# How to sleep train teenagers

## Amid tight schedule and a mental health crisis, a school in ohio, in the United States, is teaching students how to get a good night's rest.

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THE topic of a new course at Mansfield Senior High School is one that teenagers across the country are having trouble with: How to get to sleep.

One ninth grader in the class says his method is to scroll through Tiktok until he nods off. Another teen says she often falls asleep while on a late-night group chat with friends. Not everyone takes part in class discussions on a Friday; some students are slumped over their desks napping.

"It might sound odd to say that kids in high school have to learn the skills to sleep," says Mansfield health teacher Tony Davis, who has incorporated a newly released sleep curriculum into a state-required high school health class. "But you'd be shocked how many just don't know how to sleep."

Adolescents burning the midnight oil is nothing new; teens are biologically programmed to stay up later as their circadian rhythms shift with puberty.

But studies show teenagers are more sleep deprived than ever, and experts believe it could be playing a role in the youth mental health crisis and other problems plaguing schools, including behavioural and attendance issues.

"Walk into any high school in America and you will see kids asleep. Whether it's on a desk, outside on the ground or on a bench, or on a couch the school has allotted for naps – because they are exhausted," says Denise Pope, a senior lecturer at Stanford Graduate School of Education. Pope has surveyed high school students for more than a decade and leads parent sessions for schools around California on the importance of teen sleep.

"Sleep is directly connected with mental health. There is not going to be anyone who argues with that."

Adolescents need between eight and 10 hours of sleep each night for their developing brains and bodies. But nearly 80% of teens get less than that, according to the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which has tracked a steady decline in teen sleep since 2007. Today, most teens average six hours of sleep.

Research increasingly shows how tightly sleep is linked to mood, mental health and selfharm. Depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts and behaviour go up as sleep goes down. Multiple studies also show links between insufficient sleep and sports injuries and athletic performance, teen driving accidents, and risky sexual behaviour and substance use, due in part to impaired judgement when the brain is sleepy.

‘Sleep intervention’

For years, sleep experts have sounded an alarm about an adolescent sleep crisis and as a result, some school districts have shifted to later start times.

California and Florida have passed laws that require high schools to start no earlier than 8.30am. But simply telling a teenager to get to bed earlier doesn’t always work, as any parent can attest: They need to be convinced.

That’s why Mansfield City Schools is staging what it calls “a sleep intervention”. The district’s high school is piloting the new curriculum, “Sleep to be a better you,” hoping to improve academic success and reduce chronic absences, when a student misses more than 10% of the school year.

The rate of students missing that much class has decreased from 44% in 2021 but is still high at 32%, says Kari Cawrse, the district’s attendance coordinator.

Surveys of parents and students highlighted widespread problems with sleep, and an intractable cycle of kids going to bed late, oversleeping, missing the school bus and staying home.

The students in Davis’ classroom shared insights into why it’s hard to get a good night’s sleep. An in-class survey of the 90 students across Davis’ five classes found over 60% use their phone as an alarm clock.

Over 50% go to sleep while looking at their phones. Experts have urged parents for years to get phones out of the bedroom at night, but national surveys show most teens keep their mobile phones within reach – and many fall asleep holding their devices.

During the six-part course, students are asked to keep daily sleep logs for six weeks and rate their mood and energy levels.

Freshman Nathan Baker assumed he knew how to sleep, but realises he had it all wrong.

Bedtime meant settling into bed with his phone, watching videos on Youtube or Snapchat Spotlight and often staying up past midnight.

On a good night, he got five hours of sleep. He’d feel so drained by midday that he’d get home and sleep for hours, not realising it was disrupting his nighttime sleep.

“Bad habits definitely start around middle school, with all the stress and drama,” Baker says. He has taken the tips he learned in sleep class and been amazed at the results. He now has a sleep routine that starts

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Denise Pope

around 7pm or 8pm: He puts away his phone for the night and avoids evening snacks, which can disrupt the body’s circadian rhythm.

He tries for a regular bedtime of 10pm, making sure to close his curtains and turn off the TV.

He likes listening to music to fall asleep but has switched from his previous playlist of rousing hip hop to calmer R&B or jazz, on a stereo instead of his phone.

“I feel a lot better. I’m coming to school with a smile on my face,” says Baker, who is now averaging seven hours’ sleep each night. “Life is so much more simple.”

There are scientific reasons for that. Studies with MRI scans show the brain is under stress when sleep-deprived and functions differently.

There is less activity in the prefrontal cortex, which regulates emotions, decision making, focus and impulse control and more activity in the emotional centre of the brain, the amygdala, which processes fear, anger and anxiety.

Parents and teens themselves often aren’t aware of the signs of sleep deprivation, and attribute it to typical teen behaviour: Being irritable, grumpy, emotionally fragile, unmotivated, impulsive or generally negative.

Think of toddlers who throw temper tantrums when they miss their naps.

“Teenagers have meltdowns, too, because they’re tired. But they do it in more age-appropriate ways,” says Kyla Wahlstrom, an adolescent sleep expert at the University of Minnesota, who has studied the benefits of delayed school start times on teen sleep for decades. Wahlstrom developed the free sleep curriculum being used by Mansfield and several Minnesota schools.

Ignoring the conversation

Social media has been blamed for fuelling the teen mental health crisis, but many experts say the national conversation has ignored the critical role of sleep.

“The evidence linking sleep and mental health is a lot tighter, more causal, than the evidence for social media and mental health,” says Andrew Fuligni, a professor of psychiatry at the University of California, Los Angeles, and co-director at UCLA’S Center for the Developing Adolescent.

Nearly 70% of Davis’ Mansfield students said they regularly feel sleepy or exhausted during the school day. But technology is hardly the only reason. Today’s students are overscheduled, overworked and stressed out, especially as they get closer to senior year and college applications.

Chase Cole, a senior at Mansfield who is taking three advanced placement and honours classes, is striving for an athletic scholarship to play soccer in college.

He plays on three different soccer leagues and typically has practice until 7pm, when he gets home and needs a nap. Cole wakes up for dinner, then dives into homework for at least three hours. He allows for five-minute phone breaks between assignments and winds down before bed with video games or TV until about 1am.

“I definitely need to get more sleep at night,” says Cole, 17. “But it’s hard with all my honours classes and college stuff going on. It’s exhausting.”

There aren’t enough hours in the day to sleep, says sophomore Amelia Raphael, 15. A selfdescribed overachiever, Raphael is taking physics, honours chemistry, algebra and trigonometry and is enrolled in online college classes. Her goal is to finish her associate degree by the time she graduates high school.

“I don’t want to have to pay for college. It’s a lot of money,” says Raphael, who plays three sports and is in student council and other clubs.

She knows she’s overscheduled. “But if you don’t do that, you’re kind of setting yourself up for failure. There is a lot of pressure on doing everything,” said Raphael, who gets to bed between midnight and 2am. “I am giving up sleep for that.”