Good sleep gets harder as we age, but mindfulness could help

Getting a good night’s sleep can be challenging, especially as we age. About half of all older adults report sleeping difficulties. This can make them more likely to experience physical or mental health conditions, memory problems, and falls, due to poor balance.

Older adults also have less deep sleep than younger people and their sleep is more easily interrupted.

As we age, our body clock or “circadian rhythms” change. We have a less consistent pattern of feeling sleepy and awake. We also feel sleepy earlier in the evenings and wake up earlier in the mornings.

Medical conditions commonly experienced in later life, and the medication used to treat, them can also interfere with sleep.

Treatments for sleeping difficulties include medication for short-term relief and psychological treatments such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). CBT helps people to change unhelpful thoughts and behaviours that contribute to poor sleep.

While CBT is very effective for clinically diagnosed insomnia, not everyone with milder sleeping difficulties needs such an intensive treatment. For some people, sleep quality can be improved by learning relaxation to reduce physical tension and worry.

Another approach that is showing promise for improving sleep is to learn mindfulness.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness involves deliberately focusing on what we are experiencing, thinking or feeling in the present moment, without negatively judging our experiences. We can learn mindfulness by becoming more aware of where we are focusing our attention.

Mindfulness is the opposite to absentmindedness or being on “auto pilot”, like when you read a book and realise you haven’t paid attention to what was written on the last few pages because you were distracted by planning tomorrow’s activities.

Mindfulness involves focusing on your sensations in the present moment, and letting worrying thoughts pass by. Halfpoint/Shutterstock

Mindfulness also involves deliberately focusing on things we don’t normally pay much attention to. You may have experienced mindfulness when you’ve listened intently to a favourite piece of music and deliberately turned your attention to the sound of just one instrument.

How can mindfulness help sleep?

The findings of a recently published research study, led by David Black from the University of Southern California, suggest that practising mindfulness might be particularly helpful for improving sleep quality in adults aged 55 years or older with mild sleeping difficulties.

The mindfulness program involved taking part in six two-hour group classes and between five and 20 minutes a day of home practice.

The researchers found that adults who completed a structured mindfulness program showed greater improvements in sleep quality than adults who completed a program that taught them good “sleep hygiene”
Counter-intuitively, the way that mindfulness may influence sleep is not directly through relaxation, because mindfulness is about waking the body up and becoming more aware. By learning to become more aware of present-moment experiences, we learn not to react to thoughts and worries that can interfere with sleep.

We still don’t know exactly how much and what type of mindfulness practice is needed before a person notices improvements to their sleep. But research suggests that regular practice activates the parts of the brain that help us experience our environment through our senses rather than through thoughts and worries.

**Tips for practising mindfulness**

Practise mindfulness regularly, in a quiet place where you won’t be interrupted. It’s best to learn mindfulness outside of the bedroom because to learn the skill, you first need to learn to pay more attention to your present-moment experiences rather than to go to sleep.

Tai chi is one way to practise mindfulness. [Garry Knight/Flickr, CC BY](https://unsplash.com/photos/LYmzL9Yj0eE)

There are a number of ways to start to practising mindfulness:

- Listen to a mindfulness meditation CD, MP4 audio or a mindfulness app
- Take part in activities that encourage mindfulness, such as yoga, pilates, walking, tai chi or running
- Undertake daily activities, such as cleaning your teeth or washing the dishes, in a mindful way by focusing on the experience of doing the activity
- Enjoy the experience of eating in a mindful way by using all of your senses and keeping your attention on the food.

Try not to pressure yourself to get the hang of mindfulness straight away. The goal of mindfulness is to not judge your experiences. If you notice your attention straying you can gently bring your attention to what you are focusing on, such as your breath.

**Resources:**

- [Mindfulness and Yoga Nidra Relaxation](https://example.com) CD and MP3 audio for mindfulness and deep relaxation exercises
- [Mindfulness for Life](https://example.com) book and CD
- [Full Catastrophe Living](https://example.com) book
- [Smiling Mind](https://example.com) a mindfulness app for both Android and iPhones
- [Sleep Well](https://example.com): a mindfulness and relaxation app for Android phones available as part of a research trial by Swinburne University of Technology researchers.