Let's Talk About Sleep

A partnership project with Make it Happen, One Wirral and Collective Encounters.

Background

The project grew out of an awareness that people who are working in the voluntary and community sector are tired and stressed, the demands of their work have grown and this is having an impact on their quality of sleep.

We recognise that sleep is a highly emotive subject. People tend not to talk about it especially in work yet sleep or a lack of it, has a huge impact on people's lives,

Research highlighted that people who struggle with sleep are given a standard 'Sleep Hygiene' hand out, they are asked to keep a sleep diary that looks a certain way and asks stock questions. These resources are not fit for purpose as one size doesn't fit all when it comes to sleep solutions and many people feel that they are failing at sleep, which increases their sleep anxiety.

What we did and why

Abi Horsfield from Collective Encounters facilitated a series of creative workshops with people who work with people on the Wirral.

She used 30 different creative exercises to get people thinking and talking about how they feel about sleep, how sleep impacts on their lives, sleep strategies and barriers to sleep. The groups selected the exercises that they felt resonated most and they are the ones which we have included in this playbook.

Why use creativity

Creativity transforms how we think about questions, it breaks cognitive fixedness and repetitive mental loops and encourages divergent thinking generating a wider range of possibilities. It can help reframe questions and build emotional insight.

What is in this playbook

First there is some information about sleep, that looks at why it is important, why it can be tricky, the impact of a lack of sleep, sleep cycles and stages.

Then it offers ten creative exercises and games, which can be completed alone, in pairs or in groups to get people talking about sleep. Enjoy x

For more information or to feedback please contact abi@collective-encounters.org.uk

Why sleep is important

Fundamentally sleep helps your body and brain function at their highest levels, it supports everything from your immune system to your emotional stability. Here are some examples of how sleep supports your day to day.

- Sleep enhances Memory & Learning: During sleep, your brain organises information, it solidifies learning and transforms short-term memories into long-term ones.
- Sleep sharpens Focus & Productivity: Quality sleep ensures peak alertness, quicker reaction times, and higher cognitive performance, in short, it helps you make better decisions and avoid mistakes.
- Sleep supports a stronger Immune System: During sleep your body produces infection-fighting proteins and antibodies, which help you fend off viruses and enables you to recover from illness much faster
- Sleep improves heart health: Sleep lowers your blood pressure, giving your cardiovascular system a much-needed break, thus reducing the long-term risk of heart disease and stroke.
- Sleep helps you manage your weight: Research shows that adequate rest regulates the hormones that control appetite (leptin and ghrelin) and can help reduce 'junk-food' cravings.
- Sleep can help with moods & Mental Health: Sufficient sleep helps regulate powerful emotions. It is said to lower stress levels and decrease the risk of developing anxiety and depression.
- Sleep can help you to physically repair: During sleep your body releases hormones that repair muscle tissue, help balance inflammation, and promote cell growth.

Why is sleep tricky?

People talked a lot in the workshops about feeling that they failed at sleep, this was loaded with self-criticism. We recognise that sleep is not easy for everyone.

One explanation as to why sleep is tricky is that people are experiencing a biological tug-of-war. People's brain's sleep signals (like adenosine and melatonin) are battling their awake signals (like adrenaline and cortisol). If people are stressed, in unfamiliar environments or overstimulated their brain gets trapped in "stay awake" mode, making sleep elusive.

Many sleep scientists cite these things as contributing factors to disrupted sleep:

- Stress and anxiety loops, which are worries about daily life that throw off sleep, meaning you stay awake more and get into a frustrating cycle;
- Lack of naturally produced melatonin, often caused by shift work, smart phones or inconsistent bedtimes.
- The "First Night Effect": Being in unfamiliar places can put your brain on high alert meaning you stay partially awake to monitor the new surroundings.
- Stimulants: caffeine, a heavy meal too close to bedtime and alcohol

For some, waking up can be tricky too. Coming out of deep sleep can cause "sleep inertia"—that disorienting, groggy feeling—which makes pulling yourself out of bed difficult

Neurodivergent people may face a different set of challenges.
Neurodivergent sleep challenges—affect up to 80% of autistic and 50% of ADHD individuals—These are primarily driven by biological differences, delayed circadian rhythms, and hyper-reactive sensory processing.
Key Causes

