

## **Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams**

By Matthew Walker, PhD

Sleep is a non-negotiable biological need that supports brain function, emotional stability, learning, immune health, and longevity. Chronic sleep deprivation disrupts emotion regulation, increases vulnerability to anxiety and depression, impairs memory and decision-making, and weakens physical health. Rather than being a passive state, sleep is an active process through which the brain restores, integrates, and regulates itself.

### **Therapeutic Orientation**

Neuroscience-informed, CBT- informed, nervous system- based frameworks

### **Key Concepts**

- During sleep, the brain consolidates memory, processes emotion, clears metabolic waste, and recalibrates stress responses
- REM sleep plays a key role in emotional regulation by helping decouple emotional charge from distressing memories
- Insufficient sleep increases anxiety, irritability, emotional reactivity, and risk for depression and mood disorders
- The body's internal clock regulates sleep-wake cycles and is highly sensitive to light, timing, and consistency
- Attention, learning, creativity, and decision-making decline sharply with sleep deprivation
- Lost sleep cannot be fully “caught up on”; chronic deprivation has compounding effects over time

### **Practice Ideas**

- Instead of evaluating sleep as “good” or “bad,” notice what your sleep patterns may be communicating about stress, safety, or overload
- Gently experiment with exposure to natural light earlier in the day or dimmer lighting in the evening and observe shifts in energy or mood
- Choose one low-effort, repeatable evening activity (stretching, reading, warm water, quiet music) and let it signal safety rather than performance
- Notice when your energy naturally rises and falls. Experiment with aligning tasks to those rhythms instead of forcing productivity
- Observe how emotional reactivity, patience, or clarity change with different amounts of rest
- Journal prompt: How does my mood change when I'm well-rested versus sleep-deprived?
- Journal prompt: What does my body seem to ask for when I'm exhausted?

### **For Clients**

This book may be helpful if you:

- Feel emotionally reactive, exhausted, or foggy

- Struggle with anxiety or low mood that worsens when tired
- Have difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Feel pressure to push through exhaustion

What it's not:

- A sleep-tracking or productivity optimization guide
- A replacement for medical or psychological care

### **For Therapists**

- Provides a clear biological rationale for prioritizing sleep in treatment planning
- Helps externalize symptoms
- Supports integration of sleep assessment into intake and ongoing work
- Can feel overwhelming for clients with chronic insomnia or trauma-related sleep disruption
- Less attention to social, cultural, or trauma-related barriers to sleep
- Risk of increasing self-blame if framed rigidly

### **Clinical Takeaways**

- Normalize emotional dysregulation as a physiological consequence of poor sleep
- Incorporate sleep inquiry into case conceptualization
- Use sleep as a foundation for nervous system stabilization rather than a goal to fix

### **Recommendation**

Recommended for adults experiencing mild to moderate anxiety, depression, or burnout, especially when paired with therapy that emphasizes nervous system regulation, self-compassion, and realistic expectations around rest