The importance of sleep

Sleep is essential for everyone and is a huge part of feeling well. Sleep is important for general physical health, restoring energy, repairing injuries or illness, growth, psychological well-being and mood, concentration, memory, work performance, and getting along with others. Most researchers agree that sleep serves a restorative purpose, both psychologically and physiologically.

Stages of Sleep

There are two types of sleep:

REM rapid-eye-movement sleep

This type of sleep occurs for about 25% of the night, and is characterised by electrical activation of the brain, very relaxed muscles and body becoming immobile, and rapid eye movements as the eyes dart back and forth under closed eyelids. REM sleep provides energy to the brain and body and supports daytime performance. Dreams often occur during REM sleep, although they can occur at any stage.

NREM non-rapid-eye-movement sleep

This type of sleep occurs during the other 75% of the time, and can be further broken down into 4 stages:

- **Stage 1:** this stage is light sleep, between being awake and falling asleep.

- **Stage 2:** this stage is the onset of sleep, when the person begins to become disengaged from their surroundings. Body temperature drops and breathing and heart rate become regular.

- **Stages 3 & 4:** These stages are the deepest and most restorative sleep, known as 'delta sleep' - Stage 3 is a transition into Stage 4, or 'true delta.' During these stages, blood pressure drops, breathing becomes slower, muscles are relaxed and receiving more blood supply, tissue growth and repair occurs, and hormones are released (including growth hormone, which is why growing teenagers need to sleep more).
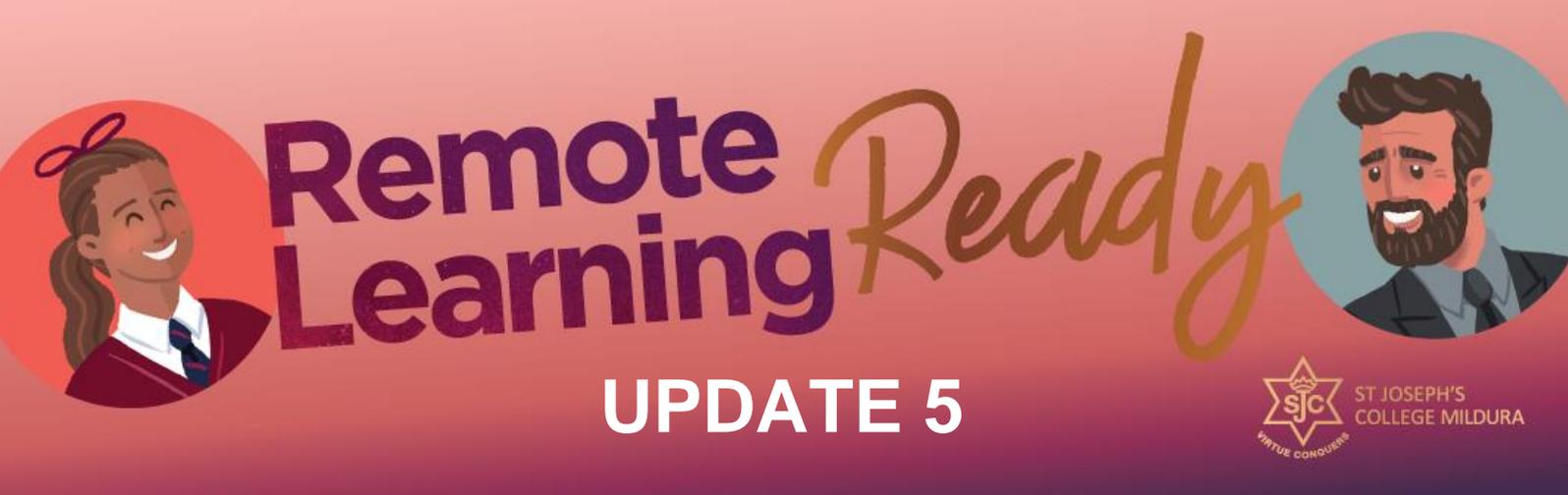
Effects of lack of sleep

People vary in terms of how much sleep they need – however children and adolescents need more sleep than adults (at least seven to nine hours of sleep a night). It is also known that some people function well with a little less sleep and others with a little more. Whatever your individual needs, lack of sleep or poor sleep quality can have effects including:

- Poor attention, concentration and memory.
- Irritability and other mood disturbances.
- Impaired judgement and reaction time.
- Poor physical coordination.