- Melatonin Dysregulation: Many neurodivergent individuals naturally produce melatonin later in the evening or at lower levels, causing a "delayed sleep phase".
- Sensory Overload: Heightened sensitivity to light, temperature, textures (bedding), and sounds (faint hums or clock ticks) can prevent the brain from settling.
- Revenge Bedtime Procrastination: Common in ADHD, where the brain seeks stimulation late at night to make up for a lack of daytime autonomy.
- Racing Thoughts (Mind Wandering): Difficulty turning off a hyperactive mind makes winding down feel impossible

The impact of not sleeping.
Lack of sleep—or persistent sleep deficiency—impairs people's physical and mental health. Short-term effects include extreme fatigue, weakened immunity, and cognitive issues like poor memory, slowed reaction times, and brain fog. Over time, it increases the risk of serious conditions like obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and depression.

What are sleep cycles?
A sleep cycle is the progression through different stages of brain activity and physical relaxation that repeats about every 90 to 120 minutes.
Most people go through four to six of these cycles during a full night of sleep. Each cycle moves through stages of non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep and rapid eye movement (REM) sleep.

Sleep Stages.

1. NREM Stage 1 (N1): Light Sleep

Duration: 1 to 7 minutes (about 5% of your total sleep)

What happens: This is the phase between being awake and falling asleep. Your breathing and heart rate slow down, muscle twitches are common and you can be easily woken up.

2. NREM Stage 2 (N2): Deeper phase of light sleep

Duration: 10 to 25 minutes per cycle (makes up about 45-50% of your sleep)

What happens: Your body begins to relax as your heart rate and breathing stabilise, and body temperature drops and you start to shut out external noise. Eye movement stops and your brain produces sudden bursts of activity called sleep spindles, which help your brain organise, process, and consolidate memories and facts learned during the day.

3. NREM Stage 3 (N3): Deep Sleep

Duration: 20 to 40 minutes per cycle. Most deep sleep happens in the first third of the night.

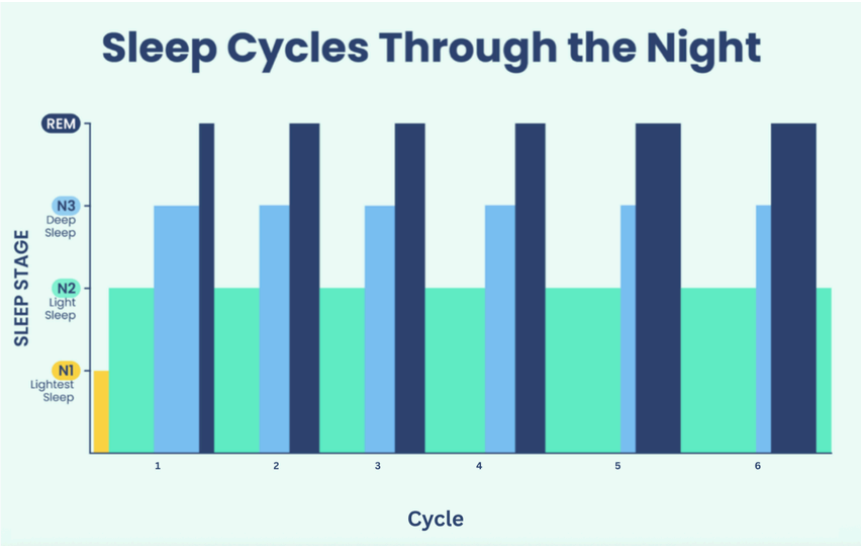
What happens: This is the most restorative stage. It is critical for physical recovery, tissue repair, muscle and bone growth, and strengthening the immune system. You become very difficult to wake up during this phase.

4. REM Sleep: Dreaming

Duration: Starts at about 10 minutes and grows up to 60 minutes in later cycles (about 25% of total sleep)

What happens: Your brain lights up with activity similar to waking levels, and your eyes dart rapidly beneath your closed lids. The body enters temporary muscle paralysis (atonia) to prevent you from acting out your dreams. This stage is essential for memory consolidation, learning, and emotional processing.

