

Strategic Habits for Better Sleep

It's a process when it comes to changing your behavior, which isn't always easy. And while building new habits and breaking old ones can be challenging, having a clear strategy can help you succeed in this journey. HPRC developed the Strategic Habits for Better Sleep worksheet to guide Service Members through the process of building healthy sleep habits—from staying motivated to embracing changes to making them part of a regular routine.

This worksheet contains the same tips as HPRC's [Sleep Habits Self-Check](#) worksheet and goes beyond to provide a comprehensive approach to building habits to support sleep quality and duration. The 5 steps below serve as your roadmap to better sleep.

Step 1: Identify your why

A high level of motivation can help you stay committed to building new habits and breaking old ones. And clearly identifying your reasons for setting sleep routines can boost your motivation. In other words, [finding your why](#) is the first step toward lasting, healthy sleep habits.

Take time to identify how [sleep deprivation affects health, wellness, and performance](#). Also, consider how adequate sleep can support your meaningful goals and values. Once you have a clear picture of your “why” to build sleep habits, write your thoughts in the space below.

Step 2: Learn the strategic habit plan

HPRC's [Strategic Habits Workbook](#) lists 20 tips to help you build good habits. These habit tactics fall under one of the 3 pillars of the strategic habit plan:

- **When.** This is the cue that triggers your strategic habit plan. A cue must provide a clear moment that will trigger the habit you want to build. It can be the time of day, places, people, smells, feelings, thoughts, temptations, notifications, alarms, emails, text messages, or even your phone buzzing.
- **Then.** This is the action of your habit plan. It can be a behavior, thought, emotion, or a series of thoughts and actions. In this worksheet, “then” is one of the sleep habits meant to help improve your sleep quality and duration.
- **Because.** This is the immediate reward you get from the action. The reward can be intrinsic (something you enjoy doing in itself), internal (a feeling of pride or accomplishment), or extrinsic (for example, the taste of a favorite food or the pleasure from reading a funny post online). After a habit is fully formed, the reward can no longer be present, and you'll still continue the habit.

Step 3: Check all the sleep habits you want to try

In this step, you'll explore 20 sleep habits and the science behind them. You won't work on all 20 habits at once. But as you learn more about how these tips can help improve sleep quality and duration, focus on those particular habits that can potentially be effective. You'll narrow down your choices in a later step.

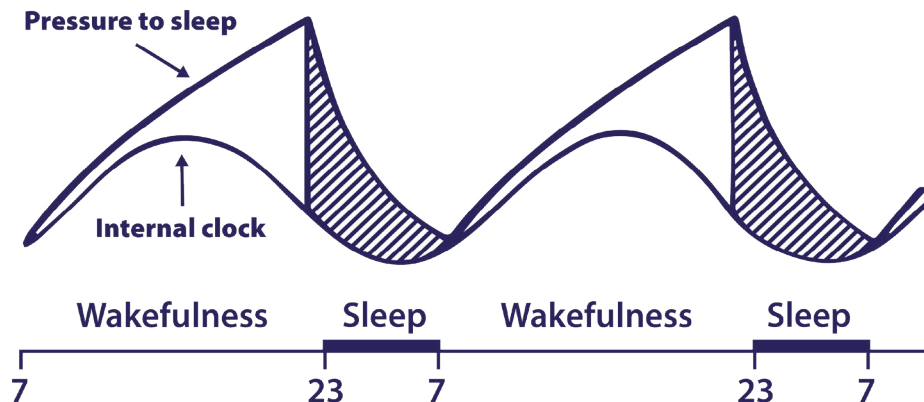
The sleep-wake cycle is complex and tightly regulated by 2 different processes: pressure to sleep and your internal clock. Pressure to sleep (or [Process S](#)) is the gradual increase in fatigue that happens throughout the day. From the moment you wake up, pressure to sleep builds as a result of chemicals building up in your brain. The longer you stay awake, the stronger your need is to sleep. During sleep, the level of sleep-inducing chemicals goes down. If you get 7–9 hours of good-quality sleep, the sleep-inducing chemicals reach their lowest point and lead to your waking up. As soon as you wake, the process restarts.

Your internal clock (or [Process C](#)) uses the light-dark cycle of the day to further regulate the sleep-wake cycle. When you

see sunlight, the timekeeper in your brain adjusts to promote wakefulness and support performance. When it gets dark, the timekeeper responds to the absence of light and makes you sleepy. Your internal clock also controls other body functions such as body temperature, strength, heart rate, and hormone levels in response to the light-dark cycle. Both processes, S and C, work together to enable good-quality sleep, and understanding them can help Service Members work with their biology to optimize their sleep.

