

Neurodivergent Teens and Sleep



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Holistic Sleep Lens



Sleep biology

Homeostatic drive and circadian system that is adjusting in adolescence. Governed by internal and external cues and stimuli



Nervous System Awareness

Fight (agitation, resistance, anger)
Flight (Hiding, avoidance, distraction)
Freeze (Shutdown, blank responses)
Fawn (people-pleasing, perfectionism)



Underlying needs

Attachment, Autonomy,
Emotional expression,
Psychological safety, Sensory safety,
Validation/reassurance,
Quieting over-stimulation,
Understanding before changing



Diet & Nutrition

Types of food and timing alongside quality,
Hydration, Gut health,
Deficiencies



Family Dynamics/ Environment

Values and beliefs, Relating and communication styles,
Modelling, Bedroom and digital technologies



Integrative holistic thinking to improve sleep



Foundation & Energy

- Relies on rhythm, flow, consistency and reliability.
- What example are you setting?
- What energy are you creating?



Guidance & Support

- Multi-perspectival dynamic of providing guidance, direction, holding space, maintaining boundaries, integrating teaching and role modelling.
- Support that is direct, calm and confident and collaborative.



Connection & Harmony

- Force is the enemy of engagement.
- Choose connection over correction.
- Bringing to the surface that most sleep challenges are resolved by addressing the aspects that are interfering with the body's natural rhythm, homeostasis and lifestyle and that the whole family supports sleep.

Considerations



Medical Concerns & Symptoms

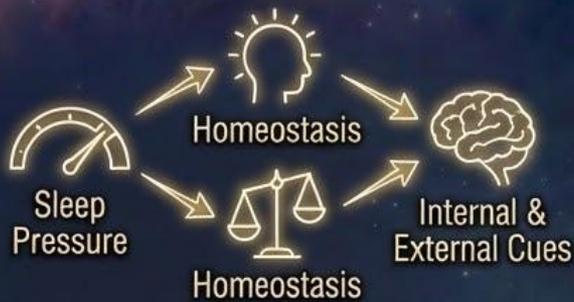
-  Snoring and sleep apnea issues.
-  Restless leg syndrome.
-  Depressive symptoms and mood.
-  Underlying conditions addressing needed.



Blood Work & Nutritional Factors

-  Low-iron levels (ferritin).
-  Magnesium deficiency.
-  Vitamin D status.
-  DHA (omega fatty acid) intake.
-  Known contributors to short sleep duration, disrupted, and/or low quality sleep.

Sleep Biology



Controlled by sleep pressure and homeostasis, influenced by internal and external cues.



8-10 Hours



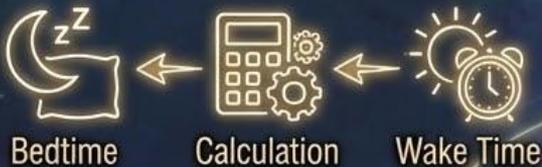
Varies



Sleep loves regularity in all areas: waking, eating, drinking, resting.



Consistent wake times with no greater than 1 hour on weekends underpins this.



Bedtime is arrived at by reverse engineering the time your young person needs to awake at and doing backwards maths.



Delayed Sleep Phase

For teens in a significant delayed sleep phase may require chronotherapy with appropriate supervision.

Nervous System and Arousal



The Sleep Switch

- Sleep requires a shift to the parasympathetic state. Chronic sympathetic/HPA activation clocks sleep onset and continuity.



Activation Triggers:

Stress & Relational

- Over-tiredness, unmet needs and emotional stress.
- Relational mismatch: Attachment style and parenting approach.



Activation Triggers:

Body & Rhythm

- Dietary Functions: Proinflammatory foods, sugar, caffeine, sensitivities.
- Circadian Disruption: Misaligned wake/bedtime times, dysregulated eating patterns.

