

Sleep in Neurodivergent Teens

Many neurodivergent teens face unique challenges when it comes to sleep. While we all understand how vital sleep is, ensuring our teens get enough rest can be a real challenge. By understanding the reasons behind their struggles, you can explore strategies that work best for your family.

Understanding the Sleep Struggles of Neurodivergent Teens

Autism

Autistic teens often experience unique sleep challenges, and these difficulties can stem from various factors:

- **Biological differences:** Autistic teens may have disrupted sleep-wake cycles due to differences in their internal clocks, making it difficult to fall asleep or stay asleep.
- **Sensory sensitivities:** Bright lights, noisy environments, or even certain fabrics can be overstimulating, preventing your teen from relaxing at bedtime.
- **Difficulty transitioning:** Shifting from a busy day to bedtime can be particularly hard for teens who struggle with change or transitions.

ADHD

Teens with ADHD often describe feeling “wired” when it’s time to sleep.

- **Delayed melatonin production:** ADHD is linked to a delayed release of melatonin, the hormone that signals the body it’s time to sleep. This can lead to a “night owl” tendency, where your teen stays up late despite feeling tired.
- **Hyperactivity and racing thoughts:** The same impulsivity and overactivity that affect behavior during the day can also make it difficult for ADHD teens to calm down at night.
- **Trouble with routine:** Teens with ADHD often have trouble sticking to regular routines, which can disrupt sleep hygiene and make it harder to wind down.

Adjusting Expectations

It is important to recognize that not all teens need the same amount of sleep.

Typically the general recommendation is 8-10 hours per night, however, your teen might need less (or more). Trust your observations on their behaviour, mood, and performance. If they are thriving on fewer hours and are not exhibiting signs of sleep deprivation, it may simply be their natural rhythm

Anxiety and Depression

Anxiety, depression, and sleep have a complicated relationship.

Common issues include:

- **Rumination:** Teens with anxiety often find themselves replaying the day's events or worrying about the future, which can keep them wide awake long after they should be asleep.
- **Physical symptoms:** Racing hearts, upset stomachs, and muscle tension can make it impossible to relax and drift off
- **Fear of missing out (FOMO):** Anxiety can make teens hyper aware of what they might be missing, keeping them alert instead of at rest.
- **Disrupted Sleep Cycles:** Depression can cause irregular sleep patterns, where teens may either sleep excessively to escape their feelings or struggle with insomnia.
- **Sensitivity to Stress:** Teens with anxiety or depression often have heightened emotional sensitivity, meaning even small stressors can interfere with their ability to relax at night.
- **Negative Thought Patterns:** Teens with depression may wrestle with feelings of hopelessness or low self-worth at night, a time when distractions are fewer, making sleep feel even more elusive.



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Gifted Teens and Low Sleep Needs

Gifted teens often show a mix of sleep challenges:

- **Overactive minds:** Their intense curiosity and creativity can keep their brains in overdrive, making it difficult to quiet their thoughts before bed.
- **Low sleep needs:** Some gifted teens may genuinely need less sleep than their peers, thriving on fewer hours of rest. However, others may require more sleep to recover from the mental stimulation of their day.
- **Sensitivity:** Gifted teens may also experience heightened emotional or sensory sensitivities, which can further complicate sleep.

Recommendations for Promoting Sleep Hygiene

Consistent Sleep Schedule

- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even on weekends.
- Predictability is especially important for teens with ADHD or autistic youth, as it can help them anticipate the transition to bedtime.



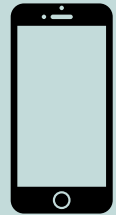
Pre - Bedtime Routine

- Introduce calming activities like light reading, listening to soothing music, or guided meditations.
- Consider journaling to help offload racing thoughts.
- Dim the lights 1–2 hours before bed to signal the body it's time to relax.



Limit Screen time

- Encourage your teen to stop using electronic devices at least one hour before bed.
- The blue light emitted from screens can interfere with melatonin production and delay sleep.
- If screens are non-negotiable, consider using blue light-blocking glasses or apps to help mitigate the impact.



Address Sensory Needs

- For autistic teens or youth with sensory needs, consider weighted blankets, white noise machines, or blackout curtains to create a sensory-friendly environment.
- Allow your teen to choose bedding and sleepwear that feel comfortable to them, as sensitivities to fabrics or textures can affect sleep quality.



Encourage Relaxation Techniques

- Progressive muscle relaxation or breathing exercises can help calm the body and mind before bed.
- Try diffusing calming scents like lavender or chamomile, but check for your teen's sensory preferences before using any scents.



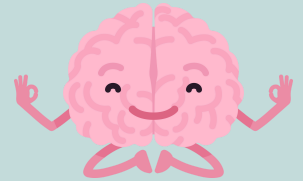
Use Bedtime Props

- Some teens benefit from visual or tactile cues, such as an “imaginary off-switch” for their brain or a favorite pillow to cuddle.
- These small rituals can signal that it’s time for rest.



Let Them Relax, Not Force Sleep

- Encourage your teen to rest quietly, even if they’re not falling asleep. Sometimes the pressure to sleep creates more stress.



Build in Processing Time

- Some teens might need some time to process the day before bed. Set aside a “talk time” where they can discuss their thoughts and feelings.



Model and Normalize Healthy Sleep

- Show your teen that you value sleep by following your own routine and getting enough rest.
- Avoid making sleep struggles a source of shame; instead, approach it as a problem to be solved together as a team.



Additional Resources

Caring for Kids : https://caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/healthy-living/teens_and_sleep

Sleep On It : <https://sleeponitcanada.ca/>

Kids Help Phone : <https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/sleep-diary>

Autism Speaks: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/tool-kit/strategies-improve-sleep-children-autism>

Harvard Division of Sleep Medicine: <https://sleep.hms.harvard.edu/education-training/public-education/sleep-and-health-education-program/sleep-health-education-41>

Options Autism: <https://www.optionsautism.co.uk/support-advice/sleep-advice-for-neurodivergent-children-and-young-people/#:~:text=Research%20suggests%20that%20around%2080,experience%20some%20difficulties%20with%20sleep.&text=There%20are%20different%20types%20of,and%20waking%20during%20the%20night>