Many of the following sleep habits focus on leveraging pressure to sleep and how to reset your body clock to support better sleep. Some include ways to calm your mind and relax your body for restful sleep. And others focus on breaking habits that can hurt your sleep. Review the information below and check those habits you want to try. In your first pass through this list, check as many habits as you want.

Sleep Habits Self-Check



Self-awareness

1. I make sleep a priority by choosing it over work, social events, or watching “just one more” TV show when appropriate.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Habit tactics

- Optimize resistance. Identify those activities that tempt you into procrastinating at bedtime and make it harder to execute them. If it's a show you're binge-watching, store the remote in a hard-to-reach place. Too much scrolling on social media? Charge your phone in another room.
- The action itself can be the reward. Focus on enjoying a longer night's sleep and its likely effect on your performance and well-being as your reward for prioritizing sleep.
- Trust the process. Trying to sleep at an earlier time than usual can be challenging at first. It can take a few days for your internal clock to adjust to a new bedtime. Keep those behavioral changes consistent, and your body clock will adapt.

2. I know how much sleep I personally need to optimize my health and performance by doing a [sleep self-study](#), and how [different lengths of sleep impact my energy and focus](#) (most adults need 7–9 hours each night).

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Habit tactics

- Optimize resistance. Make it easy to remember to fill out the sleep diary during your sleep self-study. For example, leave

your sleep diary next to your bed so it only takes a few minutes to fill out each morning.

- Build on current routines. If you commit to doing a sleep self-study, think about how you can make filling out the sleep diary a part of your routine. For example, you could commit to filling out your sleep diary while enjoying your morning coffee.
- Use the power of peer pressure for good. Consider completing the sleep self-study with a partner to help you both stay on track with monitoring your routines.

Daily Habits

3. I have a consistent wake-up time for most days of the week.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- Process C has a reciprocal relationship with your daily schedule. It influences when you naturally wake up and fall asleep, and adapts to your behavioral patterns. For example, if you take an extended vacation and shift your bedtime by 2 or 3 hours, you'll need time to readjust to your old schedule once you return home.
- Consistent wake-up times on weekdays, weekends, holidays, and vacations can enhance your ability to easily fall asleep around the same time every day.

Habit tactic

- Set up your environment for success. If you struggle with the snooze button, place your alarm clock far enough away where you need to get out of bed to turn it off.

4. I get early morning and regular exposure to sunlight (or artificial bright light when sunlight isn't possible) that helps me set my body clock and be ready for sleep at night.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- Light from the environment is your brain's strongest cue to distinguish daytime from nighttime.
- Melatonin production in your brain increases in the absence of light, promoting sleep.
- When you're exposed to sunlight, melatonin production shuts down, promoting wakefulness.
- Exposure to natural light immediately after waking up is an effective way to regulate the circadian rhythm for improved sleep.
- If you're up before the sun's out, an artificial light that provides 10,000 lux (a unit of light intensity) can provide similar benefits.

Habit tactics

- Set up your environment for success. If you're up before the sun and decide to use an artificial light, place it in a convenient location that makes it easier to use.
- Try temptation bundling. Pair viewing light with some other activity you love doing. For example, if you love coffee, enjoy your cup outside while you get some sunlight.

5. I have a regular exercise routine that helps me be physically tired at the end of the day.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- Sleep and exercise have a two-way relationship. Regular exercise improves sleep, and adequate sleep supports overall physical performance during the day.
- Exercise can decrease the time it takes to fall asleep and increase sleep quality.
- Those who exercise regularly spend more time in the deep, restorative stage of sleep.

Habit tactics

- Work with your schedule, not against it. Exercise performed at any time of the day can improve your sleep quality and duration. Find when and where you're more likely to work out and commit to it. If you decide to exercise close to bedtime, pay attention to how it affects your ability to fall asleep. Some people get too energized from their workout and have a hard time falling asleep. Learn what works for you and adjust as needed.
- Start small. Any exercise is better than no exercise. With time, you can increase the duration and intensity of your workouts and work towards a regular routine.
- Set up your environment for success. Create cues to remind you to exercise. For example, you can set alarms, leave notes, or place your running shoes where they're the first thing you see when you wake up or come home from work.

6. I avoid naps close to bedtime.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- Napping impacts the buildup of the pressure to sleep (Process S).
- Naps that are too long or scheduled too close to bedtime can make it harder to fall asleep. Service Members can benefit from taking strategic naps but should avoid them within 4 hours of bedtime.
- It's important to learn how long you should nap to meet your performance needs without impacting your night's sleep.

