

Sleep Better:

A Research-Backed Checklist

by Ginny Santos, M.Sc

This checklist was created to help you identify sleep hygiene habits and lifestyle changes you can make — at no cost — to improve the quality of your sleep.

Sleep hygiene is just as important as dental hygiene, but it's definitely much harder to do on a regular basis.

Go for progress over perfection.

How Much Sleep Do You Need?

First of all, it helps to understand how much sleep you actually need.

Give yourself a minimum **eight-hour sleep opportunity** every night. That means eight hours in bed, not eight hours of sleep. It can take up to 20 minutes to fall asleep, and you usually wake up gradually, so an eight-hour window realistically gives you about 7 to 7.5 hours of actual sleep.

That's the minimum your brain needs to complete all of its repair and restoration cycles.

But many factors can fragment your sleep and pull you out of the deep, restorative stages. For example, if you're under chronic stress, **you may need a longer sleep opportunity -- nine or even ten hours** -- just to get the same recovery your brain would normally get in eight.

We know this is true for physical stress: athletes under high training loads are encouraged to get 9-10 hours because the body needs more deep sleep to repair itself. The research on cognitive and emotional stress hasn't caught up yet, but the biology is similar -- more wear and tear likely means more repair time needed.

Your Bedroom

- Keep your room cool (18–20°C / 65–68°F). Core body temperature needs to drop for deep sleep.
- Make it dark. Blackout curtains or a sleep mask. Even small amounts of light suppress melatonin. You shouldn't be able to count the fingers on your own hand when the lights are out.
- Reduce noise or use consistent white noise. Sudden sounds pull you out of deep sleep.
- Use your bed only for sleep. Not for work, scrolling, or watching TV. Your brain needs to associate the bed with rest.
- If you're still awake after 20 minutes, get up. Do something calm (read, stretch) in dim light, and return when you feel sleepy. Don't train your brain to associate the bed with frustration.

Your Evening Routine

- Keep a consistent bedtime, even on weekends. Your circadian rhythm depends on regularity. Having different bedtimes on different days is like changing time zones every week.
- Stop screens 60–90 minutes before bed. If you must use a screen, use a strong blue & green light filter so you aren't suppressing melatonin production. See the [companion guide](#) for step-by-step setup instructions for iPhone, Android, and desktop.
- Create a wind-down ritual (reading, journaling, stretching, a shower). It signals to your nervous system that it's time to shift.
- A warm bath or shower before bed works because the cooling-off afterward drops your core temperature, which triggers sleepiness.
- If you tend to think about worries when you close your eyes, try writing out your to-dos and unresolved problems. Make a pact with yourself to address them during the day, focusing on what you can control and letting go of what you can't.

What You Eat and Drink

- No caffeine after early afternoon. Caffeine has a half-life of 5-6 hours, so a 3 PM coffee is still 50% active at 9 PM.
- Limit alcohol, especially within 3 hours of bedtime. It might help you disconnect but it damages the quality of your sleep.
- Avoid heavy meals within 2-3 hours of bed. Digestion raises core temperature and can disrupt sleep.
- Consider magnesium-rich foods (leafy greens, nuts, seeds) or a magnesium bis-glycinate supplement. Magnesium supports muscle relaxation and nervous system regulation.

During the Day

- Get morning sunlight within the first hour of waking. It sets your circadian clock and improves melatonin timing at night.
- Exercise, but not within 3 hours of bedtime. Movement helps, but late exercise raises core temperature and cortisol.
- Limit naps to 20 minutes and before 3 PM. Longer or later naps steal from your nighttime sleep drive.

Your Time with Loved Ones

□ Spend quality time chatting or sitting with someone you feel safe with. This actually helps your nervous system relax. Our ancestors used to sit together around the fire before falling asleep. We've lost that tradition, but we have many other ways of feeling connected.

□ If you can't be physically together, a phone conversation can go a long way in helping your nervous system wind down. Hearing the voice of someone you trust signals safety to your brain.

□ Schedule social time with friends over dinner or in the evening, but not too close to bedtime. Connection is restorative, but you still need time to wind down and transition into sleep mode afterward.

Further Reading

- *Why We Sleep* by Dr. Matthew Walker. It's one of the most comprehensive books on what sleep does for your brain and body, and what happens when you don't get enough of it.
- *Reversing Alzheimer's* by Dr. Heather Sandison, which covers the connection between sleep, brain health, and long-term cognitive resilience. Even if Alzheimer's isn't on your radar, the practical recommendations are relevant to anyone who wants to protect their brain.

Your brain knows how to get good quality sleep. Sometimes it just needs the right conditions to remember how.

Meet the Author



Ginny Santos (she/her/ella) **NeuroPerformance Coach, Trainer and Facilitator**

Ginny is the founder of Neolé, where she helps dedicated professionals sustain their energy and show up fully for work and life. With over 20 years of experience in facilitation and team development, she now combines that expertise with neurofeedback brain training to help people whose nervous systems have been stuck in overdrive.

Her approach starts with understanding what's actually happening in your brain, through EEG brain mapping, and then designing a personalized plan that fits into your life. No medication. No guesswork. Just your brain learning to do what it already wants to do.

Ginny works with executives, business owners, and senior professionals across Canada, both in person (Toronto) and remotely.

[LinkedIn Profile](#)

Accreditations

- M.Sc. Creativity and Change Leadership
- Graduate Certificate in Creative Problem Solving & Change Leadership
- Certified FourSight Presenter and Master Trainer
- Certified Productive Thinking Facilitator and Trainer
- Neurofeedback Certified Practitioner
- Certified Solution Focused Coach
- Certified Nutrition Science Coach
- Certified to Coach with the Nervous System in Mind

Your Next Step

Still pushing through brain fog, poor sleep, or a nervous system that won't switch off? Let's find out what's actually going on in your brain, and what you can do about it.



[Schedule a call](#)