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Getting your rest during trying times

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By Anne Craig, Communications Officer

Queen's sleep expert Judith Davidson outlines the best way to get the rest we need as we deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, more and more people are finding themselves confined to their homes for most of the day. Queen's University researcher Judith Davidson is one of Canada's leading sleep experts and says it is normal to have some degree of sleep difficulty in times of uncertainty and when our daily routines have been suddenly altered.

"People may be experiencing some trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep, associated with the uncertainty about the pandemic, processing the fast-changing global news about it, and making sense of what it all means for them, and their family and friends," Dr. Davidson, a faculty member in the Department of Psychology, says.

Dr. Davidson has worked in sleep research since 1981 and her work now focuses on insomnia and its treatment. She is currently looking at the best ways to make effective, non-drug treatment more available to people with insomnia. She says there four things people can do to help improve their sleep, without resorting to medication:

- Know that it's completely normal to have some anxiety, uneasiness, and perhaps some temporary sleep difficulty at this time.

- Keep your routines in place. If you are off work or working from home, have structure in your day. Get up at the same time each day, get dressed, and start your day. Keep your regular meal and exercise times and stick to your regular bedtime. Avoid drifting to later bedtimes and sleeping in. On the other hand, avoid going to bed earlier than usual.
- Don't try to sleep. If you're in bed and it feels like you've been awake for more than about 15 minutes, get out of bed, go to another room and do something until you are sleepy. Return to bed when you feel sleepy. Same thing applies to waking up during the night.
- Give your brain a break from the news and thinking about what's happening in the world, especially in the hour before bedtime. Read a book, watch a movie, work on a jigsaw puzzle or a crossword.

Dr. Davidson explains temporary sleep difficulty can lead to irritability and low mood, and if the issue turns into chronic insomnia (trouble falling or staying asleep that persists for at least three months and that interferes with daytime functioning), there is an increased likelihood of depression, cardiovascular problems, and Type 2 diabetes.

“It doesn't mean everyone with chronic insomnia gets these things, it means that the likelihood is somewhat higher compared to people without chronic insomnia,” she explains. “Fortunately, there is a very effective treatment for chronic insomnia called cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia. This is the first-line treatment, above medications. So, even if you develop chronic insomnia, it can be reversed.”

For more information, [visit Dr. Davidson's website](#).

[Read the original Queen's Gazette article](#)