Habit tactics

- Repurpose bad-habit cues. If getting home from work feeling tired is the cue that triggers your late afternoon nap, look for an energizing activity to replace the nap. A 30-minute walk, for instance, can get your blood flowing and boost your energy into the evening. Working on a fun hobby also tends to be naturally rewarding and can help clear your mind from daily stress.
- Work with your schedule, not against it. If you don't get the recommended 7–9 hours of sleep every night, early afternoon naps can help you manage fatigue. If you have a break that doesn't fall within 6 hours of your bedtime, use this time to nap. Even a 10-minute nap can help you feel refreshed.

7. I avoid stimulating or energizing physical or mental activities at least 1 hour before bedtime. (It's normal to have an energy boost 1 hour before bedtime.)

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- It's hard to shift from intense physical and mental activity to sleep. If possible, change your evening schedule to allow 30–60 minutes to make the transition.
- Use this time to implement some of the activities covered in tips 15–18.

Habit tactics

- Set up your environment for success. Set a timer to remind you to get ready for bed.
- Work with your schedule, not against it. Schedule energy-boosting activities earlier in the day or to replace late afternoon or early evening naps.

8. I turn off devices at least one hour before bedtime and dim the lights.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- As highlighted under tip 4, light entering your eyes informs your brain it's daytime and shuts down melatonin production.
- Melatonin is a natural hormone released in the absence of light to help promote sleep.
- Light from screen devices is strong enough to reduce melatonin release and impact sleep.
- When you use screen devices right before bedtime, you might struggle to fall asleep despite being tired.

Habit tactic

- Optimize resistance. Most cell phones allow you to set a time after which certain apps will be blocked, and unlocking your phone will be hard. Or set your phone on Do Not Disturb 30 minutes before bedtime to mute notifications. These tactics can help increase resistance and make it harder to use your phone around bedtime.

Sleep nutrition

9. I stop consuming [caffeine](#) at least 6 hours before I go to bed.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- Five hours after you consume caffeine, half of it is still in your body.
- Experts generally recommend to stop consuming caffeine at least 6 hours before bedtime. This ensures that your body will have time to clear out more than half of it from your system.
- How caffeine is metabolized varies by individual. Some people might need to stop consuming caffeine earlier in the day than others.
- The total amount of caffeine consumed also plays a role in its impact on sleep. The average caffeine content in an 8-oz cup of coffee is 95 mg. If you consume this amount of caffeine around 1400 or 1500, you'll likely enjoy restful sleep around 2200.

Habit tactic

- Repurpose bad-habit cues. Reflect on why you consume caffeine within 6 hours of your bedtime. If it's for the taste, consider changing to a decaffeinated beverage that tastes similar. If it's for warmth, try a different hot beverage. When a cue triggers your desire to consume caffeine within 6 hours of your bedtime, choose something that won't hurt your sleep.

10. I avoid drinking alcohol before bed because it disrupts the quality of my sleep.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- Alcohol acts as a brain activity inhibitor. In other words, it sedates the brain.
- Many people drink alcohol around bedtime to fall asleep easier. In fact, once alcohol reaches the brain, it promotes mental and physical relaxation, making it easier to fall asleep. However, people who drink before bedtime often experience disruptions later in their sleep cycle and low-quality sleep overall.
- In summary, drinking alcohol might help you fall asleep faster, but you likely won't wake up feeling rested and energized.

Habit tactic

- Repurpose bad-habit cues. Similarly to caffeine, reflect on why you drink alcohol close to bedtime. If you are using it as a sleep aid, replace alcohol consumption with a habit that can support both sleep quality and duration. Check out the "Bedtime routine" section of this worksheet for some evidence-based tips to support your sleep.

11. I don't go to bed hungry. And I [avoid large meals](#) close to bedtime. I also clear my bladder and avoid drinking lots of liquids before bed.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- Eating large meals close to bedtime impacts sleep quality, and going to sleep right after a large meal impairs digestion.
- After you eat a large meal, your body devotes energy to processing and digesting the food you ate. Fully digesting a heavy meal can take hours.
- Sleep slows down digestion, contributing to discomfort, indigestion, and acid reflux. As a result, sleep quality also decreases.
- Also, avoid going to bed hungry as you might have trouble falling asleep. If needed, eat a small, light snack before bed.
- It's important to avoid drinking lots of liquids around bedtime as well. Many people have difficulty getting back to sleep after they wake up to use the bathroom.