Shift over the night: Deep sleep (N3) dominates the first half of the night, while REM sleep periods get progressively longer as morning approaches see the graph below.



Ten-line poem - What Keeps You Up At Night.

This can be used in a one-to-one session or with a group.

The aim - To get people talking about sleep and reflecting on what keeps them awake at night, so they can deepen their self-awareness and understanding.

Why ten-line poems? - Ten-line poems get people to think about and express how they feel about a topic. Poetry widens the brain's focus and stops the brains rushing for quick literal answers. Using a ten-line structure gives people boundaries which makes it manageable.

Top tip - When doing any poetry exercise, it is good to explain that poems do not need to rhyme but they can if people want. They also do not need to be written in full sentences, and they can be a list of thoughts or a random ideas.

Instructions - Give everyone a piece of paper, ask them to put the numbers 1 to 10 down the left-hand side of the page. In this case, share the poem's title as a prompt.

What keeps you awake at night? – explain that it can be a literal poem describing the actual things that keep you awake or it can be more metaphorical. I like to give the first line in this case No sleep tonight; This is to set the tone and help people get started.

It someone says that they are good sleepers, ask them to think about a time when they haven't slept so well or imagine what it's like not to be able to sleep.

Example poem

No sleep tonight
Mind racing, thoughts whirring
Can't switch off
Can't get comfortable
Tossing, turning
Counting the seconds, counting sheep
Knowing I'm tired, I need to sleep, piling pressure
The clock ticks loud, breath in two three hold two three –
Eyes shut, impatient for tomorrow

Once people have created their poem, ask them to read them out loud without explanation or apology. Then identify common themes.

Some questions you explore: -

- How did you feel writing the poem?
- Are these thoughts you have written down before?
- Did you gain any insights or learnings from what you wrote?
- Did anything you write surprise you?
- Are you someone who often struggles with sleep? If so, what helps you in these moments.
- What can we do as a team to support you when you are struggling to get enough sleep?

99 words about What Sleep Means to You

***This can be used in a one-to-one session or with a group*.**

The aim – To get people thinking about how they think and feel about sleep.
Why 99 words? - It is a really simple exercise that focuses people's thoughts and makes writing a game. A time constraint allows the brain to bypass the internal editor.
Top tip - The 99 words is a guide. I often facilitate it as up to 99 words, making it ok for people to write less.
Instructions – Give people a piece of paper and a pen and ask people to write 99 words on what sleep means to them. Be really clear they are not allowed more than 99 words. Give them a five-minute time limit, this encourages a sense of urgency and pushes people to get started.

Example 99 words
The welcoming hello after a lovely day that turns into a sinister laugh.
You thought you'd get some rest, but you get up feeling worse.
On the occasion she welcomes you with a warm embrace,
The alarm is a horrible screech.
She's someone I want a better relationship with
But the couple's counselling doesn't seem to work.

Once people have had five minutes as them to stop and share their words. The questions you ask will depend on what has been written. From the example writing I asked about the couple's counselling and what this person had already tried to help with their sleep. We also talked about bedtime routines and if there was a way that they could do to alleviate anxiety before bed. We then went on to have a conversation about the impact of a lack of sleep on life and work.

Acrostic poem

This can be used in a one-to-one session or with a group.

The aim – To start the process of thinking about sleep.
Why Acrostic poems? - Acrostic poems are a playful poetry form, where the first letter of each line spells out a word or phrase.
Top tip – This can be created through a chat. Often, I will offer the topic "Let's talk about sleep, first words that come to mind when I say sleep?" then as soon as the person lands on a word beginning with an S the poem starts and together, then work on what the other words or phrases should be.
Instructions – On a piece of paper write the word sleep going down the page like this:

S
L
E
E
P

Start a chatting or brainstorming all the words that come to mind when you hear the word sleep. Decide on a word or sentence that starts with the letter S, then talk about what should be put by the letter L, the E, then E the P. The important thing is not the poem it is the conversation and decision making. This simple exercises gets people sharing a huge amount of information. Once the poem is created, read it out loud and edit it if needed.

