

A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

LEARNING ABOUT SLEEP FROM AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE



Recommendations made with and for autistic young people, and for all supporters of autistic young people.

Autistic Young People Made Two Top Recommendations

1. It is important to work out sleep routines that work for you, even if that is different from the general sleep advice. Maybe your parents/carers and supportive adults can work out with you what will help you sleep.
2. It is important to consider the following daytime and bedtime “feelgood” factors that may have an impact on the quality and quantity of your sleep.

Focused interests

Many autistic young people said that they feel happier and more relaxed when they focus on their special interests (themed books, animation, playing an instrument, chatting about favourite movie characters or nature). Time spent on special interests helps them sleep. Some said they plan some time for special interests in the day and at bedtime. They prefer to have a visual agreement with parents/carers for when it is time to stop doing favourite activities, and a few reminders so that they don't get interrupted suddenly.



Physical activity

Lots of autistic young people said it helps to exercise or play sports. Choosing a time and way that feels alright was important to them (playing basketball alone, being able to change clothes or join a group as much or as little as you want).

A chance to choose

Lots of autistic young people said that being able to choose how to spend some of their time at home/school helped them sleep. This helped make a balance between things they have to do and things they like to do. They slept better after talking through problems or just sharing their favourite hobbies or achievements with people who listen to them. Being able to make choices at bedtime was also important.

Being kind to your senses

Autistic people can be sensitive to what they see, smell, taste, touch and hear. Many autistic young people said that before bedtime they get rid of things that feel bad (uncomfortable labels, unwanted noise) and choose things that feel good (creams that smell good, familiar food, soft clothes).



Things that help in the evening and at bedtime

Personalised sleep routine

Choosing things that feel, taste, smell, and sound good helped some autistic young people to feel relaxed and safe before they went to bed. For example: special smells from clothes, toys, oils, or body creams; eating certain foods; wearing comfortable clothes, putting things along the edge of the bed; blocking out noises, for example, by turning on a fan.

Relaxing before bed

Many autistic young people felt more relaxed when they had time to themselves to choose what to do. Some said they found it easier to sleep on days that they do not have extra clubs and activities. Relaxing activities included: Listening to music; watching familiar videos; using a self-help exercise; taking a bath; meditating.

Spending time with family

Spending time with people in a way that is comforting and supportive helped many young people sleep. For example: relaxing in the same room, playing a rule-based game, talking about the day, planning the next day, having familiar bedtime conversations.



Things that help during the day

Physical activity

Some autistic young people said that physical activities during the day helped them to feel happier at bedtime. Activities included: swimming; riding a bike; doing gymnastics; or having a short drumming session. They like to do this in a way that feels comfortable (e.g; riding a bike alone to have a feeling of freedom).

Things that make you feel good

Many autistic young people said they sleep better when there are things that make them feel good during the day. It helped to: plan nice activities for the future; see what interesting lessons they have the next day; talk through schoolwork so they know they can do it; have a good relationship with a teacher; prepare for activities; attend a club they have set up; talk about good things that have happened.

Focused interests

Spending time on special interests helped many autistic young people relax so that they slept better. It helped to spend some time doing activities that they enjoy; talk about their favourite topics with family; plan time for their special interests the next day.



