

Mental Health & Wellbeing at the Bar

Losing sleep



Wellbeing
at the Bar

Losing sleep

Over 30% of the British population experience sleep issues including insomnia and sleep apnoea. Consistently poor sleepers are at much higher risk of early death than those who sleep well. Lack of this vital wellbeing ingredient leads to a higher incidence of cardiovascular problems and an increased risk of diabetes and obesity.

There are many reasons why you may find yourself losing sleep, particularly when you are seeking pupillage or have just entered practice. A common factor is the stress and uncertainty that comes with this period of life, which can lead to overthinking, worrying and anxiety. If you are losing sleep over a specific problem e.g. financial stress, please see our guidance on this [here](#).

Sleep appears to have some key physiological and psychological purposes. Poor quality, reduced sleep cycles, or lack of sleep is likely to result in poor performance. Whilst occasional bouts of bad sleep are part of a busy working life, we should all take steps to prevent this becoming the norm.

Primarily, sleep allows our bodies and minds recovery time. It also strengthens neural connections in the brain that form memories and process thinking.

Conversely, connections that no longer serve a purpose for us are pruned. Increasing evidence suggests that the brain also clears itself of protein and lipid waste when we sleep and this may indicate that sleep protects us from early cognitive decline (such as dementia related conditions).

Tips for improved sleep

Enhancing our health, wellbeing and performance through good quality sleep can be achieved through practical steps:

Don't break your back – opt for low intensity exercise such as pilates or yoga. Avoid cardiovascular exercise for up to 3 hours before bed.

Switch off – reduce the use of TV, phones or smart devices for at least 30 minutes before bed. The light from these devices interrupts the production of the sleep hormone melatonin.

Avoid caffeine and alcohol – try to avoid after midday. Although alcohol promotes GABA (a neurotransmitter involved in managing stress and anxiety), it only achieves this for a very short period before it then starts depleting, causing sleep problems, anxiety and nervousness.

Nutrients – eat foods rich in tryptophan which converts to serotonin, the raw material for the sleep hormone melatonin e.g. Oatcakes with tuna; white meat such as chicken or turkey; protein smoothies; nuts and seeds; or natural yogurt.

Regular routine – try to establish a regular routine in the early years of practice.

Unwind – find a method that works for you. This may be listening to talking therapy, a meditation podcast or writing out your thoughts on paper.

Stop smoking – smokers can take up to twice as long to fall asleep as non-smokers. This is quickly remedied after giving up smoking¹.

If the problem persists after trying these tips, consider visiting your GP for more specialist help.

Where can I find out more?

- <http://thesleepschool.org/>
- <https://sleepfoundation.org/excessivesleepiness/sleep-tools-tips/healthy-sleep-tips>
- <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/sleep/art-20048379>
- <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/insomnia/Pages/bedtimeritual.aspx>

¹ Reference: A Pennsylvania State University study showed that the time taken to fall asleep was reduced by a third within only 2 days of giving up smoking.