

## Dr. Garrett's Step-by-Step Guide



Improving your nightly sleep from 5 to 8 hours is both achievable and deeply beneficial for physical and mental health. Below is a research-backed, practical, stepwise approach that incorporates evidence-supported strategies from behavioral medicine, sleep science, and mental health research.

### Assess Your Sleep Patterns

- Keep a Sleep Diary for 1-2 weeks to track bedtime, wake time, naps, caffeine, alcohol, and stressors.
- Identify patterns and obstacles (e.g., late work emails, caffeine late in the day) that limit your sleep.

### Set a Realistic Goal and Make Gradual Adjustments

- Don't try to increase sleep by 3 hours in one night. Gradually shift your schedule by 15-30 minutes earlier every 3-4 nights until you reach 8 hours in bed.
- Consistent sleep extension has been shown to improve cognitive function, mood, and cardiovascular markers in adults who are habitually short sleepers.

### Establish a Consistent Sleep Schedule

- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, including weekends.
- Regularity stabilizes your internal circadian rhythm and makes it easier to fall asleep and wake refreshed.

### Create an Ideal Sleep Environment

- Keep your bedroom cool (around 65°F or 18°C), dark, and quiet to support deep sleep.
- Use blackout curtains, white noise machines, or earplugs if needed.

### Prioritize a Pre-Sleep Routine

- Develop a calming ritual 30-60 min before bed (reading, warm shower, gentle stretching, meditation, or journaling).
- This signals to your brain that sleep is coming, helping facilitate the transition.

### Limit Stimulants and Alcohol

- Avoid caffeine at least 6 hours before bedtime.
- Minimize alcohol intake in the evenings as it disrupts REM sleep, even if it helps you fall asleep initially.

### Avoid Screens Before Bedtime

- Reduce exposure to blue light from phones, TVs, and computers at least 60 minutes before bed.
- Blue light suppresses melatonin, leading to later sleep onset and poorer sleep quality.

### Exercise Regularly- but Not Too Late

- Aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate activity most days, but avoid vigorous exercise within 2 hours of bedtime.
- Habitual exercise enhances sleep quality and duration.

### Get Out of Bed if You Can't Sleep

- If you're awake more than 20 minutes, leave the bed and do something relaxing in dim light.
- This prevents your brain from associating the bed with frustration and wakefulness.

### Seek Professional Help if Needed

- If sleep does not improve after 2-3 months of consistent changes, or if you have symptoms of insomnia or sleep apnea (loud snoring, gasping, excessive daytime sleepiness), consult a sleep specialist.

### Be Mindful of Refined Sugar Intake

- High intake of refined sugar, especially later in the day, is strongly linked to both short- and long-term sleep disruption.
- Sugar spikes can disturb the production and timing of key sleep-regulating hormones like serotonin and melatonin.

### **Example Timeline**

| <b>Week</b> | <b>Bedtime</b> | <b>Wake Time</b> | <b>Time in Bed</b> |
|-------------|----------------|------------------|--------------------|
| 1           | 12:00 AM       | 5:00 AM          | 5 hrs              |
| 2           | 11:30 PM       | 5:30 AM          | 6 hrs              |
| 3           | 11:00 PM       | 6:00 AM          | 7 hrs              |
| 4           | 10:30 PM       | 6:30 AM          | 8 hrs              |

### **Key Evidence Supporting These Steps**

- Consistent schedules and gradual changes help align social and biological clocks for better sleep quality and alertness.
- Cool, dark environments and pre-bedtime winding down routines facilitate sleep onset and depth.
- Caffeine and alcohol reduction, screen curtailment, and regular activity are associated with longer, better sleep.
- Cognitive-behavioral techniques, such as getting out of bed when unable to sleep, are effective for insomnia.

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