Nervous System Regulation Tools



Breathwork



Vagus nerve activation (humming, chanting)



Somatic grounding exercises



Journalling



Expressive outlets



Grounded meditations



Scans

4-4-6-4 Breathing

Example of 4-4-6-4 Breathing Technique

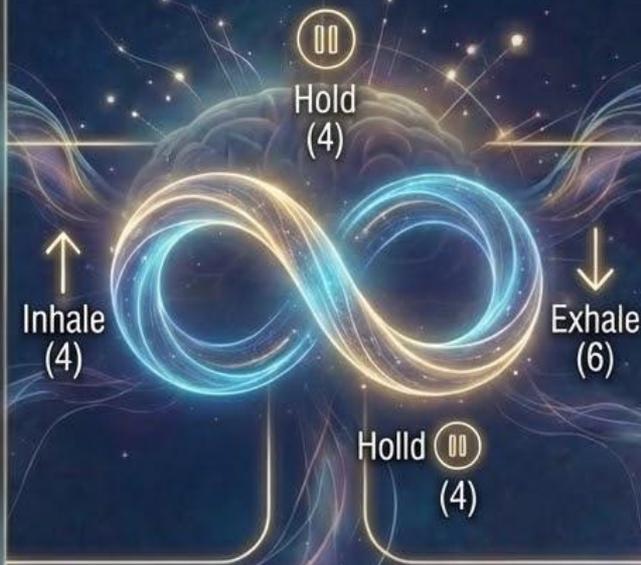
 ↑ Inhale: Breathe in slowly through your nose for a count of four.

 Hold: Gently hold the breath for a count of four.

 ↓ Exhale: Exhale slowly through the mouth (or nose) for a count of six.

 Hold: Hold the breath again (empty lungs) for a count of four.

 Repeat: Repeat this cycle to create a "loop" of rhythmic breathing that anchors your attention



Key Takeaways

- Purpose: This technique helps shift the nervous system from a stressed "fight or flight" state to a "rest and digest" state.
- Benefits: It is used to quickly reduce anxiety, improve concentration, and promote a sense of calm.
- Alternative: Sometimes practiced as 4-4-6-2 (inhale 4, hold 4, exhale 6, hold 2) to specifically slow the mind and steady the heart.

Body scan

Initial Focus



With your eyes closed, start at the top of your head and mentally scan down your body.

Step-by-Step Scan



Bring awareness to your head and neck: Do you feel tension, relaxation, warmth, or fatigue?



Slowly continue down to your shoulders, arms, hands, chest, stomach, hips, legs, and feet.



Spend 20–30 seconds on each area.

The 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique

A sensory-focused coping strategy to reduce anxiety and stress by redirecting attention to the present moment. By identifying 5 things you see, 4 you can touch, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, and 1 you taste, you interrupt the "fight or flight" response.

Steps for the 5-4-3-2-1 Technique



5 - Sight: Look around and identify five things you can see, such as a pen, a spot on the ceiling, or a tree outside.



4 - Touch: Focus on four things you can feel, such as the texture of your chair, your feet on the floor, or the fabric of your clothes.



3 - Hear: Listen for three distinct sounds, such as traffic, a clock ticking, or your own breath.



2 - Smell: Identify two things you can smell, such as air freshener, soap, or the scent of the air.



1 - Taste: Note one thing you can taste, such as the lingering taste of toothpaste or coffee, or sip a drink.

Why it Works

This method pulls your focus away from anxious thoughts and back to your immediate environment, which helps calm your nervous system. It is particularly effective for managing acute stress or panic by providing a tangible, sensory-based anchor.

Care-giver Co-regulation

Physiological Techniques



Slow voice/pace



Longer exhales



Gentle pressure/touch



Attunement

Relational Techniques



Open communication



I-Messaging



Safety of expression



Modelling

Morning wake time suggestions



- Regular wake time avoiding weekend drift



- Suggested wake me up light to stimulate the waking part of the brain-gently



- Begin the day with a nervous system regulation tool



- Allow ample time first thing for morning light (within first 30-1h), movement, regulation and connection



- Try not to skip breakfast – ideally protein rich



- Start hydration

Daytime stress releases



Nourishing sleep



The food we eat can affect our sleep and set off a cascade of negative reactions that lead to a wellness and sleep downwards spiral.



Digestion requires more energy than any other human function.



The body naturally shuts down cortisol production a necessary state for relaxation and sleep induction processes.

Timing of eating, what is eaten and combination of foods have significant impact on sleep.

Process of digestion interferes with sleep and contributes to discomfort. If the body is still processing and metabolizing food from later dinner, the hunger inhibiting hormone can be delayed but also reversed.



Anti sleep foods



Trans fats: contain toxins that increase inflammation and increases the stress hormone cortisol.