Example Acrostic Poem:
S – Silence that is deafening, as I lay awake worried.
L – Listening to the minutes and hours tick by - no sleep
E – Eventually, I drift off into fitful sleep – big dreams
E – Early morning Alarm, screams me awake
P – preparation for a difficult day - overtired

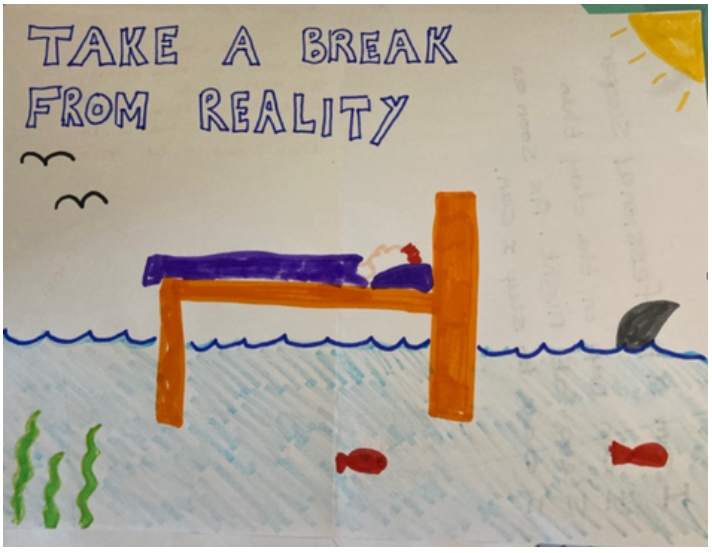
Through the poem you can get a real sense of how someone is feeling and ask questions accordingly. From this example you might ask what support the person might need when they have had a difficult night.

‘Why Does Sleep Matter?’ Posters

This can be used in a one-to-one session or with a group.

The aim – To get people to think about why sleep is important and what it does for them.
Why a poster? – Drawing gets people to use both sides of the brain at once and slows down the thinking process. Posters are about strong and clear messages, so creating a poster enables people to choses a learning that they feel is important to pass on.
Top Tip – Focus on the clear messaging. Many people are scared to draw as that have been told that they are not very good at it, so get people to think about the words and how to depict them - it takes away the pressure.
Instructions – If you are in a group, brainstorm why sleep matters. This is a process where you write “Why Does Sleep Matter?” on a page and you ask people respond and you write their answers on the paper. If you are working one to one, then do the same thing probing them to think of several answers.
Then ask people to choose one answer and think of how they might word it on a poster, thus creating a slogan. Once they have their slogan ask them to create the poster.

Example poster:



Once their poster is finished as them to share it and talk about the rationale - why they felt draw to the idea, what the drawing symbolises etc. This leads nicely onto asking people about how they sleep, if they have any concerns about sleep, if there are any material or physical factors that are stopping them from sleeping, and how a lack of sleep impacts on their day.

Drawing your perfect bedroom/sleep space

This can be used in a one-to-one session or with a group.

The aim – To get people thinking about their best environment to sleep in. This is the beginnings of looking at the concept of "one size doesn't fit all", so it is about personal needs.
Why drawing your perfect bedroom/sleep space? – This is a visualisation exercise and it uses the motor cortex, so it gets people noticing in a different way and helps people pick up of the subtleties of a picture. The drawing part is to communicate to someone else.
Top Tip – As you are asking people to imagine their perfect bedroom/sleep space, get them to think about why too.
Instructions – Make sure people have pens/pencils/crayons and paper. Before they put pen to paper ask them to imagine their perfect bedroom/sleep space, the place where they would have the most restful sleep. Remind them that this is their ideal, not what they necessarily have. Get them to think about the light, do they need total black out, do they need a sleep mask, do they need the light on etc. Do they like noise to sleep to, do they listen to the radio, a podcast, white noise or do they need silence? Do they have a table by their bed, what do they need to have on it? A book, a glass of water or a clock, for example? What kind of mattress do they need - soft, firm, medium? Do they like to be tucked in or have their feet out of the bed? What do the pillows feel like? Is the door open or closed?

When they have imagined it ask them to draw it to the best of their ability.
Once they have finished get them to share. If you are in a group, the sharing could be in pairs. If you are working one to one get them to talk about their picture.

