

Night Owl Habit Undermines Mental Health

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Researchers found that "night owls" who stay up late are 20% to 40% more likely to have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder than night owls who keep an earlier or intermediate schedule, in an observational study of 73,888 middle-aged and older adults
- › Your body's internal clock genes regulate 24-hour cycles of biological processes, and research links disruption of these natural rhythms through late bedtimes to poorer emotional and mental well-being
- › People who consistently push bedtime past midnight showed higher rates of diagnosed anxiety and mood disorders in this cohort, even if they consider themselves natural night owls
- › Evening chronotypes show later melatonin timing and shifted cortisol patterns. Researchers have proposed that this may contribute to sleep difficulties and to a thinner buffer against daily stress
- › If you're a night owl, try to gradually shift to an earlier bedtime, get morning sunlight exposure, and maintain a consistent bedtime routine for better sleep

Night owls who keep a late schedule are 20% to 40% likelier to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder than those who go to bed earlier, according to a study by Stanford Medicine researchers that tracked the sleep habits of 73,888 people.^{1,2} This was an observational analysis of U.K. Biobank participants, using seven days of wrist accelerometry alongside hospital diagnostic records. The finding caught my attention

because of what it actually pins down: In this cohort, it was the late bedtime itself — not whether that bedtime matched a person's own chronotype — that tracked with poorer mental health.

Published in the journal *Psychiatry Research*, this cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis of middle-aged and older adults (averaging 63.5 years old) drew a link between bedtimes past midnight and higher rates of diagnosed anxiety and mood disorders.³ Even those who consider themselves intermediate sleepers faced worse outcomes if they veered into truly late-night territory. The difference in emotional health was significant enough that it prompted a strong call for lights out by 1 a.m.

I find these results compelling, especially because another narrative review published in *Frontiers in Neuroscience* highlighted how the body's internal clock relates to mental well-being.⁴ Late chronotypes, meaning those inclined toward later bedtimes and wake times, tend to accumulate sleep debt and show shifted hormone timing. That review links the evening chronotype to a higher risk of depressive disorders and to anxiety symptoms, while stating plainly that the causal relationship remains unclear. This is a tough combination for anyone trying to navigate daily life.

Poor sleep can hurt your mental health, but you can break free from unhealthy sleep patterns. That said, the featured research here is observational rather than interventional, but it consistently associates earlier, more regular bedtimes with better mental health outcomes.

A Closer Examination of Late Bedtimes and Emotional Health

The *Psychiatry Research* study⁵ took a deep look at whether going to bed late makes a real difference in emotional well-being over time. Investigators drew on data from the U.K. Biobank, analyzing how each individual's usual bedtime either clashed or lined up with what they believed to be their natural sleep window.

By comparing those patterns to mental health diagnoses, they pinpointed whether people who consistently pushed their bedtime too far into the night faced a higher likelihood of anxiety or depressive episodes.

This research focused on a population of middle-aged and older adults, and each participant wore a wrist-based activity monitor for seven consecutive days. That tracker captured specific bedtimes and wake times, revealing who stayed up into the early-morning hours.

The study also tapped into standardized health records, using diagnostic codes to identify mood and behavioral conditions.⁶ On top of that, the investigators measured each person's self-stated chronotype — that is, whether someone felt more like an evening type (a “night owl”), a morning type (an “early bird”), or landed somewhere in the middle.

A clear association between truly late bedtimes and elevated risk for mental health struggles emerged.⁷ Individuals whose routines veered well past midnight had stronger links to mood disruptions, even if they were convinced they did their best thinking or working at night. In plain terms, later bedtimes tracked with higher odds of mood disruption. The featured study measured sleep timing rather than circadian phase itself, so why that link exists is still an open question.

The researchers also highlighted that some morning-oriented individuals who overrode their usual preference and started going to bed after midnight ran into similar emotional pitfalls.⁸ It didn't matter that they felt naturally ready to rise early; once they forced themselves to stay up, their odds of anxiety or low mood went up. What the study found, though, was that clock time mattered more than the match: Evening types who managed an earlier bedtime showed a lower risk of depression, not a higher one. With this in mind, the authors' recommendation is to be asleep before 1 a.m. regardless of chronobiological preference.

Because this analysis included both a one-time snapshot (cross-sectional data) and a longer-term follow-up (longitudinal data), it offered the team more confidence in the direction of the association.⁹ They weren't simply looking at people who already dealt with mood disorders; they also tracked a group with no known history of depression or anxiety. Over roughly eight years of follow-up, those who followed later bedtimes were more likely to receive a first diagnosis of a mood or anxiety disorder. That sequence strengthens the case, though an observational study of this kind still cannot establish cause and effect.