High sugar foods increase glucose, insulin and cortisol levels.



Alcohol make initiate drowsy state but decreases deep sleep, critical components for healing and re-charging.



Low fibre carbohydrates such as processed and snack foods and sugary drinks. Without fibre, sugar is absorbed quickly leading to spikes in blood sugar levels, insulin and cortisol.



Low quality meats, animals raised with poor quality nutrition added hormones, antibiotics leads to meat with excess omega 6 fatty acids that increases inflammation (O3 decreases it).

Family Collaboration



Your young person can track their own sleep



Together, reinforce the connection between sleep and emotional resilience, cognition, skin health, athletic performance



Create a digital sunset



Charging station outside of the bedroom



Family Collaboration



Autonomy prompts for your teen with when/where boundaries



Decide on 2 heavy days



Focus on repair and flexibility



Mindful of weekend drift



Develop affirmations

Afternoon/Evening Rituals

Afternoon/Evening Rituals

Allow for decompression at home time/after school

Try to get homework load complete early in the evening

Attempt to have a regular evening meal time with connection

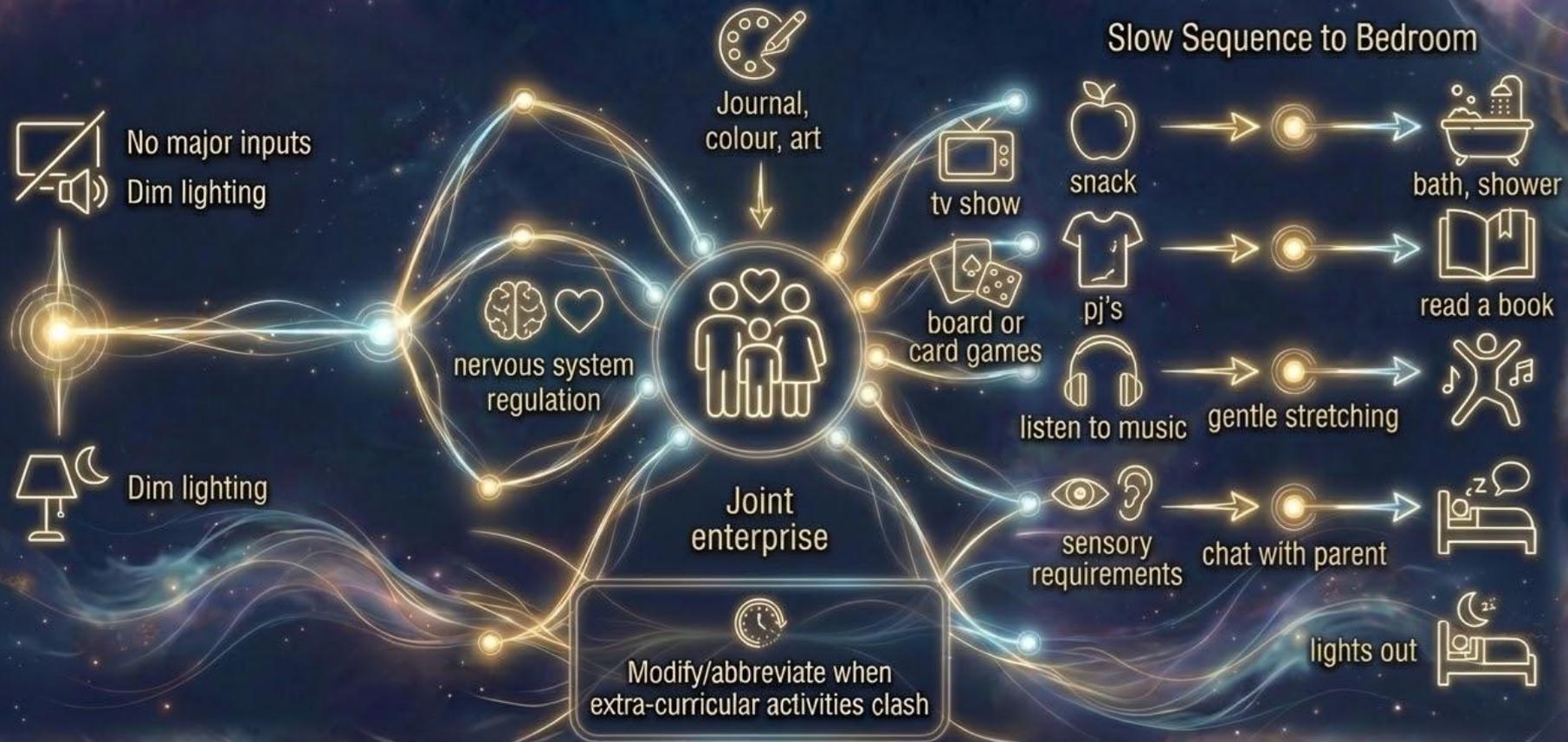
Include nervous system regulation activity- walk after dinner, dance in the kitchen, breathwork

