

## Better Sleep Webinar Transcript

**NATASHA BOWMAN:** Hi, everyone. Welcome to our webinar, Better Sleep. I'm Natasha Bowman, a counsellor here at George Brown. So this is a webinar that my colleague and I, Robert, I just want to give him some credit, Robert Malowany, developed together. Unfortunately, he couldn't be here today because we unfortunately did not schedule very well. But I'm going to be here today to introduce you to Sleep Hygiene, and to walk you through this webinar. So, I'm glad you can be here. And I hope that you can get something from this.

### Why sleep is important

So, sleep is so important for us as human beings in so many different domains. Getting enough sleep allows us to regulate our emotions, to think clearly, to process information effectively. And when we don't get enough sleep, all of these processes are compromised. So, when you don't get enough sleep, it's very challenging for you to regulate your emotions, it's very challenging for you to process information, to retain information in memory, and for you to perform optimally, physically and cognitively. So these are obviously all very relevant concerns to students, right. Because you're here in school, like you want to be able to do your best in your classes, and then presumably, if you're a human being, not just a student. But you also want to feel your best. And so in order to feel your best and perform the best that you possibly can here in college, you need to be able to get enough sleep. But we know research shows us and also just in my experience talking to students and having been a student myself, students are really chronically sleep deprived. And I think that there are a lot of reasons for this. I mean, you guys have really heavy workloads. It's difficult to fit everything in, you know, and so oftentimes when you're prioritizing, sleep tends to take the backburner, doesn't get intentionally prioritized. Other things get prioritized over sleep. I also think that we exist in this culture of, like, you know, impaired sleep being glorified or held up with some sort of badge of working harder and grinding. It's like hustle culture. It's somehow perceived as being an indication that you're not working hard and doing your best if you're getting enough sleep, if you're not chronically sleep deprived.

And so, if there's one thing you can take away from this webinar, I hope that it's that sleep is essential for you to perform, do the best that you can, and for you to feel your best. And if there's a secondary thing you can take away from this webinar is that there are things that you can do to improve your sleep, even if sleep is something that you struggle with, which a lot of people do.

So, in terms of like how many people struggle with their sleep, so 30% of Canadians actually suffer from a diagnosable sleep disorder. So this is like impaired sleep that reaches a threshold that is serious enough for clinical diagnosis and medical intervention. That's actually like a pretty staggering number ... 30% is pretty large. And along the spectrum of a perfect sleep and clinical diagnosis of a sleep disorder, there's a whole bunch of us who just struggle to get a full restorative night's sleep. Sleep is a

really elusive thing. And, you know we're not taught how to ensure that we get good sleep. And there's all sorts of misinformation out there and, you know, like I said, all sorts of different, like, cultural sort of influences that make it challenging for us to get enough sleep. But, you know, it's a topic that I think if you're a human being with a human brain is relevant to all of us. And so, I'm glad that you're here with us today. And I hope that this workshop will be helpful for you.

## What is sleep?

So without sleep, you will die. So, there are, like I said in the introduction to this workshop, if you're sleep deprived, there are going to be cognitive, emotional and physical deficits. Which means that, on the flipside of that, when you sleep well, there are going to be cognitive, emotional and physical benefits. So sleep is a restorative state. We still don't know, like, you know, the research is really sort of mixed and nebulous around sleep. We don't know like the exact function of sleep. But from what we do know, it seems that it has like a range of functions in the human body. And it affects every cell of your body, like from the tip of your head down to the bottom of your feet. So sleep is super important for every single biological, psychological, physiological function that your body is going to do. It's restorative. It helps consolidate memories. It helps regenerate cells, it helps recovery. It's necessary for survival. It's also necessary for performance.

So sleep is not something that's just unique to humans. All mammals sleep. And many other creatures also sleep. It's pretty rare in the animal kingdom for sleep to not happen. And especially sort of, within sort of like the animal kingdom, among animals who have access to higher order executive functioning, like central nervous system type biological functions, sleep happens almost universally. So it's super important. One takeaway, sleep is super important. Please prioritize sleep. Not sleeping is not something that should be glorified. If you're able to sleep, you're probably going to be able to perform better and you're definitely going to feel better.

