

Sleep Advice for Autistic Adults

If you are experiencing sleep difficulties, you are not alone. Baker & Richdale (2015) found that sleep problems are the most common co-occurring condition experienced by autistic individuals.

Difficulties with sleep can negatively affect your mental health, as well as your relationships with others and your ability to concentrate. Difficulties with sleep have also been shown to reduce quality of life.

Almost 80% of autistic adults describe having sleep problems (Halstead et al., 2021), compared to 9-50% of neurotypical people (Allik et al., 2006).

Why are you having difficulties sleeping?

Autistic people may have different circadian rhythms and increased cortisol levels (our stress hormone) to non-autistic people due to differences in how sensory information is processed.

Autistic individuals who are hyposensitive to light or sounds may not pick up on the cues (such as darkness) that prepare our body for sleep. Alternatively, autistic individuals who are hypersensitive to light or sound may have learned to block sensory cues to avoid sensory overload.

You may:

- Wake up very early and be unable to get back to sleep
- Have trouble falling asleep
- Wake frequently throughout the night
- Experience frequent nightmares

What are the effects of poor sleep?

- Some autistic adults report that poor sleep may augment some of their autistic traits and mean that they are less able to manage sensory disturbances or social situations (Morgan et al., 2020).
- Increased stress and poorer mental health outcomes, which then becomes a cycle and makes it more difficult to sleep well. This is because poor mental health may also result in people having poorer sleep.
- Difficulties at work such as it being harder to focus, poor attendance and making more mistakes.



- Difficulties with adaptive functioning. This means your ability to look after yourself and do day to day activities like cooking or cleaning.

Research suggests that sleep hygiene advice focused on neurotypical people may not be suitable for autistic people. For example, some autistic people find screen time as a way of switching off, and therefore some autistic people will not benefit from a blanket device ban before bed. Whilst every autistic individual is different, the following strategies may work:

- Having multiple versions of the same pyjamas and bedding to provide consistent sensory input.
- Removing labels from nightwear.
- Deep compression on upper legs and hands.
- Using a weighted blanket.
- Using a favourite smell consistently before bed such as essential oils, body lotion or a reed diffuser.
- Having the edges of the bed visually defined through pillows, toys, or rails.
- Using a fan or white noise machine to block out background noise.
- App-based meditation.
- Journalling in the evening, not too close to bedtime, to 'put the day to bed' and reduce the number of thoughts going through your head.
- Scheduling in down-time to your daily routine so that you can account for energy.
- Engaging with your special interest or favourite items before bed.
- Doing things which bring you joy during the day.
- Avoid lying in bed awake for a long time. Get up, do something quiet for 10 minutes and try again.

Information produced in collaboration with Sleep Action