Habit tactic

- Build on current routines. As you start to wind down and get ready for bed, pay attention to your hunger signs. You might be hungry if it's been 3–4 hours since your last meal. If so, try eating a small snack high in protein and fat and low in carbs. Some suggestions include Greek yogurt with some nuts, a small apple dipped in nut butter, or a protein shake with some popcorn.

Environment

12. I keep my bedroom quiet, dark, comfortable, and cool (65°F is optimal for some).

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- Light, noise, and temperature can impact the quality of your sleep. Try to adjust those variables to your comfort level as you're able.
- Ideally, bedrooms should be quiet, dark, and cool.
- At night, adjust the temperature to be cooler than you keep it during the day.

Habit tactic

- Set up your environment for success. Set your thermostat to automatically cool down at a specific time.

13. I only use the bed for sleep and sex. I don't watch TV, go on the computer, or do work in my bedroom close to bedtime.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- Your brain can quickly learn to associate a specific behavior with a cue in your environment.
- For example, if you consistently bring your laptop to bed to work, your brain will associate sitting in bed with being productive and doing work-related tasks. With time, it might get harder to fall asleep in that particular environment.
- Breaking unintended associations can be hard—the best thing to do is to avoid forming them in the first place.

Habit tactic

- Set up your room for success. If you must use your bedroom for other activities, try to create a designated area for those activities. For example, if you work from home and only have space for your desk in your bedroom, only do work at your desk. And avoid bringing your laptop to bed.

14. I put the bedroom clock where I can't see it to avoid checking it throughout the night.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- Feeling anxious and worried about not being able to sleep only makes falling asleep harder.
- Checking the clock and watching time pass as you try to sleep can raise stress and anxiety levels.

Habit tactic

- Repurpose bad-habit cues. If you often wake up in the middle of the night and your first reaction is to look at the time, try replacing this habit with a relaxation response activity. Learn a simple breathing exercise that you can do on your own instead of looking at the clock.

Bedtime routine

15. I have a “going to bed” ritual and consistent bedtime to signal to my body that it’s time to get ready for sleep.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- Create a repeatable 15–30 minute bedtime routine.
- The idea is to have a series of actions that culminate in sleep. With time, your brain will strengthen the association between a given routine and sleep.
- Incorporate one or several of the strategies recommended in tips 16–18 into your bedtime routine.
- You also can take a hot shower, enjoy a cup of tea, brush your teeth, set out clothes and shoes for the next day, pray, or add other habits. The activity itself doesn’t need to promote sleep, but it should be part of a series of actions that end with going to bed to sleep.

Habit tactic

- Build on current routines. You probably already have a bedtime routine, even if you aren’t aware of it. Reflect on the things you tend to do on autopilot every night before going to bed. That’s your bedtime routine. If any of those habits can potentially hurt your sleep, tweak your routine until it only includes neutral behaviors or ones that are conducive to sleep. Check tips 16–19 for habits that can improve your sleep quality and duration.

16. I have a regular [gratitude practice](#) that can boost my length and quality of sleep.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- A gratitude practice is a great habit to include in your bedtime routine. It helps you disconnect from possible bad experiences, improves sleep, and enhances feelings of well-being.

Habit tactics

- Set up your environment for success. Have a gratitude journal (like the gratitude calendar) right next to your nightstand.
- Build on current routines. Get in the habit of doing the gratitude journal as soon as you get into bed.
- Optimize resistance (20-second rule). If you’re tempted to watch TV or go on your phone, put the remote or cell phone out of reach (or out of your room altogether).
- Use the power of peer pressure for good. Create a gratitude group text with friends or family.
- Try temptation bundling. The reward of practicing gratitude is usually built into the practice, but if not experiencing it at first, lump it in with some sort of treat (that doesn’t disrupt sleep) right after your practice.

17. I have a [relaxation response activity](#)—such as [mindfulness](#), [progressive muscle relaxation](#), or [deep breathing](#)—that I practice regularly.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- Relaxation techniques are excellent ways to calm your brain and body before sleep.
- Most practices include taking slow, deep breaths with long exhales. This breathing pattern activates the rest-and-digest branch of the nervous system, resulting in a lowered heart rate and muscle relaxation.
- These body responses help you feel calmer and make it easier to fall asleep.

Habit tactics

- Build on current routines. If you're interested in trying this tip, make it a part of your current bedtime routine.
- Optimize resistance. Decide which relaxation response activity you'll do beforehand. Checking your options and choosing the resource you want to use ahead of time reduces resistance and increases your chances of actually doing the relaxation activity.
- Start small. If you're new to mindfulness or other types of meditation, choose short beginner-friendly tracks. Trying to go with the longer, more advanced ones can lead to frustration and cause you to give up.