## Benefits of sleep

So sleep helps us process and save memories. It helps us repair muscles. It boosts your immune system. This is something that I presume is important to most of us in this COVID-19 pandemic that we're living through right now. It helps regulate your appetite to ensure that various levels of hormones that influence your appetite are adequately present within your body ... that you don't have an excess or a deficit of those hormones. It helps you regulate your emotions and manage stress, really important one to students. And it helps your body restore and rejuvenate and repair damage.

## Sleep hygiene

So, what is sleep hygiene? I'm not sure if this is a term that you guys have heard before. But essentially, what sleep hygiene boils down to is it's exactly like regular hygiene, but just for sleep. So if you think about like the hygiene rituals that you probably have for

yourself, like, you know, at the end of the day, every day, I will wash my face, maybe I'll take a shower, and maybe I'll brush my teeth. And in sleep hygiene, this is exactly the same. It's the rituals that we engage in on a regular basis that ensure that our sleep is "clean," or is optimal, is restorative, as restorative as regenerative as it can possibly be. So there are like a million and one possible different sleep hygiene recommendations. But there's been a lot of research on sleep. And there are a lot of things that we know through the research and also just through our own experience that are helpful to sleep. So when you're building your, like, sleep hygiene toolkit, that's exactly like what you're doing. It's a toolkit, right? So, there's lots of information out there on the internet. I'm going to introduce you to some strategies in this webinar. But at the end of the day, it's a process of trial and error.

**Building a sleep hygiene toolkit.** What I always recommend is when people are sifting through a lot of information, and if you get interested in sleep hygiene, you're going to be sifting through a lot of information. You try to implement one thing at a time. So you try like a strategy out for a period of time. So I recommend two weeks to a month of doing this consistently. And then you assess whether or not it is working for you. So the reason that I recommend two weeks to a month is that it takes a while for your body to adjust to new stimuli and to new strategies that you're using. And so you want like sufficient amount of data to draw from when you're trying to conclude whether or not like the strategy is helpful for you in your sleep. And so two weeks to a month is like a general heuristic. This is also important for you to actually make a realistic assessment about whether or not the strategy is helpful, whether you want to keep it in your toolkit. And it's also important for habit formation. So, it takes like about a month to form a habit. So, for about a month for something to become reflexive and for it not to require, like, the conscious generation of intrinsic motivation or willpower. And so, try one thing at a time for a month.

And so, I hope at the end of this webinar, perhaps you'll take one thing away that you're going to try differently going forward for the next month or so. And then if it turns out that the thing you've chosen to try doesn't work for you, that's totally fine. There are so many other different things you could try. This just means it's time to try something new.

**Exercise.** So, what helps you sleep? There are a lot of different things that help different people sleep, but there are some general things that tend to help all of us, like, if we're human beings with human brains and human bodies. Exercise is one of them. And what exercise means for you, it's going to be different what exercise means for me than it might mean for somebody else. It's really sort of where you're at. But we do know that moving your body in any way throughout the day does tend to increase sleep drive. So, what sleep drive is is the biological drive for sleep. I hate when people use the term in a definition, but it's what I just said. That's exactly what it is. It's like the biological processes that happen in your body that increase the initiation and sustenance of the sleep process. So, one thing that increases sleep drive is moving your body. So engaging in sort of activity that, like, makes it more likely that you're going to have that biological drive for sleep at the end of the day. There are a lot of different opinions out there about when, like, the best time of day is for you to do exercise. My

recommendation to you would be to try it out and see what works best for you. So some people find that they exercise and then immediately they feel tired. So, for those people, you know, it might be helpful to engage in exercise at the end of the day. There is some research that shows that engaging in exercise past 6:00 or 7:00 p.m. can disrupt biological sleep processes. So it activates sympathetic fight or flight, like, alert type biological mechanisms, which is the opposite of what we want to be activating when we're unwinding and trying to start sleeping. So, you know, in general, like, very slightly, the research tends to support the best time of day to exercise to be around midday. But again, this is highly individual. There are some people who swear that, you know, they sleep better if they exercise in the morning. There are some people who swear that they sleep better if they exercise at night. In general, like, any exercise is probably going to help you have a more restorative sleep, even if, you know, perhaps it might --like if it's right before you're trying to sleep make it a little bit more challenging for you to fall asleep. So exercise is good. Exercise increases sleep drive, no matter when you do it during the day, as a general rule.