Allow screen and gaming time when applicable

Create space for the last 90 minute before bedtime protocol



The last 90 minute protocol before estimated bedtime



Melatonin and Sleep



Must only be used under appropriate medical supervision



Known to improve sleep onset and in some instances duration



Best taken 1-2 hours before bedtime to be effective



Can be counterproductive when screens/lighting/activity suppress and delay natural melatonin production.



Natural Sleep Solutions



Aromatherapy & Herbal Teas:

Lavender, chamomile, vetiver for relaxation.

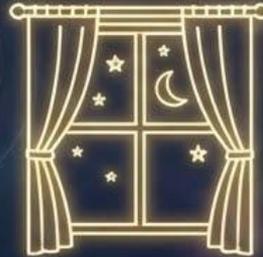


Sleep Promoting Foods & Nutrition Timing:

Bananas, whole wheat, kiwis, turkey, seeds, nuts, dairy. Time meals appropriately.



Morning Light, Movement & Stress Outlets:
Get sunlight, manage activity, find stress-relief practices.



Dark Sleep-Friendly Environment:

Ensure a cool, dark, and quiet space.



Case Study: The Cycle of Fatigue & Resistance



The Subject & Symptom

Preteen (11). Wakes "tired", all day "tired" in school, teacher comments. Tired for homework & activities.



Dietary Contributors

Morning coffee habit.
Skips breakfast.
Restrictive diet (egg, toast).
Refuses cereal/fruit/smoothies.



Sleep Patterns

Never goes to bed early. Stays up, difficulty falling asleep.



The Consequence

Chronic fatigue, impacts learning, daily functioning, and mood.



Collaborative Sleep Protocol & Lifestyle Changes

The Approach



Make 1-2 collaborative changes every week. Relies on warm, responsive, co-creational parent direction.



Use motivational interviewing & ownership to establish input.

Morning & Daytime



Regular wake time & morning light. Address morning fatigue.



Encourage protein-rich breakfast. Informed choice about coffee (always replace if changing).



Introduce nervous system regulatory tools & stress releases throughout the day.

Evening & Bedtime



Nervous system requires shifts from activation mode from evening onwards.



Introduce last 90-minute protocol (initially jointly performed). Establish a 'lights out' scenario with parental presence.

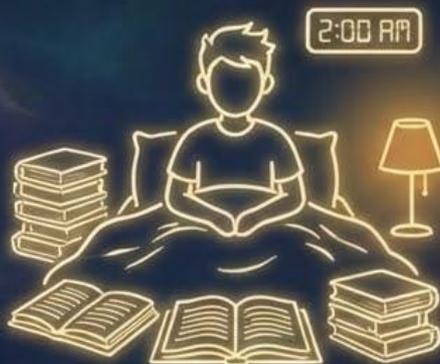


Reconsider evening meals (timing & type). Adjust bedtime forward/later as natural bed-time emerges.

Case Study



The House Rule:
No phones or tech upstairs.
Setting up a teen bedroom
for sleep success.



The Late-Night Reader:
One teen reads books until
the wee hours, unable to
wind down.

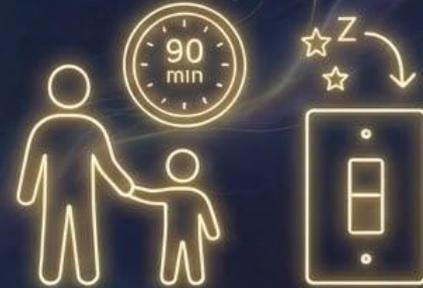


The Restless Preteen:
The other is up and down stairs
repeatedly, worse than as a
toddler in a new 'big bed'.

