Survival Guide

Getting through a friendship breakup

The Teen Sleep Crisis

School. Homework. Activities. Friends. You feel like a ZOMBIE (hey, we have a cure)!

www.scholastic.com/choices
In 1964, a teenager in San Diego named Randy Gardner hatched an idea for a science fair project. He would see how long he could stay up. By the end of the experiment, 264 hours later (that’s 11 days), he had set a new world record, which still stands. But along the way, he was not quite himself. Gardner became moody, forgetful, and paranoid. At one point, he mistook a street sign for a person, and on day four he thought he was a running back for the San Diego Chargers.

You probably don’t have any immediate plans to stay up 11 days straight, but if you’re like most teens, you’ll pull the occasional all-nighter to cram for a test. And even on a good night, you’ll probably stay up too late. Teenagers actually need more sleep than adults—about nine hours’ worth—but a recent survey found that as few
as 14 percent of them get nine or more hours on weeknights. Twice as many get seven hours or less. And this sleep deficit can drag down your mental and physical health, perhaps permanently.

You know the effects of one crummy night’s sleep: You feel groggy, forgetful, clumsy. (Twenty-four hours without sleep actually leaves you as brain-dead as if you were legally drunk.) The body uses sleep to re-energize many of its cells. And the brain uses it to enhance memories and solve problems. Studies show that lack of sleep in teenagers has been shown to put them at a higher risk for depression, anxiety, drug use, bad grades, and low self-esteem.

Sleep deprivation may also cause permanent cellular damage and even the death of neurons in the brain. And adolescence is a terrible time to put added stress on the brain, because it’s changing rapidly, creating new pathways and pruning old ones. According to David K. Randall, a reporter and the author of Dreamland: Adventures in the Strange Science of Sleep, sleep is “a third of your life that typically gets shortchanged. You don’t really focus on it. And adolescents need sleep so much more because their bodies are changing.”

OFF SCHEDULE

Unfortunately, getting more sleep is an uphill battle for teens. It’s like your body—and the world—is working against you.

To understand sleep patterns, you first need to understand the circadian rhythm. This internal clock tells your body when it’s time to be awake and when it’s time to sleep. Your brain does this by releasing a hormone called melatonin, which makes you drowsy. But in puberty, your clock shifts, and you feel like sleeping and waking 1 to 3 hours later than usual—even though school still starts at the same time.

A second mechanism tells us it’s time to go to bed. Several biochemicals, including one called adenosine, build up in the brain the longer you’re awake. The more of these biochemicals your brain collects, the more tired you get. In teens, this buildup happens more slowly than in children, so you’re better able—and more likely—to stay up late.

UP ALL NIGHT

Today’s teenagers also have to contend with technological temptations that earlier generations didn’t face. In one study of 100 adolescents near Philadelphia, the teens did an average of four different tech-related activities after 9 p.m., including going online, watching TV, playing video games, and using their cell phones all night long. As 14 percent of them get nine or more hours on weeknights. Twice as many get seven hours or less. And this sleep deficit can drag down your mental and physical health, perhaps permanently. You know the effects of one crummy night’s sleep: You feel groggy, forgetful, clumsy. (Twenty-four hours without sleep actually leaves you as brain-dead as if you were legally drunk.) The body uses sleep to re-energize many of its cells. And the brain uses it to enhance memories and solve problems. Studies show that lack of sleep in teenagers has been shown to put them at a higher risk for depression, anxiety, drug use, bad grades, and low self-esteem.

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phones. The more tech they used, the harder it was to fall asleep, and the less sleep they got, the sleepier they were at school. One reason tech use inhibits sleep is that light—particularly the blue-wave light that many gadgets produce—tells the body that it’s still daytime, preventing the release of melatonin. Playing video games or socializing online also gets the mind all revved up and prevents you from settling down. Mary Carskadon, a professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown University and a sleep expert, has called the combination of factors that affect sleep in teenagers—circadian rhythm delay, reduced sleep pressure, electronics use, increased academic pressure, early school start times, and the freedom to set their own bed time—a “perfect storm” for sleep deficit.

And it’s quite a damaging storm. Sleep deprivation may not actually kill you, but it has been known to kill other animals. Consider this: Flies and rats die sooner without sleep than they do without food.

So follow the advice to the right for better sleep, and dodge that perfect storm—before you find yourself talking to stop signs.

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YOU’RE NOT DREAMING!

FIVE FREAKY SLEEP FACTS

PEOPLE ARE ACTIVE WHILE ASLEEP

Sometimes the brain enters a stage between waking and sleep, and the body can move around without the user’s awareness. Millions of people sleepwalk—and some sleep eat and sleep fight and even sleep drive.

SLEEP CAN CAUSE PARALYSIS

Occasionally the reverse occurs: The body remains relaxed and immobile, but the mind is fully awake. People occasionally interpret this terrifying state of “sleep paralysis” as an alien abduction.

DOOLPHINS NEVER TOTALLY REST

A Dolphin can go for weeks at a time without snoring, by putting half of its brain to sleep while the other half is active. If they didn’t remain alert most of the time, they’d be easy shark food.

EVEN FLOWERS SLEEP

Plants have circadian rhythms too. They open their leaves up to the sun once a day, even in complete darkness.

THE BLIND CAN SEE

People who become blind after the age of 7 return to a colorful world after bedtime: They can see in their dreams.

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DO

✔ “Get all the technology out of the bedroom,” says Carskadon, or at least stop using it well before bedtime. Bright screens prevent the release of melatonin, and the activity gets you all worked up.

✔ Try to avoid bright lights right before bed. And when you wake up, get a big dose of sunshine. Morning light will help reset your circadian rhythm and tell your body it’s time to be awake. It can even prevent insomnia later, when it’s time to go to bed.

✔ Create a pre-sleep ritual that helps you wind down at the end of the day.

✔ Use your bed only for sleeping. If you also use it for reading or talking or working, tucking in won’t act as a trigger for sleep.

DON’T

✖ Go to sleep at different times every night. The more of a schedule you keep, the higher your sleep quality.

✖ Think about how you’re not sleeping, and how tired you’ll be the next day, and how anxious you are. If you can’t get to sleep, focus on your breathing—on each breath, think, “inhale… exhale…” It will relax you so that you can hit the hay in peace.

✖ Drink any caffeine for 6-8 hours before bed. (It lasts in your body long after the initial buzz wears off.)

✖ Ignore the signals you’re getting from your body. If it takes five alarms to get you up in the morning, or if you’re falling asleep in class, you’re not getting enough quality sleep. Go to bed earlier and make sure to follow our other sleep tips.