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### Health Plans for Employment: Sleep

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# Sleep

Many people experience problems with sleeping. Poor sleep is linked with health conditions such as anxiety, pain, depressed mood, fatigue, cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, and weight problems. This fact sheet describes how improving your sleep habits can help you manage some health conditions in order to reach (and maintain) your employment goals.

## Introduction

Getting enough sleep is important for your health, and lack of sleep can affect every aspect of your life. You may notice that it is harder to perform your daily tasks when you don't sleep well. Poor sleep is also linked with serious illnesses like diabetes, heart disease, and depression.

Mainly, sleep affects your mood, memory, and thought process. Common symptoms of poor sleep include trouble remembering, increased stress, irritability, anger, discomfort, and lack of focus. Poor sleep also weakens your immune system.



In general, adults should get seven to nine hours and teens should get eight to nine hours of quality sleep every night. Keeping a regular sleep schedule can help you stay healthy and strong.

## Sleep Benefits

Good sleep can help you manage depression, anxiety, weight problems, physical fitness problems, chronic pain, and fatigue. Quality sleep can also help improve your mood, focus, and general health.

## Sleep Tips

Practicing good sleep habits can help you increase your sleep quality. The following sleep tips are a good starting place.

- Go to bed and get up at the same time each day.
- Spend some time outside in natural light each day.
- Avoid caffeine in the evening.
- Don't nap in the afternoon or early evening.
- Don't watch television in bed.
- Avoid stimulating activities before bedtime, like video games, action movies, or meal planning.
- Exercise each day, but not too close to bedtime.
- Make your bedroom a restful place by limiting light from clocks, computers, TV's, or through windows.
- Don't smoke or drink alcohol.
- Avoid heavy or spicy meals before bedtime.
- Relax before bedtime by deep breathing, listening to soothing music, or taking a warm bath.
- Read before bed to relax the mind and increase sleepiness (not murder mysteries!).
- Train your mind to think of positive thoughts vs. negative thoughts in the early moments of sleep.



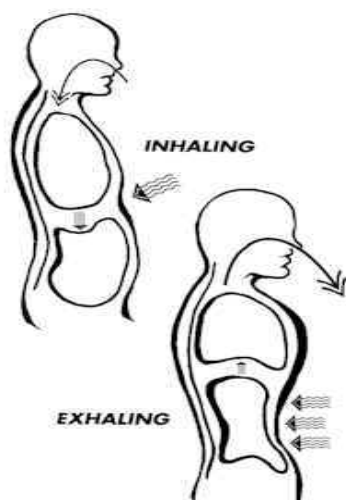
For more complete information about sleep tips, go online to [Helpguide.org](http://Helpguide.org), and click on the "Sleep" link. If you practice good sleep habits and still have trouble sleeping, you may need to talk to your doctor. A doctor can help diagnose and treat specific sleep problems.

## Sleep and Relaxation

Learning to relax can help you fall asleep and reduce stressful feelings. We relax when we calm our minds. One way to do this is to reduce the input we get from our senses. It is estimated that sight and hearing account for 90% of our sensory information. Thus, many relaxation techniques focus on reducing sight and sound stimulation.

Some people practice relaxation techniques at bedtime or in the middle of the night to help them clear their minds of worries so they can fall asleep. Others use relaxation techniques during the day as a way to manage stress. The following relaxation strategies can be used for both.

**Deep Breathing.** Deep breathing is a relaxation technique you can use anywhere to help calm yourself. Most people breathe from their upper



chests when they are awake and from their bellies when they sleep. Consciously learning to belly breathe when you are awake can help you relax.

To practice deep breathing, find a comfortable position, either sitting or lying on your back. Concentrate on breathing in through your nose and following the air all the way down to the lower lobes of your lungs. When you do this, your belly rises as you inhale and falls when you exhale. To get the most relaxation out of deep breathing, ignore thoughts and focus on the act of breathing. With each breath, visualize clean air entering, circulating and refreshing your body. Take the air in through your nose and let it out slowly by pursing your lips.

For more detailed directions about practicing deep breathing explore the Mayo Clinic website at [MayoClinic.org](https://www.mayoclinic.org) in the patient care and health information pages.

**Music.** Throughout history, music has played an important role in healing and community life. Soothing music can help you relax. In general, music

without lyrics, such as classical or new age, tends to be more relaxing. Music with lyrics is generally more stimulating.

Use music to create a peaceful environment for relaxation. First, find a quiet time and a place where you can block out extra noise. Headphones – even cheap ones – are good for this. Next, get comfortable. Start the music and either sit or lie down. Then, concentrate on the music for 20 to 30 minutes. Visualize the places and scenes it suggests. Just enjoy the sound of the music and the images in your mind.

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation.** The technique of progressive muscle relaxation can help you relieve stress by learning to relax your muscles when they are tense. To practice this technique, slowly tense and release each of your major muscles groups, starting at your feet and going all the way to your face. Tense and hold each group for about 10 seconds. Then let the muscle group relax completely so that it feels limp or loose before moving to the next. Observe how each muscle group feels as you tense and release. With regular practice, progressive muscle relaxation can help you manage muscle tension throughout the day. Use it with deep breathing to enhance your feelings of relaxation. For more complete instructions explore the [Helpguide.org](https://www.helpguide.org) website.



**Meditation.** Meditation is a practice to calm your mind and help you relax. Meditation can take many forms. These include guided imagery, mindfulness meditation, tai chi, and yoga. During most meditation you focus your attention on a specific image, sound, object, or action. Focusing on a neutral image or action distracts you from stressful thoughts. Meditation usually includes some form of deep breathing in a relaxed and quiet environment.

## Additional Resources

There are a variety of web resources for learning more about sleep and relaxation.

### The National Sleep Foundation

The National Sleep Foundation website, [SleepFoundation.org](http://SleepFoundation.org), has information on many sleep topics. You can learn more about the sleep cycle or how sleep problems contribute to health conditions. You can also find tips for increasing sleep quality. In addition, there are special topic pages for specific sleep issues, such as insomnia or sleep apnea. If you need professional help with your sleep problem, the website has an interactive page for locating a sleep center near you.

### Helpguide.org

[Helpguide.org](http://Helpguide.org) is a health and wellness resource. The website has information on many different health topics, including ways to reduce stress and relax.



### National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD)

[NCHPAD.org](http://NCHPAD.org) is an excellent resource for people with disabilities. For information on how your diet may affect your sleep, visit NCHPAD's [Sleep Disturbances: How Diet Can Help](#) page. For information on ways to reduce stress and relax, visit the [Modalities to Decrease Stress](#) page. This page also describes goal setting and time management strategies.





## Set a Goal

Setting a health behavior change goal can move you closer to achieving and maintaining meaningful employment. When setting a goal to change your sleep or relaxation habits, it is important to be realistic. Think about where



you are now, and then think about where you want to be. Begin by making a few changes in your sleep or relaxation habits, and work up to your goal from there. Remember to keep track of your progress and reward yourself for accomplishments.

*Good Luck!*

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