18. Before bed, I try to clear my mind of worry by distracting myself with [calming mental games](#) that consume my attention. Or I journal my concerns and a plan of action to address the next day.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- Sometimes the solution to a problem comes to mind just as you fall asleep. Trying to hold on to that information might keep you awake.
- Have a journal by your bed to write down important thoughts and ideas. This way, you avoid forgetting the information or staying awake trying to remember it.
- Racing thoughts can keep you awake, even when the information being mentally processed isn't important.
- In these cases, you can try calming mental games to draw your attention away from the racing thoughts.
- You can't focus your attention on 2 things at the same time. As you focus on a calming mental game, racing thoughts will go away.

Habit tactic

- Optimize resistance. Click on the link in tip 18 to learn about mental games. Define your strategy and have it ready to go when you need it.

19. When I can't sleep (or fall back to sleep) after 20–30 minutes, I get out of bed and do something relaxing under low light until I feel drowsy.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- As highlighted in tip 13, try to avoid associating lying in bed with being awake.
- If you can't fall asleep within 20–30 minutes, get out of bed and do something relaxing under low light until you feel drowsy.
- As per tip 14, use your sense of time to guide your decision to get out of bed.

Habit tactic

- Trust the process. Leaving your bedroom when you're trying to fall asleep might feel counterintuitive at first. But with time, going to bed only when you're ready to fall asleep can help your brain create a strong association between sleep and your bed.

Professional Help

20. I talked with my doctor or a sleep specialist to explore [cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia \(CBT-i\)](#) and other strategies to help me get better sleep.

☐ I already do this. ☐ This will not work for me at this time. ☐ I want to try this strategy.

Supporting evidence

- If you diligently work on the tips provided in HPRC’s Sleep Habits Self-Check and still have trouble falling and staying asleep, you should seek medical help.
- When searching for sleep specialists who can effectively help you improve your sleep, prioritize professionals who can deliver CBT-i.
- CBT-i retrains your brain to improve sleep quality and duration without the help of prescription medication.
- CBT-i intervention is effective and produces long-term results.

Habit tactic

- Use the power of peer pressure. Many organizations offer group CBT-i for Service Members and Veterans. Certain aspects of CBT-i can be challenging, but completing this program with others can help you stay committed and increase your chances of success.

Step 4: Identify 1–3 habits you’d like to focus on

Working on a few habits at a time can increase your chances of success. Trying to focus on too many changes at once might leave you feeling overwhelmed and can lead to frustration. If needed, you can come back to this list and identify new habits to further improve your sleep after you master the first few habits you chose.

Review all the habits you checked and identify 1–3 sleep habits you’d like to focus on next.

Step 5: Create your strategy

Before building a strategy, review how the examples below apply the “when, then, because” framework to some sleep habits.

Sleep habit 4: I will go outside and get exposure to sunlight as soon as possible after waking up.

- When—*Every morning, right after I wake up*
- Then—*I will go outside and get exposure to sunlight.*
- Because—*I'll also enjoy my first cup of coffee as a reward while I get my morning sunlight exposure.*

Sleep habit 5: I will commit to a regular exercise routine.

- When—*Every afternoon, after work*
- Then—*I'll change as soon as I get home and go out for a 30-minute run.*
- Because—*Every 3 days, I'll reward my consistency by enjoying my favorite chocolate after my workout.*

Sleep habit 7: I will avoid stimulating or energizing physical or mental activities at least 1 hour before bedtime.

- When—*Every night at 2100*
- Then—*I'll set a reminder to stop all stimulating or energizing activities (even the entertaining ones).*
- Because—*I'll use this time to perform a relaxing activity that I enjoy.*

Sleep habit 10: I will limit my alcohol consumption around bedtime.

- When—*Whenever I have a hard time unwinding around bedtime*
- Then—*I'll skip the nightcap and do a relaxing yoga session.*
- Because—*I enjoy yoga and the relaxation that comes with it.*

Sleep habit 19: I will leave my bedroom and do something relaxing under low light until I feel drowsy.

- When—*After being in bed for 20-30 minutes and unable to fall asleep*
- Then—*I'll go to the living room and work on my coloring book under low light.*
- Because—*I find this activity relaxing and rewarding without being stimulating. Also, getting out of my bed spares me from the stress and anxiety of being unable to fall asleep.*

Now, take the 1–3 habits you chose at the end of step 4 to develop your own strategies.

Habit 1

The habit

When

Then

Because

Habit 2

The habit

When

Then

Because

Habit 3

The habit

When

Then

Because
