

E-OSC INSIGHTS

Sleep for Better Military Performance

Sleep lays the foundation for the health and well-being of Military Service Members and their families. Yet for many, it's hard to get enough sleep to perform at their best. For example, trying to drive a vehicle on an empty tank of fuel isn't a good idea. But many people routinely "operate" on little or no sleep. Sleep loss impacts multiple areas of people's lives; at home, at work, or on a mission.

Sleep deprivation can compromise your ability to think, manage your emotions, handle stress and relationships, and maintain your physical conditioning and nutritional health. You might think you're functioning just fine, but other measures of performance might suggest otherwise.

Many people believe they can overcome being tired or "get used to it." But evidence suggests that for most people, getting only 6 hours of sleep can jeopardize their resilience, health, and well-being. As people become more sleep-deprived, they become less aware they're impaired. When someone says, "I'm used to being tired," they're simply used to having impaired awareness and judgment.

5 ways lack of sleep impacts performance.

Lack of sleep hurts your brain's performance. Sleep loss seriously impacts your brain function, including decreased working memory, ability to concentrate, situational and battlefield awareness, focus, and response time. Lack of sleep is equivalent to being drunk. In fact, after being awake for 18–20 hours, you'd function as if you had a blood-alcohol content of .1% (about 4 drinks for a 150-pound person). Little or no sleep decreases your hand- eye coordination, reaction time, and multitasking abilities—and how you remember important sequences. If you're tired, you may be able to learn skills and work well enough, but training while fatigued might impact your ability to do your best. Sleep loss also increases your tendency to be distracted or overwhelmed by emotions.

Lack of sleep can increase stress. Warfighters commonly cite stress as to why they experience sleep problems such as sleeping less, having nightmares, and insomnia. Sleep and stress are often connected in a vicious cycle: Stress causes sleep loss, making you feel more vulnerable to stress, which leads to even more sleep loss. Without enough rest and recovery, it's more likely that your emotional and psychological coping mechanisms that help manage stress won't be working as well as they should.

Lack of sleep can hurt your relationships. Sleep loss gets in the way of your ability to accurately interpret people's facial expressions—specifically, if they're happy, frustrated, or calm—making it harder to identify what they're feeling. It also lowers your ability to interact and communicate effectively with those around you. Therefore, sleep loss can impede your ability to understand where others are coming from (that is, to empathize and comprehend what they're expressing) and maintain healthy relationships.

Lack of sleep can impact your physical performance. Sleep is essential to physical recovery and gains in physical performance. However, sleep problems increase your risk of physical illnesses and debilitating health conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and chronic pain. Sleep loss can reduce your motivation to exercise. You also might have less coordination and poor physical performance, which can compromise your physical- readiness and increase injury risk.

Sleep impacts you're eating habits. You're more likely to crave junk food when you're operating with little sleep. Sleep deprivation can cause hormonal imbalances that regulate your hunger and appetite. It can also increase your risk of getting diabetes and gaining un- wanted weight. Weight gain can cause sleep apnea and other issues that hurt sleep.

How to get better sleep.

Sleep is vital for health, performance, and well-being—and the better the sleep, the greater its benefits. That's why proper sleep "hygiene" practices that promote optimal sleep length and quality are so important.

If you're struggling to get quality sleep, try these 10 tips from the U.S. Army Performance Triad to help build healthier sleep habits:

1. Maintain a consistent, regular routine that starts with a fixed wake-up time when you get out of bed and get exposure to light each day. Pick a time you can maintain during the week and on weekends. Then adjust your bedtime so you shoot for getting 7–8 hours of sleep.
2. Create a quiet, dark, comfortable sleeping environment. Cover windows with darkening drapes or shades (dark trash bags work too), or wear a sleep mask to block light. Minimize disturbance from environmental noises with foam earplugs or use a room fan to muffle noise. If you can, adjust the room temperature to suit you. If you can't, use extra blankets to stay warm.
3. Move the bedroom clock so you can't see it. If you tend to check the clock 2 or more times during the night, or if you worry that you're not getting enough sleep, cover or turn the clock face around so you can't see it (or remove the clock from your bedroom entirely).
4. Get out of bed if you can't sleep. Go to bed (and stay in bed) only when you feel sleepy. Don't try to force yourself to fall asleep—it will tend to make you more awake, making the problem worse. If you wake up in the middle of the night, give yourself about 20 minutes to return to sleep. If you don't return to sleep within 20 minutes, get out of bed and do some- thing relaxing. Don't return to bed until you feel sleepy.
5. Remove the smartphone, TV, computer, laptop, etc., from your bedroom. Don't eat or drink in bed. Keep discussions, especially arguments, out of the bedroom. Use the bedroom only for sleep and sex.

6. Don't go to bed hungry. A light bedtime snack (for example, milk and crackers) can be helpful, but don't eat a large meal close to bedtime. And empty your bladder before you go to bed so the urge to use the bathroom doesn't disrupt your sleep.

7. Don't drink alcohol before bed. Alcohol initially makes you feel sleepy, but it disrupts and lightens your sleep several hours later. In short, alcohol reduces the recuperative value of sleep. Nicotine—and withdrawal from nicotine in the middle of the night—also disrupts sleep. If you need help to quit drinking or using nicotine products, see your healthcare provider for options.

8. Stop caffeine at least 6 hours before bedtime. Caffeine promotes wakefulness and disrupts sleep.

9. Get your exercise in by early evening. Exercise is great—just be sure to finish at least 3 hours before bedtime so you have plenty of time to wind down.

10. Nap wisely but sparingly. Napping can be a good way to make up for poor or reduced nighttime sleep, but naps can cause problems falling asleep or staying asleep at night, especially if they're longer than 1 hour or taken late in the day (after 1500 hours). If you need to nap for safety reasons (for example, driving), try to take a short (30–60 minute) nap in the late morning or early afternoon (for example, right after lunch), just enough to take the edge off your sleepiness.

What is Insomnia Coach?

Insomnia Coach is a free, easy-to-use mobile application created for everyone, including Veterans and Service members, who are suffering from insomnia. It was developed by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in 2020. The app is based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I), an evidence-based treatment, and scientific research about how people can change their behaviors and thoughts to improve their sleep.

Learn about insomnia and sleep.

Insomnia Coach provides information to help you learn about sleep, insomnia and factors that affect your ability to fall and stay asleep.

- Learn about sleep basics—why we sleep, the stages of sleep and factors that affect sleep
- Get information about how insomnia develops, problems related to insomnia and treatment options

Follow a training plan for better sleep.

Your Training Plan will guide you to better sleep over 5 weeks (and beyond).

- Get started by completing a sleep diary and checking your insomnia symptoms
- Improve your "sleep hygiene"—learn how to set up your sleep environment, limit caffeine intake and work on other habits to improve sleep quality
- After you complete your first week of the plan, the app will help you set time in bed recommendations to help limit time you spend awake in bed

Track daily and weekly progress.

Just as sleep problems probably didn't start in 1 night, it's not realistic to expect them to change in 1 night. Seeing how your sleep changes over time will help you stick to your Training Plan.

- Review tips from the Sleep Coach to get personal feedback
- View graphs that show your sleep patterns over time
- Set reminders to visit the app each day to enter a sleep diary, wind down for sleep and more

Get your sleep back on track with Insomnia Coach.

Whether you want to quiet your mind, relax your body or work on sleep habits, Insomnia Coach has 17 tools to help. Just a few minutes a day can have a big impact on your sleep.