**Establishing a soothing bedtime routine.** So this is the things that you do to let your brain and body know that it's time to start unwinding. And there are lots of different things that you can do. But in general, like anything that is going to stimulate those rest and digest biological functions and down regulate activity within the fight or flight biological functions is going to be helpful to you. So, to give you some examples of things, of like activities that stimulate rest and digest nervous system activity ... it can be as simple as intentionally slowing down like your breath and your rate of speech. So this is something that I try to do intentionally at the end of the day, as you'll, like, you'll notice throughout this webinar, I'm a fast talker, I have a lot of energy. But at the end of the day, I intentionally start trying to sort of slow down my breath, slow down my rate of speech. And it's very rare that I would schedule like a social obligation right before I want to go to bed. I usually give myself like an hour window to unwind. Some other things you can do, you can take a hot shower. This is something that heats up your body temperature in the short term, but in the long term it cools down your body temperature because you get out and it's like a shock to your system. And this in turn activates those rest and digest processes. Having a hot cup of tea, non-caffeinated tea, really important. So like an herbal tea or maybe a Rooibos can also be really nice. There's one that I love from DAVIDsTEA, Valerian Nights. This is my favourite. So this is sort of biologically helpful. It does the same thing that a hot shower would do. And that it's sort of activating those rest and digest processes on a biological level. But when you're establishing routines, and when you're doing the same thing every single night, this is also like psychologically, it can help sort of get your brain and body into a space where sleep is going to be possible. It's like communicating to your brain and body, OK, now we're doing this thing, we know what comes next, sleep, right? This is something it will take time for your brain and your body to like associate certain activities with sleep, but it will happen with like consistent implementation of routine and habit. So having a nice soothing cup of tea is another one. If you're someone who likes aromatherapy, a lot of people will like lavender oil. There is some sort of research that supports like the smell of lavender and sleep process. But for me, this is more of like --it's more of a psychological thing in my mind. So this is more like communicating to your brain and

body that it's time to start unwinding. So maybe you might diffuse some lavender essential oil. And maybe you might do something like read, something really gentle, something that doesn't require a lot of thinking, a lot of high energy, something to just sort of start unwinding or maybe some gentle yoga, some meditation, if that's up your alley. Really anything that's slow and intentional and that helps you unwind and then doing it in a routine sort of way.

**Having a regular wake time.** So this is, for me, in sort of my personal journey to like regulating my sleep, this has been the most --one of the most impactful things that I've done. So it is a lot easier for you to control your wake time than it is for you to control the time that you fall asleep, right? Like we can't necessarily, as I'm sure all of you know, just snap our fingers, and most of us can't just, like, fall asleep that well. But what we can do is we can ensure that we wake up at the same time every day. And the reason that waking up at the same time or I say within an hour, you don't have to wake up like 6:00 a.m. on the dot every single day, but if you're going to maybe wake up between 6:00 or 7:00 or 10:00 a.m. 11:00 a.m. if that sort of aligns more with your lifestyle. The reason that it's helpful to have a regular wake time is that sleep is governed by these biological rhythms called circadian rhythms that happen inside of our body. And it's like an internal biological clock that gets set throughout the day. And so, when we have a regular wake time, what we are exerting control over is our circadian rhythms. And in exerting control over our circadian rhythms, what we're exerting control over is the biological processes that are responsible for initiating and sustaining sleep. So if we wake up at, let's say, like, 6:00 a.m., every morning, like, that seems --I don't know if that seems realistic for you guys. So, actually just, I'm going to say like 10:00 a.m., say, you wake up 10:00 a.m. every morning. What that means is probably the sort of cascade of biological, physiological, like hormonal changes that happen in your body later on in the day that are responsible for initiating and sustaining sleep are going to start happening as well around the same time. So, this is really powerful, because it gives you control over when you fall asleep, which in turn will then make it easier to wake up with time and intentional implementation of these sleep hygiene practices, to wake up and to feel rested, energized, rejuvenated, and ready to start your day.

