Sleep: Are you getting enough quality sleep?

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Why are so many of us struggling?

Most of us feel better after a good night's sleep, but with the pressures of modern living and balancing raising families with work life, lots of people find it harder to get the sleep they need. Many people suffer with sleep disorders and about eighty percent of the population feel they are not getting enough or the right quality of sleep.

Thankfully, we're beginning to recognise that sleep is important for our wellbeing. Popular Fitbit watches, which tell us whether we're moving about when we're asleep have had a role to play, and as the technology and media coverage improves more people are taking steps to address poor quality sleep.

Dreaming to forget…

So what does sleep do for us and how much do we need? Sleep is a both a physical and an emotional need. The right kind of sleep is vital for our wellbeing – a healthy adult needs about seven to eight hours sleep a night, and a little less as they get older.

Broadly speaking, there are two different kinds of sleep. Deep sleep (also called slow-wave or non-REM sleep) is the stage of sleep where most of the brain is offline and resting while the body's cells are repaired. This makes up about eighty percent of a healthy sleep cycle and getting the right amount helps us to stay physically healthy. Less than four hours deep sleep a night can have an impact on our ability to heal and recuperate.

REM sleep – REM stands for rapid eye movement - is the phase where most dreaming takes place. There are a number of theories about the role of REM sleep, but what we do know is that following periods of REM sleep, mood improves, as does memory, and that during REM sleep neurotoxins are cleaned away to keep the brain healthy. However, if we are worrying about unmet emotional needs – perhaps financial security, relationship issues or problems with work – then the amount of dreaming we do increases to try and calm the brain down. Unsurprisingly, if we are spending a lot of time dreaming and not getting enough deep sleep we are likely to feel worse in the mornings.
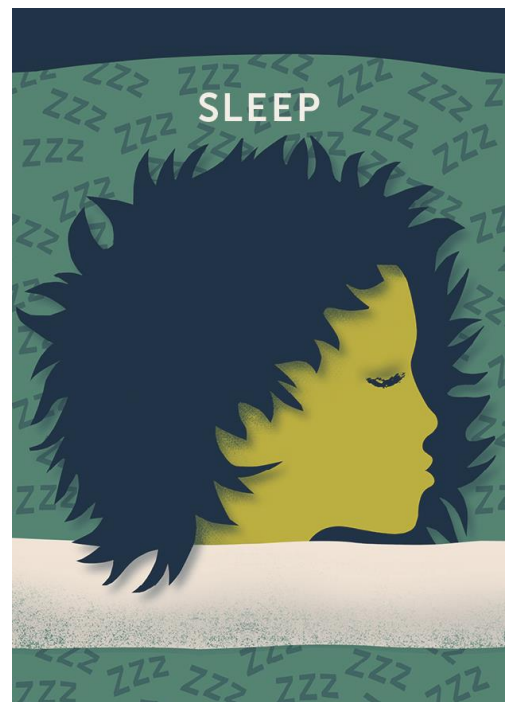
What can you do to get better sleep?

So what can we do to get better sleep? Here are some pointers which experts recommend:

• Learn and practice relaxation exercises to help you to go off to sleep more easily
• Work on addressing unmet emotional needs – so that there is less to worry about!
• Have regular going to bed and getting times – and stick to them

- Cut down on caffeine in the second half of the day
- Avoid watching TV or internet surfing in the two hours before we go to bed
- Avoid using smartphones in bed

All of these pointers can help to get you started on the path towards better quality sleep.