Healthy Sleep Guide

The most powerful recovery tool available, and the most disrupted by addiction

Guide · The Recovery Files

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The nightly or daily log and your progress charts are in the app.

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Sleep is the most powerful recovery tool available, and the most disrupted by addiction. This page explains why, gives you a practical plan, and lets you track what is actually happening night to night.

Why sleep is critical in recovery

Brain Repair

Sleep is when the glymphatic system cleans neurotoxic waste products from the brain — accelerated after substance damage.

Dopamine Reset

The dopamine system — hijacked by addiction — resets during sleep. Poor sleep prolongs cravings and relapse risk.

Emotional Regulation

Sleep deprivation activates the amygdala 60% more strongly — making anger, anxiety, and craving all worse.

Willpower Restoration

Decision-making (prefrontal cortex) is severely impaired by poor sleep — the exact brain region recovery requires.

Sleep architecture and why it matters

Stage 1

Light Sleep (1–7 min)

Transition between wakefulness and sleep. Muscles relax, heart rate slows. Easy to wake up.

Stage 2

True Sleep (10–25 min)

Body temperature drops, brain activity slows. Memory consolidation begins.

Stage 3

Deep Sleep (20–40 min)

Physical restoration. Growth hormone released. Immune system strengthens. Hardest to wake.

REM

Dream Sleep (10–60 min)

Emotional processing, memory consolidation, creativity. Disrupted heavily by alcohol/drugs.

Alcohol disrupts ALL stages: it suppresses REM sleep, fragments deep sleep, and causes rebound waking in the second half of the night - meaning even "sleeping after drinking" does not provide restorative rest.

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One Rule Above All Others

Wake at the same time every single day. Everything else in this guide is secondary to this one habit. Your circadian clock regulates every system in your body - keep it anchored and everything else follows.

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Common sleep issues in recovery

Insomnia · Days 1–30+

One of the most common PAWS symptoms. The brain's sleep architecture is disrupted from substance use suppressing natural sleep mechanisms.

Tip: Avoid napping after 2pm. Keep a strict wake time even if you slept poorly.

Vivid Dreams / Nightmares · Weeks 1–8

REM rebound — the brain compensates for REM suppression by alcohol/opioids with intense dreaming once sober.

Tip: Normalize this: your brain is healing. Write down dreams to process them.

Hypersomnia · Weeks 1–4

Sleeping excessively (12–16 hrs) is common in early recovery, especially from stimulant use. The body is recovering a massive sleep debt.

Tip: Allow extra rest but try to maintain a regular schedule after week 2.

Night Sweats · Days 1–21

The autonomic nervous system is dysregulated during withdrawal. Sweating during sleep is common and indicates healing.

Tip: Breathable cotton bedding, a cool room (65–68°F), and hydration help significantly.

Racing Thoughts at Bedtime · Ongoing

Anxiety-driven hyperactivation of the mind at night is extremely common in recovery, especially with co-occurring anxiety or depression.

Tip: A 10-minute "brain dump" journal before bed clears the mental queue.

Early Morning Waking · Months 1–3

Cortisol spikes earlier than normal during early recovery, disrupting the final sleep cycle. Often linked to anxiety.

Tip: Avoid looking at your phone. Use a body scan or breathing until you drift back.

Your sleep hygiene plan

2 Hours Before Bed

- ☐ Dim all lights — use warm/amber bulbs or lamps instead of overhead lighting
- ☐ Stop eating heavy meals (a small protein snack is okay)
- ☐ Begin winding down — no intense exercise, heated arguments, or stressful news
- ☐ Set tomorrow's intentions on paper to empty your mind

1 Hour Before Bed

- ☐ Put all screens away (phone, TV, laptop) — blue light suppresses melatonin for up to 90 minutes

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☐ Take a warm shower or bath (the subsequent body cooling triggers sleepiness)

☐ Gentle stretching or yoga (10 minutes) to release physical tension

☐ Herbal tea: chamomile, valerian root, or passionflower

Bedtime Ritual

☐ Keep your bedroom cool (65–68°F / 18–20°C)

☐ Total darkness or a sleep mask — even small light exposure disrupts melatonin

☐ White noise or nature sounds for those with racing thoughts or in noisy environments

☐ 4-7-8 breathing: inhale 4 counts, hold 7, exhale 8 — activates the parasympathetic system

☐ Read physical books — fiction is especially effective for transitioning the mind

If You Can't Sleep

☐ Do not stay in bed awake for more than 20 minutes — get up and do something calming

☐ Go to another room with dim lighting, read or journal, return when sleepy

☐ Never watch TV or scroll your phone — this rewires your brain to associate bed with wakefulness

☐ Practice progressive muscle relaxation: tense and release each muscle group

☐ Remember: one bad night does not ruin recovery. The pressure to sleep makes it harder.

Morning Anchor

☐ Wake at the SAME time every day — even on weekends. This is the #1 sleep hygiene rule.

☐ Get outside within 30 minutes of waking — natural light resets your circadian rhythm

☐ Delay caffeine 90–120 minutes after waking (adenosine clearance is still completing)

☐ Physical movement in the morning significantly improves sleep quality that night

What to avoid

☐ Critical Alcohol

Even 1–2 drinks fragment sleep, suppress REM, and cause rebound waking. Many relapse triggers occur at night.

☐ High Cannabis

Suppresses REM sleep. When stopping, severe REM rebound occurs for weeks — expect vivid dreams.

☐ Critical Benzodiazepines (non-prescribed)

Short-term sleep gain with severe disruption to sleep architecture and dependency risk.

☐ Moderate Caffeine after 2pm

Half-life of 5–7 hours means afternoon coffee is active in your system at bedtime.

☐ High Phones in the bedroom

Blue light + psychological alerting keeps the brain in wakefulness mode.

☐ High Irregular sleep schedule

Social jet lag disrupts your circadian clock more than most other habits.

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☐ Moderate Large meals before bed

Digestion raises core body temperature, which competes with the cooling needed for sleep.

☐ Moderate Napping after 3pm

Reduces sleep pressure (adenosine) built up during the day, making it harder to fall asleep.

Evidence-based sleep supplements

Always discuss supplements with your doctor or treatment provider. These are not replacements for sleep hygiene.

Melatonin

0.5–3mg30–60 min before bed

Signal hormone — low dose is more effective than high. Not habit-forming. Best for circadian rhythm issues.

Discuss with your doctor. Not for long-term nightly use.

Magnesium Glycinate

200–400mg1 hour before bed

Relaxes muscles and nervous system. Deficiency is extremely common and worsens insomnia and anxiety.

Very well tolerated. One of the most evidence-backed supplements for sleep.

L-Theanine

100–200mg30 min before bed

Amino acid found in green tea. Promotes calm alertness and reduces anxiety without sedation.

Non-habit-forming. Can be combined with magnesium.

Valerian Root

300–600mg1 hour before bed

Herbal extract that increases GABA. Research is mixed but many find it helpful for sleep onset.

Check interactions with any medications. Not for long-term use without breaks.

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