Sleep is important

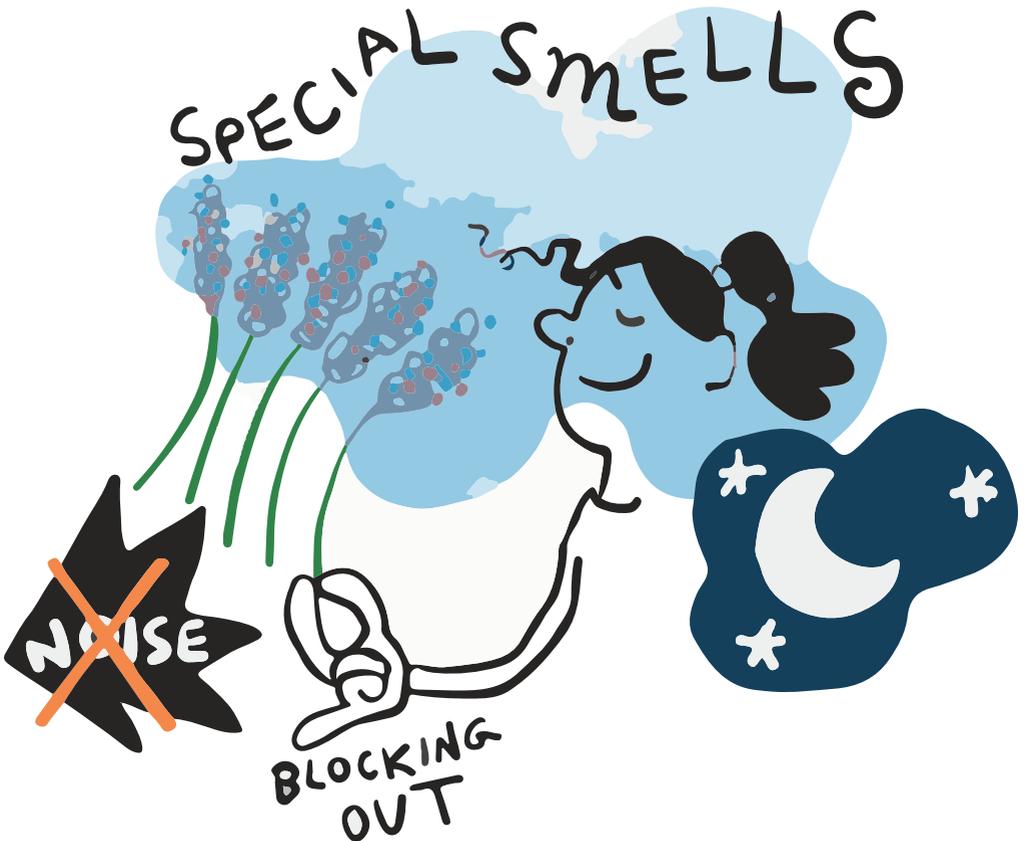
It affects how we feel and what we do when we are awake. It affects how we learn at school. Our body and our brain need sleep. No one is exactly sure what work the brain does when we're sleeping, but some scientists think that the brain sorts through and stores information, replaces chemicals, and solves problems while we snooze.

Lots of autistic people have difficulty sleeping

They might find it hard to fall asleep.

They might wake up a lot in the night.

They might sleep for less time than other people.



There is a lot of advice about how to get a 'good night's sleep' but we don't know whether it is helpful for autistic people. The first line of advice for many autistic young people who struggle to fall asleep, or to stay asleep during the night, is introducing general sleep rules, for example; not viewing screens before bed and making sure the bedroom is dark. For some autistic young people this might feel like one more pressure to comply with rules written by, and for, non-autistic people.

To find out more, a researcher worked with 54 autistic young people to understand what helped them sleep. They worked together using photo taking, talking, writing, and drawing to understand their sleep-related activities during the day and before bedtime that contributed to a good night's sleep.

Full research paper:

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.583868/full>



If you need to talk to someone, these organisations can help:

Samaritans: call 116123

Shout: text SHOUT to 85258

Childline: children & young people call 0800 1111

For mental health advice and support in Kent & Medway,

please contact NELFT Single Point of Access (SPA):

Call: 0800 011 3474

Email: nem-trkentchildrenandyoungpeoplehealthservicesanhs.net

Website: www.nelft.nhs.uk/single-point-of-access-referral

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Equality and diversity

We are committed to meet and provide equitable and accessible care and support for all our patients by working in partnership with you and communicating these needs at the earliest, so that appropriate arrangements could be made.

NELFT provides community and mental health services for people of all ages in Essex and the London boroughs of Barking & Dagenham, Havering, Redbridge and Waltham Forest, as well as Kent and Medway.

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