Does Staying Up Too Late Encourage Self-Defeating Choices?

The authors note that staying awake beyond the typical evening window might open the door to self-defeating choices.¹⁰ Staying up late exposes you to more time alone, which can lead to unhealthy behaviors like endless scrolling, overeating, drinking, or using other substances that affect your mood. This combination, they suggested, may trigger or deepen depressive feelings and anxious thoughts for many people, especially over long stretches.

The study explained that even individuals who felt like their ideal bedtime was on the later side experienced measurable emotional strain when they routinely went far past their own normal limit.¹¹ Practically speaking, that makes gradually easing back toward an earlier lights-out schedule a reasonable thing to try — bearing in mind that this featured study observed sleep patterns rather than testing whether changing them improves mental health.

Biologically, these outcomes point to your body's main [circadian regulator](#), the suprachiasmatic nucleus (SCN) in your brain, which keeps most of your rhythms — such as sleep-wake cycles and hormone releases — in sync with daylight and darkness.¹²

Delaying your bedtime is associated with shifted hormone timing and altered temperature rhythms. These are patterns described in the wider circadian literature rather than measured in this particular study, which collected movement data and

diagnostic codes only. Whether that shift is what erodes emotional balance has not been established.

The authors concluded that this internal misalignment may set off a cascade of chemical and neural responses.¹³ For instance, **melatonin** — the hormone that nudges you into slumber — surges later than normal, and **cortisol** — known as the stress hormone — follows a daily curve that shifts along with sleep timing, so it may still be elevated when you are trying to wind down.

Your body perceives that signal as a call to stay alert, making restful sleep less achievable. Over time, that pattern saps your emotional buffer, so a single bad day or stressful event feels heavier. One thing worth adding here, because it changes what you do about it: most of your melatonin is not made in the pineal gland at all. It is produced inside your mitochondria in response to near-infrared light, which is why getting outdoors during the day matters as much as keeping your nights dark.

These findings emphasize how important it is to pay attention to your personal bedtime cues. If you've been wondering why your moods wobble when you push your lights out to the limit, this study makes a reasonable case for moving your bedtime earlier — before 1 a.m. is the benchmark as mentioned earlier — whether or not you consider yourself a night person.

An Inside Look at Intricate Body Clocks and Emotional Harmony

A separate narrative review published in *Frontiers in Neuroscience*¹⁴ sought to examine how a person's chronotype interplays with psychiatric disorders. Researchers gathered and reviewed findings from a wide range of clinical reports and academic sources to identify common threads and underlying biological factors that tie late-night tendencies to mental health challenges. Because it is a review rather than original research, its conclusions inherit the limitations of the studies it summarizes — most of which, the authors note, are cross-sectional and rely on self-reported chronotype.

Rather than zero in on one particular age group or narrow population, the authors pulled insights from multiple lines of scientific inquiry, assembling a broad perspective on the role of circadian rhythms. Those featured in the final review spanned various categories of mental health, including people with major depression, bipolar disorder, substance use disorders, and more.¹⁵

By pooling existing evidence, the authors aimed to show that an individual's internal clock is associated with not only sleep quality but also hormone patterns, neurotransmitter function, and even brain structure. Their hypothesis was that these intertwined mechanisms form the core link between a person's inclination toward evening or morning lifestyles and the likelihood of developing or worsening psychiatric issues.

The review also highlighted genes known as “clock genes.”¹⁶ These genes create a 24-hour cycle in the body by turning certain biological processes on and off at predictable times, including periods of heightened activity and rest. When you naturally skew toward late nights, your clock genes appear to operate on a slightly extended cycle — roughly 24.3 hours in evening types versus 24.1 in morning types — pushing your body's energy peaks and troughs into later hours. This shift, in turn, travels together with later timing of hormones like cortisol and melatonin, though the review does not establish which drives which.

One of the most intriguing points the authors made was that circadian misalignment — meaning a mismatch between your internal clock and the clock society expects you to keep — is associated with more than just feeling tired.¹⁷ The review links it to changes across several biological systems. It is worth holding this alongside the U.K. Biobank finding above, though. There, evening types who shifted to an earlier bedtime showed a lower risk of depression, not a higher one.

This partially explains why evening chronotype individuals have a more challenging time adjusting to social obligations that start early in the morning, like jobs or school.¹⁸ Your brain doesn't simply flip a switch and perform optimally if it has already begun shifting melatonin production deep into the night. Over time, you may find it harder to steady

your mood or handle stressors at work or home. At a population level, the featured review also associates the evening chronotype with higher rates of substance use disorders — an association across groups, not a forecast for any one person.

