

Toolbox Talk for students

Sleep, Fatigue and
Switching Off



Time: 15 minutes

Objective: To help learners understand how poor sleep and ongoing fatigue can affect mood, concentration, learning and safety and identify realistic ways to improve rest or seek support when tiredness continues.

Have you ever gone to bed intending to sleep, then checked one message, watched one video and suddenly realised another hour has passed? The alarm still goes off at the same time. You get up tired, rush to college or work and spend the morning trying to concentrate. A straightforward task feels confusing, you become irritated or read the same instruction repeatedly without taking it in. One late night happens to everyone. The difficulty comes when tiredness stops being occasional and starts becoming how you feel most days.

Why It Matters

Sleep gives the body and mind time to recover. When we regularly get too little rest, it can affect memory, concentration, decision-making, reaction time and how we manage emotions. This matters during lessons and written work but it becomes especially important in workshops, practical assessments, driving and tasks involving tools or equipment. Learners may find it difficult to switch off for many reasons. There can be coursework, exams, shift work, long journeys, family responsibilities, relationships, money worries and uncertainty about the future. Phones also make it possible to stay connected, entertained or distracted long after we intended to sleep. Feeling tired does not mean somebody is lazy or unmotivated. Sometimes the schedule is genuinely demanding and sometimes stress or worry keeps the mind active even when the body is exhausted. Ongoing fatigue can also have physical or medical causes, so it should not always be assumed that somebody simply needs an earlier night.



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What It Can Look Like

Fatigue can appear as heavy eyes, constant yawning, headaches or feeling as though you have no energy. You may struggle to remember information, miss parts of an instruction or make simple mistakes that are unusual for you. Some people become quiet and withdrawn, while others become impatient, emotional or easily frustrated. You might rely on energy drinks, coffee or sugary food to get through the day, then find it harder to sleep later. When worries are keeping you awake, tiredness can make those same worries feel harder to manage the following day, creating a cycle that is difficult to break. A serious warning sign is struggling to keep your eyes open, briefly nodding off or feeling unsafe while driving, using equipment or completing practical work. That is not something to push through. Stop the activity and tell the appropriate person.

What Can Help

Start by looking at your routine honestly rather than aiming for a perfect one. Notice when you usually go to sleep, when you wake up and what tends to keep you awake. If your schedule changes every day, aim for as much consistency as your circumstances allow.

Create a short period before bed that tells your mind the day is ending. That might mean finishing coursework, preparing what you need for the morning, lowering the lights and putting your phone somewhere you cannot keep checking it. Even thirty minutes with less noise, work and scrolling can make switching off easier.

Be aware of caffeine and energy drinks, especially later in the day. They may help you feel temporarily alert but they do not replace sleep and can make it harder to rest.



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If your mind becomes busy at night, write down what you need to remember or deal with tomorrow. This can help you stop mentally repeating the same list. If one assignment or problem is keeping you awake, speak to somebody early rather than carrying it alone through the night.

There will be times when good sleep is harder to achieve, particularly for shift workers, parents, carers or people living in busy homes. Focus on the changes that are possible rather than blaming yourself for the ones that are not. Rest, breaks and asking for help still matter even when your routine cannot be perfect. If tiredness continues despite giving yourself enough opportunity to sleep, regularly affects daily life or comes with other changes in your health, speak to your GP. You do not need to diagnose the cause yourself. If you feel too tired to drive, use equipment or work safely, stop and tell somebody rather than trying to prove that you can continue.

Preparing for Life in Construction

Construction can involve early starts, travelling, physical work, changing schedules and long periods of concentration. It can also offer structure, purpose and satisfaction. Looking after your rest helps you enjoy those opportunities and work safely.

Fatigue can slow reaction time and affect judgement. On site, that can place you and other people at risk. Being responsible means recognising when tiredness is affecting you, taking agreed breaks and speaking up if you cannot complete a task safely. Caffeine, determination and “getting on with it” cannot replace proper rest.



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Discussion Questions

- What can make it difficult for students and apprentices to switch off at night?
- What signs might show that tiredness is affecting somebody's learning or safety?
- What is one realistic change that could help someone get better rest?

Takeaway Message

Sleep is not wasted time, and constant tiredness is not something you should automatically accept. Poor rest can affect how you think, feel, learn and work, often before you realise how much it is influencing you. Small changes to your routine can help, but persistent fatigue deserves attention. Taking tiredness seriously is part of looking after your wellbeing and keeping yourself and others safe.

Action

Choose one change to try tonight. Set a reminder thirty minutes before you plan to sleep and use that time to finish work, put your phone away or prepare for the morning. Try the same change for the next three nights and notice whether switching off becomes any easier.



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