

SLEEP TIPS FOR DEPLOYED PERSONNEL

VERSIONS:

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Tips to Improve Sleep

COVID-19 deployments are challenging - long shifts, odd hours and strict PPE requirements all while working in an unfamiliar city with a rapidly rising death toll. Standards of care have changed and most providers are witnessing or making heartbreaking decisions. Stress levels are high and sleep may be elusive. However, there are many actions you can take to improve the quality of sleep you get, whenever you are able to get it.

Sleep Area Preparation

We sleep best in a cool, dark, quiet environment. Ideally, the room temperature should be between 64 and 68 degrees. As an EMS provider, your brain is trained to respond quickly to visual and audio stimulation (this is part of the hypervigilance that develops - you know, when you hear a sound that resembles the alerts or tones your operation uses while you are off-duty and your body responds with the startle reflex - your heart rate and BP jump, etc). That can happen during your sleep too unless you take steps to limit stimuli.

Your eyelids don't block all light - covering your eyes with a sleep mask or a light piece of fabric like a shirt or towel can effectively create a dark space. If you don't opt for that route, using room darkening shades or curtains can help. If you see light through the gap between curtains, use whatever you have handy to seal the curtains together (a pant hanger with clips, clothes pins, duct tape, etc). If light is shining under your hotel door, roll up a towel and place it along the bottom edge. Blue light is especially disruptive to our sleep as it disrupts melatonin production, a key hormone to promote and maintain sleep. If there are blue lights in your room, such as an alarm clock or a television, consider covering the light with whatever you have available (tape, clothing, a book or extra pillow) or unplugging it. Using night shade or other color shifting app on your device screen can reduce the amount of blue light to which you are exposed in the two hours before bed. Consider a digital sunset - shutting off your device or not using it an hour before sleep.

Our minds listen for noises and can rouse us out of sleep to alert of us of potential danger in our environment. Ear plugs are an easy solution for this, especially silicon ear plugs that create a good seal over the ear canal. As an alternative, creating a white noise environment to mask other background noises can aid sleep. Consider using a fan,

SLEEP TIPS FOR DEPLOYED PERSONNEL

humidifier or white noise track on your phone (YouTube and most music services include many options).

Preparing Yourself for Sleep

Our bodies like consistency. Stick to as consistent a sleep schedule as possible to maximize the quality of your sleep.

Many of us experience mind-racing thoughts that hinder our sleep. A great trick for this is to journal - it can be as simple as writing a to-do list- and writing them all down before trying to sleep. This helps your mind let go of them so you can relax. Writing down whatever is on your mind can also help relax your brain, allowing sleep.

Wound up or anxious? Physical symptoms like this can prevent sleep. In these cases, try burning off some of your sympathetic nervous system hormones through a quick burst of activity like running stairs, burpees, calisthenics, jumping rope (you don't need the rope - just do the motion), squat jumps or dancing. Burn off that energy to help you relax.

Stress and tension interfering with your sleep? Gentle stretching or yoga releases muscle tension in your body, sending the signal to your mind that it's okay to relax. (The mind and body are in a constant feedback loop.) Meditation also helps calm the mind, preparing it for sleep. Check out the Ten Percent Happier (free to EMS workers) or Head Space apps for guidance. Breath work can stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, relaxing the body. Try a series (ten or more cycles) of slow deep inhales, expanding your belly, to a count of four followed by a prolonged exhale to a count of six. [Qi gong](#) is an ancient practice that combines breath, movement and meditation.

Find which tips work best for you and create a personal nighttime ritual. Practicing the ritual consistently sends your mind and body a signal that it is time to wind down and sleep.

Other Practices to Encourage Good Sleep

- Avoid caffeine (coffee, energy drinks, soda) within six hours of sleeping.
 - Energy drinks contain more than just caffeine. Most brands pride themselves on a proprietary blend of herbs, vitamins and other stimulants that can significantly increase the activation of your sympathetic nervous system, even causing cardiac irregularities. Additionally, the combined ingredients can lead to increased anxiety, restlessness, insomnia, headaches and irritability. If you're looking for something to keep you going, coffee is by far the better choice.

SLEEP TIPS FOR DEPLOYED PERSONNEL

- Avoid eating at least 2 hours prior to bed, especially sugary or processed foods. This can prevent a blood sugar crash that wakes you later.
- Avoid alcohol, especially within two hours of sleeping. Alcohol might make you fall asleep faster, but it is a sleep disruptor and usually causes waking few hours into your sleep due to a decline in blood sugar and other factors. As we all know, alcohol doesn't lead to quality sleep.

This is just a brief primer of tips that can have immediate impact on the quality of your sleep. Poor sleep decreases our immune system, our focus, our energy, our mood and our ability to process stressors. You are working in a demanding environment, so ensuring that the sleep you do get is quality is one of the best ways you can take care of yourself.