Ask people to compare their reality to their perfect sleep space/bedroom. Then get them to identify up to three changes or things that would make their sleep environment better and explore what is preventing them from making this happen.

'What Is Your Sleep Routine?' Storyboard

This can be used in a one-to-one session or with a group.

The Aim – To get people to think about their personal sleep routine.
Why What is your sleep routine storyboard? – Using a storyboard helps people to think about sequences. It also gives a base line so that people can think about how they can make changes if they are necessary, because they give an anchor to base the change on.
Top Tip - Even though Storyboards are historically drawn this exercise is about building a picture which can be written or drawn.
I**nstructions –** Give people pens and paper. Ask them to fold the paper in half down the middle of the longest side, then fold into three sections so the paper has six sections. Ask them to number the sections 1, 2, 3, 4 ,5, & 6. It is best to start with section 6, which is in bed ready for sleep, then get them to think of the five steps to get there. Give each section a headline like 'Time For Bed,' 'Get Off The Sofa,' or 'Turn The TV Off', 'Head To The Bathroom,' 'Shower,' or "Go To The Toilet.' Once the headlines have been given to each section, get people to write or draw the detail. You can ask people if they do this routine every day, is there set times that go with each stage.

When people have finished get them to share their routines. These can be explored using a series of questions

- It your routine working for you?
- Is there anything you would like to change about this routine?
- Were you honest in your story board, did you leave anything out?
- How do you feel when this routine is disrupted for any reason?
- Is this a learnt routine from childhood or is it something you have decided on or fallen into?
- What one thing could be added to make sleep better/easier for you?

If people want to change or add anything on their story board as a result of the discussion that is great. If someone wants to make significant changes they could create the routine that they would like as a comparison and look at steps that they could take to make changes.

Create questions you can ask at work about sleep.

This can be used in a one-to-one session or with a group.

The Aim – To create a series of safe questions that can be asked and explored in a workplace about sleep.

Why Create questions you can ask at work about sleep? – Sleep is an emotive subject; many people struggle with sleep or feel that they fail at sleep. People tend to avoid talking about lack of sleep as a reason that they are not functioning as well on certain days, research suggests that this stems from a culture of workplace stigma and a fear of negative professional consequences.

Top Tip – Talking about sleep is a cultural change in workplaces, it will take time. take it one step at a time.

Instructions – You will need pens and sticky notes or postcards. If you are working with a group, ask people to think of a question that they would feel comfortable answering about sleep. Get them to think about the exact wording and ask them to write it down anonymously. Collect all the questions in, shuffle them. You are going to read them out one by one, when you do you will ask people who think that it is a suitable question that they feel safe answering to stand up, the people who do not like the question of feel it is too intrusive you ask to stay seated. This will give you a chance to see if it is question you can adopt in the workplace. You might feel some need rewriting or clarity and some need to be put to one side. Some questions might need talking about too. It is important to get these right. If you are working one-to-one ask the person to think of two or three sleep questions, they feel comfortable answering and they can be adopted for this person.

How you might use the questions - There are many ways you can use these questions, they can become part of a daily greeting “Good Morning, how did you sleep?”. You can create a sleep check-in where you post either physically or electronically a sleep question for the week and encourage people to ask it of each other. A question about sleep can be asked in a team meeting. Once the culture begins to change people will start to talk about sleep with each other and the taboo will be broken.

Let's Talk About Sleep Bingo

This excercise can be done in a group setting.

The aim - To break the ice and get people talking about sleep in a fun, casual and accessible way. The game encourages people to share their experiences and stories, helping to open up conversations about sleep without making it feel too serious or personal.

Why sleep bingo? -Sleep is something we all experience, but everyone's relationship with sleep is different. Using bingo as a starting point makes it easier to introduce different topics, spark curiosity and encourage people to share their experiences in a relaxed, informal setting. Hearing other people's stories can help people recognise shared experiences, discover different perspectives and feel more comfortable talking about sleep.

Top Tips - Laminate the bingo cards so they can be wiped clean and reused. Alternatively, print fresh copies for each session. The bingo cards come with a grid sheet containing all the phrases. Print two copies: use one to keep track of the phrases you have called out, and cut up the other to draw the phrases from a hat or container. Consider offering a small prize, such as a chocolate bar, fidget toy or rosette, to encourage engagement. Keep the atmosphere relaxed and welcoming. Make it clear that people are welcome to share their stories, but nobody has to contribute if they would rather listen.