Nervous System & Attachment in Preteens



Preteens behaviours could be considered a nervous system/ attachment seeking patterning that is dynamically influenced by many of the factors outlined.



One change here could be a larger parental involvement before lights out with the last 90 minute protocol and possibly once lights go out, using parental presence as an attachment bridge to allow him create the downshift and allow a relaxing state and sleep production to begin with greater ease.

Case Study: ADHD & ODD Sleep Struggles



The Son's Situation (16yo, ADHD+ODD)

- Goes to bed very late (2-3 am).
- Claims not tired, plays guitar, watches TV.
- Exhausted in morning, hard to wake for school.
- Not into sports, refuses routine (stubborn/ODD).

What They Are Doing

- Phone taken at 11pm, TV remote hidden.
- Magnesium Bisglycinate 240mg at night (10-11pm).
- Daytime: Probiotic, Vitamin D, Fish Oil, L-theanine, Ashwagandha.

The Ask for Lucy

- Any other tactics than what we are doing?
- Acknowledges Lucy probably cannot give supplements advice.

Nervous System Patterning & Intervention Strategy



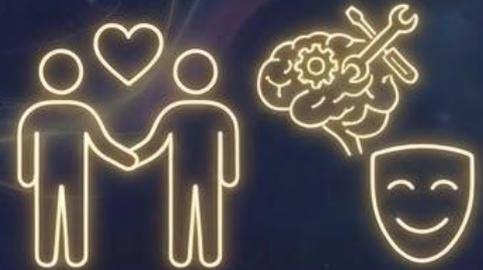
The Challenge: Fight/Freeze State

- Presents as predominantly fight/freeze nervous system patterning.
- Exhausted and resistant to change.
- Small adjustments with gradual buy-in from him.



Structured Approach & Protocol

- Bedtime/lights out needs more structure, less self-organised.
- Begin with the last 90 minute protocol at the late time.
- Once working, gradually bring it forward.



Connection & Regulation Tools

- Motivational interviewing and parts integration.
- Validation and reassurance, "gather him" before interactions.
- Nervous system regulation tools (1-2), include fun and humour.
- If late sleep persists, chronotherapy with supervision.

Supporting Neurodivergent Teens: Managing Severe Exhaustion in School

What can we do in a school setting to help support neurodivergent teens manage the day with severe exhaustion?

Morning & Environment



- Start the day with outside activities and fresh air



- Be flexible with start times



- Be close to windows for daylight

Structure & Rest



- Structure main learning earlier in the day



- Utilise day stressor releases every 1.5h



- Allow for naps/quiet time before 2.30pm

Nervous System Regulation & Sleep: A Root Cause Approach

SHIFTING THE FOCUS



Before: Trying to Induce Sleep

After: Supporting Nervous System Regulation & Root Cause

- From 'trying to induce sleep' to supporting regulation.
- Focus on uncovering and addressing the root cause.

SLEEP: A BIOLOGICAL SIGNAL OF SAFETY

Sleep Emerges When Brain Perceived Safety



Sleep is a biological process, not an action to be forced. When it doesn't occur, it's a signal, not a failure.



EXPLORE WHAT'S ACTIVATING THE SYSTEM



PHYSIOLOGICALLY

EMOTIONALLY

COGNITIVELY

ENVIRONMENTALLY

Appropriate Holistic Strategies for Neurodivergent Teens

1. REMOVING PERFORMANCE PRESSURE AROUND SLEEP



Reduce anticipatory anxiety by understanding rest is beneficial.

Sleep emerges naturally when the body is ready, not forced.

2. GENTLE SENSORY & NERVOUS SYSTEM REGULATION



Practice slow diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or awareness to muscle relaxation, or bringing awareness to neutral sensory experiences (e.g., mattress support) to shift to parasympathetic dominance.

3. JOURNALING FOR EXTERNALIZATION



Helpful for minds that remain active.

Externalize thoughts, emotions, and concerns to release cognitive vigilance, not to analyze or problem-solve.

4. SUPPORTING EMOTIONAL SAFETY & REDUCING VIGILANCE



Address underlying emotional processing, academic pressures, or identity development.

Reinforce emotional safety to allow the brain to disengage from protective alertness.