sleep well at night.

You or someone you love may be battling the novel coronavirus, or your employment may have been blown up by business shutdowns and stay-home directives. You're juggling health care with child care and cabin fever. Even if you're healthy and gainfully employed, pandemic living isn't easy.

"Everyone's routine is being disrupted. It's a severely stressful event," said Dr. Atul Khullar, an Edmonton psychiatrist and senior consultant for MedSleep, a group of sleep clinics.

This provokes anxiety and stress, exacerbating any pre-existing mental health and insomnia problems, or causing new ones, he said.

"And for some people it can be very traumatizing. They're facing losing their livelihoods. They're faced with losing their way of life. Notwithstanding that your kids are home. It's just stressor after stressor after stressor."

This isn't the stuff of which sweet dreams are made.

Whether or not you're occupied at any given moment with the task or activity in front of you, below the surface remains the psychological weight of being in unprecedented and life-altering times, said Khullar.

"It's kind of this dull ache for a lot of people, and you can only ignore it so much."

Evolutionary roots

It turns out that disrupted sleep in times of crisis has deep roots, said evolutionary anthropologist David Samson, an assistant professor at the University of Toronto Mississauga who studies the evolutionary links between sleep and cognition.

He's the co-author of [a new study published in the journal Sleep Medicine Reviews](#), which explores the evolutionary connection between fear and insomnia.

Sleeplessness is in part a fear-related survival technique connected to how we evolved, he said. We had to be alert to life-threatening forces like predatory animals and severe weather, say, 1.5 million years ago. But we also lived in groups where people could take turns keeping watch at night.

"It turns out fear is actually a good thing from an evolutionary perspective," said Samson. The problem is our psyches stay on high alert when we sense threat.

"This is particularly pernicious in COVID-19, because this is not a lion in the savanna. It's not even a rival group over the next bend that's trying to take our resources."

Because we can't just chase off this problem, we are unable to extinguish our fear, he said. "It's turning into what we classically call insomnia, which is a perpetual chronic condition characterized by the inability to fall asleep."

But since sleep is critical to both emotional regulation and immune strength, said Samson, it's worth your while to establish good sleep habits.

Here are some ways to help you sleep easier in this uncertain time:

Turn off screens an hour before bed

You've heard it before, but the blue light emitted by phones, computers, routers, tablets and televisions is bad news at bedtime. Those screens blast blue-wave light that suppresses melatonin, the hormone that regulates your sleep-wake activity and makes you tired at night, said Samson.

He recommends shutting these down at least an hour before you go to bed.

Make the bedroom just for sleep

While you're at it, resist the temptation to watch Netflix in bed. "A lot of people have televisions in their rooms, and I think the science says this is pretty much a non-starter," he said.

Right now you may be forced to use a bedroom to work from home during the day, but do whatever you can to remove signs of work from your room at night, tucking away your laptop and papers. If you're using a desktop computer, throw a blanket over your whole makeshift setup.

Practice good 'light hygiene'

Less well known but just as important as turning off blue-light-emitting screens at night is getting blue-light-emitting sunshine during the day. "This is critical to enhancing our circadian rhythms, and when we amplify our circadian rhythms, it's basically cuing and synchronizing our body with the local environment," said Samson.

The problem is we're inside more than ever while physically distancing ourselves. So get sunshine wherever you can: stepping out onto a balcony or doorstep, going for walks — as local public health guidelines allow — or at least sit by a window when you eat your lunch, he said. In the evenings, use lower, warmer light before bed to help signal to your body that sleep time is approaching.

Stick to consistent sleep and wake times

It's OK to adjust our schedules and use some of the time you might have spent commuting to work or getting ready for school to get a bit more sleep, said sleep coach Alanna McGinn, who advises families on healthy sleep through her company Good Night Sleep Site.

But avoid letting schedules get turned upside down where there's no routine at all. Teens can sleep until 10 a.m., for example, not the middle of the afternoon.

"We always talk about the 80-20 rule. So 80 per cent of the time try to really stay consistent in terms of bedtimes and wake times." You may want to stay up a little later on a Friday night, but avoid treating every night like it's Friday, she said.

Get some exercise

"Exercise is well known to help sleep," said Khullar. It's beneficial to overall physical and mental health, too.

Activity helps build our drive for sleep, wearing out both kids and grown-ups alike, said McGinn. "We can still go outside and go for family walks, provided you are practising proper distancing."

If full quarantine, self-isolation or a pre-existing condition means you're among the people who can't go outside, stream one of countless free exercise routines online or available through exercise apps.

Time your naps

Naps can disrupt your nighttime sleep, especially if you're taking them after 5 p.m., said Khullar. Although they can help you catch up on needed rest, you're best to contain them to 30 to 40 minutes at most. Isolation can lead some people to nap out of boredom, but that will only compound problems with nighttime sleep.

Look away from COVID-19 news

Although it's important to stay informed, it's overwhelming if you're never looking away from news about the pandemic. "Choose one or two news sources that you trust and just check in with them. You don't need to read it all," said McGinn. That includes the questionable content your friends and family may be sharing on social media, she said.

Don't stare at the clock

If you do wake in the night, resist the temptation to check the time or your phone — which should be kept in another room, said Khullar. Try to get back to sleep. But if that's not working, leave the bed and try some low-key activity like reading. It's OK to watch a show that relaxes you if that's worked for you in the past, he said, but stay away from middle-of-the-night news updates, and return to bed when you start to feel sleepy again.