Instructions - You will need bingo cards, which can be downloaded from our website. Each person is given a bingo card and felt tip pen; you say you're playing for a line that is either a horizontal line or a vertical line but not a diagonal line. You pick phrases out of the hat, if people match the phrase on their bingo card, they cross it out. The game stops when someone shouts line.

The difference about this bingo is that as you pull the phrase out of the hat you ask people if anyone has experience or a story about the issue, this is to stimulate conversations about sleep.

Let's Talk About Sleep - What's Your Story Cards

This can be used in a one-to-one session or with a group.

The aim - To prompt people to share their experiences of sleep in a relaxed and easyway. The cards provide gentle prompts to help people tell their own stories, reflect on their experiences and connect with others.

Why What's Your Story Cards? - What's your story as simple as it sounds, it is asking people to tell a story about themselves. We have found that if you just asked questions, people are reluctant to answer. However, if you make questions into a game, people want to play. Working with community members we developed a series of 48 cards that explore aspects of sleep.

Top Tips - Keep the atmosphere informal. Encourage people to share as much or as little as they feel comfortable with, and make it clear that passing is always an option.

Allow time for people to listen and respond to each other's stories. The aim is to create conversation, not to find the right answer.

Adapt the activity to suit the group. In smaller groups of five people or fewer, inviting everyone to take a turn can help ensure everyone has an opportunity to contribute.

Instructions - Choose one of the following ways to introduce the cards, which can be downloaded on our website:

1. Pick a card: Place the cards face down on a table and invite someone to choose a card and answer the question.
2. Fan the cards: Fan the cards out in your hand, like a magician, and invite someone to pick one.
3. Say stop: Flick through the cards and ask the participant to say "stop". Read out the question on the card where you stopped.
4. Play with dice: If you don't have access to a printer or physical cards, organise the questions into six grids, each containing six questions. Roll a dice to select a grid, then roll again to choose a question within that grid.

Invite the person who chose the card to tell their story in response to the question. Once they have finished, open up the conversation to the rest of the group by asking whether anyone else would like to share their own experience.

Remember: The purpose isn't to put people on the spot or expect everyone to share personal information. The cards are a starting point for conversation, helping people explore sleep through their own experiences and learn from one another in a welcoming, supportive environment.

Sleep Diaries.

This can be completed individually and can be discussed in pairs or groups

The aim - To help people develop a better understanding of their sleep habits, routines and behaviours. Sleep diaries offer a simple way to notice patterns and reflect on the different factors that might affect how well someone sleeps.

Why sleep diaries? - When someone is struggling with sleep, it can be difficult to understand what might be affecting it. Keeping a sleep diary can help people notice connections between their daily activities, feelings, food and drink, and their sleep. It can also help them reflect on whether they have difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep or feeling rested. Everyone's experience of sleep is different, so a diary provides an opportunity to explore what matters to each individual, rather than assuming the same approach will work for everyone.

Top Tips - Encourage people to choose questions that feel useful to them, and change or remove questions that aren't working. Make it clear that there are no right or wrong answers. The purpose is to notice patterns, not to judge someone's sleep habits or routines. Sleep diaries work for some people and can be a useful tool, but they won't suit everyone. If keeping a diary becomes stressful or makes someone more anxious about sleep, they can stop or try a different approach.

Instructions - Download the templates from our website. Introduce the idea of a sleep diary and explain that it is a way to explore sleep habits and the things that might influence them.

Share the sleep diary template and example questions. Explain that people can record information about their day, feelings, food and drink, routines, or anything else they think might affect their sleep. They can also note whether they had difficulty falling asleep, woke during the night or struggled to get back to sleep. Invite participants to identify the questions that feel most relevant to them. They can adapt the template, add their own questions or leave out anything that doesn't feel useful. Participants can then take the diary away and complete it over a period that feels manageable, using it to reflect on their sleep over time. Sharing personal diary entries should always be optional. Once participants have had time to use their diaries, they can reflect on anything they have noticed, including patterns, changes or questions they would like to explore further.