How to supercharge your sleep

AIM FOR EIGHT HOURS Sleep regulates temperature and immune function and is essential for problem-solving, constructing memories and preventing their decay. It is critical for your bodily and mental health that you experience every phase of sleep (stage 1 and 2 non-REM [rapid-eye-movement], slow-wave and REM) in the correct order each night, obtained through a long, deep sleep.

NAP STRATEGICALLY If you need to remember information for an interview or exam, study in the afternoon and take a nap straight after: this encourages slow-wave (deep) sleep, during which recently acquired information is replayed and strengthened in your memory. Target a mid-morning nap for REM sleep if an event has upset you, as REM resets and disentangles emotions from memories. A morning nap is also effective for problem-solving, because REM sleep makes connections between information stored in the brain.

TURN OFF THE LIGHT Humans have a 24-hour circadian clock (a sleep pattern that follows the sun and means that we sleep better during the night). Our clock is sensitive and reset by light, so keep your bedroom as dark as possible when you sleep. Make sure you are not exposed to any blue spectrum light (sunlight, televisions, computers) for the last three hours before sleep, as it can stimulate the mind. Whether you are a morning lark or night owl is in your genes.

IMPROVE YOUR MENTAL HYGIENE Your bed should be strongly associated with sleep, so that when you get in to it, your brain receives signals that it is time to switch off. Avoid in-bed activities such as watching television or playing video games. If you wake up in the night, don’t ruminate in bed; get up. Spend 15 minutes dispelling the anxiety that has woken you, for example, by writing down a list of worries, then go to the lavatory or eat half a banana, and go back to bed. Again, this will prepare the brain for sleep.

CHOOSE SLEEP-FRIENDLY FOOD Eat a medium-sized dinner, high in complex carbohydrates with a small amount of protein (complex carbs are digested slowly, which is more congenial for sleep) at least four hours before going to bed. Sleep-promoting foods include bananas, warm milk, potatoes, whole-wheat bread, honey or camomile tea. Avoid caffeine, alcohol and spicy, sugary or fatty foods.

TRICK YOUR BODY Body temperature decreases during sleep, so ensure that your bedroom is cool enough (16° to 19°C is ideal) to allow this to happen. Open a window before bedtime, for a five-minute blast of fresh air. One of the best ways to encourage sleepiness is to simulate a temperature drop with a hot bath or shower (or a hot foot bath), an hour and a half before bedtime. The dramatic temperature decline when you get out will make you feel drowsy.

"The Secret World of Sleep" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), by Penelope A Lewis, is out now.