**Create a soothing sleep environment.** So this is creating an environment that feels comfortable to you. And it's going to be different person to person. But again, there are some general rules. So you want to minimize light, if possible. Some people like a nightlight, that's fine. In general, having your lights off stimulates melatonin production, which is like a hormone that is helpful in generating sleep. You also want to minimize inconsistent noises. So you don't have to have, like, a silent sleep environment. Some people will find it soothing to like sleep with, I don't know, nature sounds or white noise or, like, classical music, whatever it may be. It's OK, that's fine. But what you want to minimize is like abrupt jarring sounds or, like, changes in sound, because this keeps your brain alert. Your brain is hardwired to be alert to inconsistent noise. This is a survival mechanism. Like when we were out in the wild, we wanted to be able to, like, notice and respond to any sign of a threat and inconsistent noise would be an indication of a threat out in the wild. So minimize inconsistent noise. I really like white noise for this, which you can find on YouTube. You just Google white noise. My favourite one on

YouTube is celestial white noise. There's also brown noise and pink noise which is basically just like different, slightly different sounds but the same idea of like masking inconsistent noise and creating like a consistent noise. Also make sure that your bed is comfortable. So if you're someone who likes a hard mattress, get yourself a hard mattress. If you're someone who likes a soft mattress, get yourself a soft mattress or get a mattress cover, get yourself some pillows. Make sure that it's not too hot, not too cold. In general, our bodies tend to sleep better when things are a little bit colder, not freezing, but a little bit colder. Some other things, we can also like increase the moisture in the air, if we're finding that our air is dry, with a humidifier. Just creating, you know, like an environment that is soothing. And that makes it more likely that, you know, we're going to fall asleep comfortably and stay asleep when we do fall asleep.

**And finally, sunlight.** So, this is another one that you can intentionally manipulate your exposure to and gain some control over your circadian rhythm. Research shows that getting exposure to sunlight in the morning is helpful. And minimizing exposure to sunlight in the afternoon and evening is also helpful. So, what this might look like in practice is going for a walk in the morning, a 30-minute walk with no sunglasses on. And then, if we're going to be outside in the afternoon, making sure we wear sunglasses.

**Blue light.** So like exposure to blue light from computers has similar impacts on our circadian rhythms and, like, on the cascade of hormones that happen and regulate the sleep process. And so you can get glasses, like if you're someone who works on a computer, all day, you can get like blue light filter glasses. I always recommend that people wear them like after 12:00 p.m., but don't wear them in the morning. So this is the thing, it's not like blue light is bad. We actually want blue light. We want exposure to sunlight in the morning because this wakes us up. This communicates to our body on a physiological level that sort of we're awake and it's time to start the day, it's time to start getting energized. And minimizing exposure to those lights, turning our lights off, then it communicates to our body, OK, it's time to sleep. So like manipulating exposure to sunlight, not by avoiding the sun entirely, but by wearing sunglasses or wearing these blue light glasses, putting a blue light filter on your screen in the afternoon can be helpful and also intentionally getting sun in the morning can also be helpful in regulating your circadian rhythms.

## Resources and next steps

So these are a collection of sleep hygiene strategies. Like I said, there are so many other ones out there, do some googling, Google sleep hygiene. Try some different things out and start building that toolkit for yourself. There's also, if this interested you, if you're sort of inspired and interested by like the biological sleep process as I am, there's this great book, "Why We Sleep," that I highly recommend. I think it's just fascinating, really, really interesting. So that's another possible next step for you. And if you're really struggling to regulate your sleep, in spite of sort of trying some sleep hygiene recommendations like the ones I've shared with you today, please go see a professional. So come and see us in counselling, talk to your doctor. This is something that is a challenge for a lot of people and you're definitely not alone in struggling with

this and you don't have to be alone in figuring it out either. So if you want to talk with us in counselling about your sleep, definitely come do that. You can email [letstalk@georgebrown.ca](mailto:letstalk@georgebrown.ca) and book an appointment to talk with a counsellor. You might also want to talk with your family doctor.

So again, I'm Natasha from Counselling and Student Well-Being at George Brown College. This workshop was developed with my colleague, Robert Malowany. And thanks for being here today. Good luck in implementing a productive sleep hygiene regimen. Bye, guys