Overall, the review¹⁹ makes a compelling argument that your natural leanings toward later nights encompass much more than personal preference. They touch on intricate systems — encompassing genes, neurotransmitters, and key hormones — that carry consequences for your psychological well-being.

If you regularly push bedtime deeper into the night, or if you keep an inconsistent schedule altogether, it may work against the systems that help keep your emotions steady and your thinking sharp — a link that the research describes as consistent, while stopping short of calling it causal.

Practical Steps for Resetting Your Sleep Cycle

Sleep issues run deeper than just late bedtimes though. Many factors, including stress, artificial light, and poor sleeping position, can make it hard to fall and stay asleep. To optimize your sleep, both in terms of quantity and quality, consider the following suggestions:

- 1. Shift your bedtime in small increments** — If your lights-out time has been creeping past midnight for years, avoid an abrupt change. Move your bedtime 15 or 30 minutes earlier each week until you settle into a window like 9 p.m. or 10 p.m. This gentler approach helps your body and mind adapt without sparking extra frustration. Abruptly cutting off hours of late-night activity often leads to tossing and turning, so aim for gradual progress.
- 2. Harness morning light** — Natural light is a powerful way to realign your internal clock. Head outside shortly after you wake up to get sunlight exposure. That sends a direct signal to your brain that day has started, keeping you from drifting into a prolonged late-night cycle. In the evening, be strategic. Lower the lights well before

bed, and turn off electronics so your body can wind down effectively rather than feeling wired.

- 3. Darken your sleeping space** — Even the faintest light tricks your brain into staying on alert. Use blackout curtains if streetlights shine in, or slip on a comfortable eye mask to block every trace of illumination. Darkness supports your body's nighttime melatonin release, which is associated with deeper rest. Unplug devices so that nothing interrupts the pitch-black environment you need for sound sleep.

For your bedroom I strongly recommend non-flicker red LED bulbs. They are about 3 watts and have zero blue light. [Exposure to blue light](#) in the hours leading up to bedtime is associated with poorer sleep and with suppression of your body's release of melatonin. So, make sure you filter out blue light from all sources after sunset and before sunrise.

- 4. Use proper sleep posture and specialized neck support** — Supporting your neck while you sleep is generally recommended for keeping it in a neutral position. I am not aware of long-term trials showing that it changes the course of degenerative change in the spine, [but in this interview with Dr. Peter Martone](#), he explains how proper sleep posture, especially for your neck, can support your well-being. If you're used to sleeping on your side or in a curled-up fetal position, it might seem strange at first to lie on your back.

However, back-sleeping is often recommended for aligning your spine and easing stress on your neck and shoulders. I realize it's a habit change, but transitioning to back-sleeping is worth the effort for healthier posture.

I recommend a [cervical pillow](#) designed to cradle your neck without elevating your head too high, allowing your neck to arch gently backward. My Posture Perfect Pillow has a bow-tie shape intended to support the neck's natural curve and reduce pressure on the muscles around it. Disclaimer — these are design intentions rather than tested clinical outcomes.

If you're someone who's woken up with a crick in your neck more times than you can count, or dealt with morning headaches, many people find this kind of support changes how rested and comfortable you feel.

5. **Craft a consistent bedtime routine** — Beyond lights and posture, your regular wind-down routine matters. Wrap up meals at least three hours before bed, and consider lowering the temperature in your room so you're not restless from heat. If swirling thoughts keep you awake, try journaling or keep a notepad beside you to park your worries until morning.

Some people like gentle stretching or reading a physical book — whatever it takes to gently signal that your day is done. This consistent pattern, repeated night after night, forms a powerful anchor for your body clock.

Then, when your head hits your pillow, it's easier to surrender to a calm, restorative sleep. For more help, review my article [“50 Tips to Improve Your Sleep,”](#) which covers environmental tweaks, breathing exercises, and other targeted strategies. Adopting even one or two of those tips — like turning off Wi-Fi in the evening or sleeping in loose, comfortable clothing — can make for a more peaceful night.

Investing energy into these steps means you're tackling both your internal clock misalignment and the mechanical strain your body endures overnight. As you develop a healthier schedule and pay attention to sleep posture, you may notice a difference both in how you feel during the day and in how your neck and upper back feel once you're up and moving.

This article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Consult a qualified health care provider before making changes to your health regimen.

Sources and References

- ¹ [Stanford Medicine News Center May 29, 2024](#)
- ^{2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12} [Psychiatry Research July 2024, Volume 337, 115956](#)
- ^{3, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18} [Front Neurosci. 2022 Aug 10;16:811771, Conclusion and Discussion](#)