The seriousness of these effects depends on how bad the sleep deprivation is (e.g. less sleep vs. no sleep; one night's poor sleep vs. chronic problems) and the tasks and responsibilities of the day.

What can help?

Stick to a routine of setting your alarm for the same time each morning and going to bed at the same time each night.

- Lay off caffeine before bed, as it can make it harder to get to sleep or may disrupt your sleep.
- You need to turn off your television, mobile phone and laptop or tablet at least 30 minutes before bed. The light from these devices can trick your brain into thinking it is still daytime.
- Practise relaxation and meditation techniques to help you switch off your mind in the evenings.
- Try not to nap during the day.
- Exercise first thing in the morning, outdoors. Sunlight can help reset your body clock.
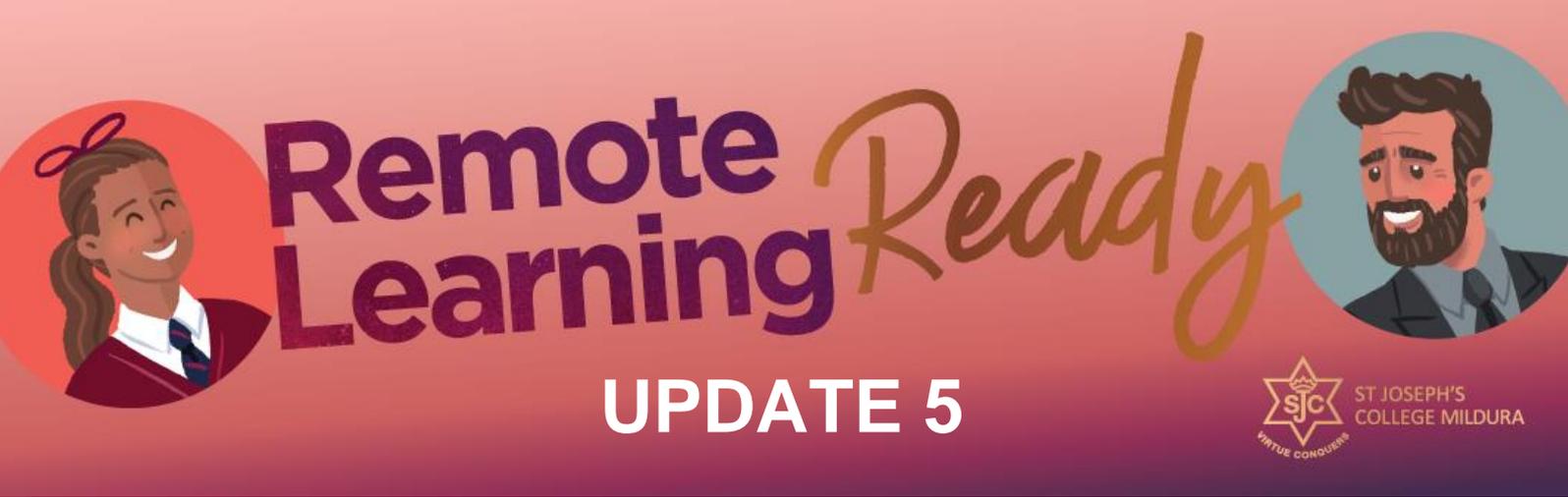
Still struggling?

Still tossing and turning in your bed at night?
There are some other things you can try.

Your environment

Create a sleep playlist with soft, gentle music to slow your heart rate and help you unwind.

Check the room temp – is it too cold or too hot? Open a window, get an extra blanket, or change the heating setting so that the environment is comfortable.

Keep light and noise to a minimum. Wear an eye-mask to block excess light. If outside noise is disturbing you, wear ear-plugs or grab some headphones and play gentle music.

Your body

Drink warm milk or chamomile tea to calm your body.

Try some muscle relaxation techniques.

Practise deep breathing. Inhale deeply through your nose for seven seconds. Hold for four. Then exhale slowly through your mouth for eight seconds. Repeat.

Your brain

If you're stuck in a half-awake, half-asleep state, get comfy, close your eyes and try to stay awake instead of falling asleep. This disruption can trick your brain into resetting itself.

Escape into your imagination. Give yourself an imaginary task, such as building your dream house or exploring a new city, and walk yourself through it in your mind.

If you've tried some of these suggestions and you still aren't sleeping well, talk to your GP, or a member of the wellbeing team.

**Centre for Clinical Interventions
www.cci.health.wa.gov.au**