



SLEEP STEALERS

Conflict at Home

DO YOU AND YOUR FAMILY GET ENOUGH SLEEP EACH NIGHT?

Conflict in your home environment might be keeping you and your loved ones from getting the restful sleep you need.

Sleep is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. It restores critical brain functions, boosts crucial bodily processes like the immune system, and helps regulate appetite hormones. Without enough good quality sleep, children and adults may experience daytime sleepiness, be unable to focus, and be at risk for physical health problems including obesity, illness, and diabetes, and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. One aspect of the home environment that you may not realize is related to sleep health is family conflict. Conflict is present in all relationships, but how these disagreements are managed can make all the difference.



National Sleep Foundation's Recommendations for Daily Hours of Sleep

Newborns (0–3 months)	14–17 hours
Infants (4–11 months)	12–15 hours
Toddlers (1–2 years)	11–14 hours
Preschoolers (3–5)	10–13 hours
School-age children (6–13)	9–11 hours
Teenagers (14–17)	8–10 hours
Younger adults (18–25)	7–9 hours
Adults (26–64)	7–9 hours
Older adults (65+)	7–8 hours

Two Types of Conflict

The term “conflict” can conjure visions of violent or intense arguing. But not all conflict is negative. There are two types of conflict: constructive conflict, which you can think of as positive conflict, and destructive conflict, or negative conflict. You can tell the type of conflict you are engaged in based on the actions that occur during and after the confrontation.

Constructive/Positive Conflict

Main Goals/Behaviors:

- Acknowledge other person’s opinion or point of view
- Work toward compromise and solution to the problem
- Work toward reducing feelings of anger by using soothing words and phrases
- End the argument with a hug or other physical affection like a comforting hand on the shoulder

Benefits:

- Builds children’s confidence that a family is healthy, can stay together, and will be able to get along
- Helps children learn to handle their own conflicts peacefully
- Allows disagreements to become a way to build family unity, trust, and the peace of mind that comes from knowing someone cares about us and our needs and wants

Destructive/Negative Conflict

Main Goals/Behaviors:

- “Winning” or being in charge of decision making
- No effort to reduce feelings of anger
- May include verbal attacks like screaming, using personal insults, or making threats toward the other person
- May include physical attacks like pushing, shoving, or hitting

Lasting Effects:

- Increased stress levels for everyone in the home
- Feelings of fear for personal safety and the safety of family members

For Children:

- Worry and stress that can lead to chronic anxiety, stress, depression, and emotional and behavioral problems
- Worry for safety even when there is no actual threat to physical safety
- A continuous or heightened state of stress

How Conflict Impacts Sleep

Negative conflict is often the source of disrupted sleep patterns for adults and children. When children are exposed to negative conflict, they have difficulty handling their emotions, and they may not get as much sleep as they need. To get restful sleep, children need to be able to relax and feel safe. Children cannot do this if they are worried about family members arguing, especially if they are worried someone will be hurt. In fact, when people are worried about their safety or the safety of others, their brains will try to keep them awake and alert so they can protect themselves from danger. Negative conflict makes it hard to get enough sleep and harder to stay asleep through the night, and the overall quality of sleep will be poor. This poor sleep quality includes tossing, turning, and waking during the night. These factors make you feel tired and less alert during the day.

Destructive conflict creates additional stress for everyone in the home, especially for children.

Constructive conflict does not negatively impact sleep. Remember, arguments that are resolved in a calm fashion can help children learn to resolve future conflicts peacefully. And keep in mind that, even if you try to hide your arguing, research shows children are aware of arguing that is taking place.

How Lack of Sleep Impacts Conflict

The more conflict there is, the less sleep you are likely to get. At the same time, less sleep means that conflicts may arise more frequently. Lack of sleep makes it harder to control your emotions, which may make you overreact to arguments that otherwise would not be worth the time and effort. Even if only one person in the family is getting less sleep than needed, the entire family is impacted; that one person will not be able to control his/her emotions as well and may get in more arguments with family members than usual. Sleep calms your stress levels. It provides a way to recharge your body and reset important brain functions. If the normal patterns of sleep are interrupted, those important processes do not happen as they should.

Losing just a few hours of sleep can reduce your ability to care about others, even those you love, in the ways you normally do. This extends to work and other relationships, as well, where you may be more likely to jump to conclusions and have a short temper if you have not had enough sleep.



Constructive Approaches for Dealing with Conflict

Learn to Listen

- **Keep eye contact**—When you focus on others, it shows you are paying attention.
- **Be patient**—Wait until your family member has finished before you respond.
- **Repeat the message**—In your own words, repeat the message your family member spoke to you.

For children: Acknowledge their feelings so they feel understood. And remember that you don't always have to say "yes." For example, when your child wants a toy, you can notice their feelings and still say no: "I can see that you really want this toy and that you feel upset right now, but we're only here for food today. We can get a toy for you another time."

Learn to Speak

- Make sure your family member is paying attention.
- Be direct and clear—make sure your verbal and nonverbal messages are consistent.
- Ask for feedback to be sure your message was understood.

Think Before You Speak

- Some conversations with your partner should be private. Your children may not need to hear what you have to say. Set a time to have these chats.
- **Code word**—Consider a family code word that anyone can use when an argument is getting too heated. This eases tension and lets family members know the argument won't be solved right then, but it will be at a later time.

Avoid

- **Criticism**—passing judgment, finding fault with your partner or family member
- **Kitchen-sinking**—bringing up past arguments unrelated to the current situation
- **Evasion**—seeking to ignore or not listen to your family member's concerns
- "You always" or "you never" statements



Tips for Getting Enough Sleep During Conflict

- Avoid arguments just before bed. This will make it hard to relax and fall asleep. When you are angry or stressed, your body is flooded with energy; this can keep you awake when you should be sleeping.
- Avoid arguments in the bedroom. Your bedroom should be a safe haven—a place where you can easily relax. When you have arguments in this safe space, you may think about the conflict when it is bedtime instead of falling asleep.
- Keep a journal. When you cannot resolve an argument readily, it can leave you feeling frustrated. Write down your thoughts and feelings about the argument along with possible solutions. You can talk about it with your partner/family member later, but you will not lose sleep over it.
- Resolve arguments long before bedtime. When you can, find a resolution to arguments and end the conflict by showing love and appreciation for the other person. This should include physical contact like hand-holding, a gentle pat on the shoulder, or a hug.
- Take a warm shower or bath.
- Take a walk outside, if you can. This will release endorphins (the happy hormone) and will help boost your mood.
- When you cannot sleep, go into another room and do something relaxing until you feel tired.

Additional Resources and References

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