A sleep expert gives advice for improving your shuteye during COVID-19

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The coronavirus pandemic has changed all our lives. For many, it has also affected the quality and quantity of sleep.

Sleep expert Michael Grandner said he’s noticed four major sleep trends since the start of general anxiety about COVID-19. Grandner is an associate professor of psychiatry in the College of Medicine - Tucson and director of the Sleep and Health Research Program [1] in the Department of Psychiatry and the Behavioral Sleep Medicine Clinic [2] at Banner - University Medical Center Tucson.

He spoke with Lo Que Pasa about steps we can take to get a better night's rest amid pandemic-induced stress.

"The first trend I've noticed is that people are having a hard time detaching and disconnecting at night, especially when glued to the news," Grandner said. "Many are worried, and now on top of all that, they're really fatigued. The first few weeks of shutdowns and stay-at-home orders was like a panic, and now they're burnt out."

His advice is for people to give themselves enough time to wind down before bedtime.

"We're not machines that can just push a button and power off," he said.

Take time to relax and "switch gears." Avoid screens. Try reading or focus on relaxing each of your muscles one at a time.

"It's like making a left turn. If you don't tap on the brake to slow down, you'll miss your turn," he said. "It's not the car's fault when you end up in a ditch."

The second most common sleep issue he's noticed is that people are more often waking up and staying up in the middle of the night.

"It's normal to wake up 10-30 times a night, but it's only for a few seconds, and you don't remember it," he said. "It becomes an issue when small awakenings blossom into a half hour, hour or more."

Such awakenings often happen because anxious thoughts come crashing into our minds once we realize we're awake.

Grandner suggests getting out of bed as soon as you know you're not falling back asleep. The bed should only be for sleeping, he said, and maintaining that rule will help train your body and mind into equating the bed with sleep instead of anxiety.
"When you wake up, come up with ways to relax. Get your mind off your anxious thoughts because your attention isn't helpful at 3 a.m. anyway," he said.

Third, people's sleep schedules have become irregular.

"Your body likes routine," Grandner said. "Many people's sleep schedules are now all over the place ? waking up super late, taking naps at weird hours, not getting much physical activity. All these things are deregulating your body's natural rhythms, such as appetite, metabolism, even hormones. This causes people to feel tired or just blah even if they're not doing anything."

The trick is to build regularity into your day, he says. Try to go to bed and wake up at a similar time every day. When you wake up in the morning, get some sunlight and move around.

"Vigorous exercise isn't necessary to send a daytime signal, but light and movement tell your body that it's morning. This will help reset your wake-sleep rhythm and make falling asleep at night easier," according to Grandner.

And lastly, many people are reporting more vivid dreams than usual. While this isn't a health issue for all, it can be for some if it's disrupting sleep.

"It might be happening because people are sleeping in later, which is when we're most likely to produce the brainwaves associated with vivid dreams," Grandner said.

Vivid dreams like this occur during REM sleep, short for rapid eye movement, and that happens most often after six, seven and eight hours of sleep.

"Dreams are for processing the world around us. Right now, there's a lot of changes going on in the world that we need to work through. Whether it's someone getting sick or vulnerable or losing a job or school coming back, it's showing up in dreams because that's what they're for," Grandner said.

To learn more about Grandner's work, visit his website [3]. To learn more about sleep science, watch his lab's seminars online [4].

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