



HORSES DONE? TICK. WORK FINISHED? TICK. DOG WALKED, DINNER COOKED, DISHWASHER LOADED AND EMAILS SENT? TICK. ONLY WHEN WE'VE DEALT WITH THE DAY DO WE TEND TO GIVE ANY THOUGHT AT ALL TO THE NIGHT – AND TO SLEEP, THE VERY LAST TASK ON THE 'TO DO' LIST. **ANDREA OAKES** LOOKS AT THE VITAL ROLE SLEEP PLAYS IN OUR WELLBEING.

**W**hy is it that sleep is so often the least of our priorities? Most of us claim that we need more of it, yet by failing to prepare, we typically wake feeling tired and frustrated after a restless night. According to sport sleep coach Nick Littlehales, restoring healthy habits can bring powerful benefits for general wellbeing and performance. And if it seems like just one more demand on an already overloaded lifestyle, the good news is that refining our sleep patterns can actually free up more hours to do the things we love.

"The first myth to bust," says Nick, "is the belief that we need a block of at least eight hours of sleep every night. While it's true that sufficient sleep is essential for mental and physical recovery, it's a mistake to stress out and try to force the magical eight. Instead, we should be re-building a relationship with the natural process by tuning in to our circadian rhythms.

"Think of sleep in cycles, rather than hours," says Nick, who has worked with elite athletes and professional footballers to boost their competition prospects. "One sleep cycle is 90 minutes, so five in a night equals seven-and-a-half hours. Find out what you feel better with – maybe four cycles at night and one during the day works for you."

The average person needs around 35 cycles of sleep a week. Dipping too much below this can lead to irritability, impaired judgement and health issues, but this overall total can be adapted to suit the week's requirements.

"Very few people sleep for eight hours between two fixed points," adds Nick, who explores the subject in detail in his book 'Sleep'. "Rather than trying to push yourself into what's considered the norm, try sleeping for shorter

periods, more often. This might be more effective during a big show, especially if you're alive with adrenalin and excitement or competing late into the night."

Next, Nick redefines the nap. Rather than the traditional mid-afternoon shut-eye, he refers to a short, daytime refresher called a controlled recovery period (CRP).

"This can be on the sofa, on a plane or sitting in the car – we don't have to be lying down to sleep," he says. "It's all about achieving a balance between activity and recovery, so take a break if you need to. The brain loves it. Zone out for 20-30mins maximum and you'll be gaining big-time."

By understanding your chronotype, says Nick, you can stay at the top of your game. Are you a lark or an owl, tending to be more awake in the early morning or late at night?

"You can't change the world, but you can adapt things to work with your natural type," he explains. "If you're



a night-time chronotype, for example, perhaps you can shift activities forward to play to your strengths. If you're up early for an event, be conscious that you will need a recovery period later in the day."

Quality sleep depends on light – keeping it out altogether or letting in the right type, at the right time.

The pre-sleep period is when we should dim the lighting and turn off the blue-lit smartphones and gadgets that inhibit drowsiness. Nick recommends a properly dark bedroom, using black-out blinds

if needed and covering up electrical standby lights. When morning comes, however, our bodies dislike being roused in the dark. An alarm clock that suffuses the room with light can make waking easier and leave us more invigorated for the day ahead.

Bringing our brains back into sync with our bodies means letting ample daylight into our lives.

"Being around horses is a fantastic opportunity to spend a lot of time outdoors, in natural light, so embrace the benefits," says Nick. "The nature of riding as a sport means

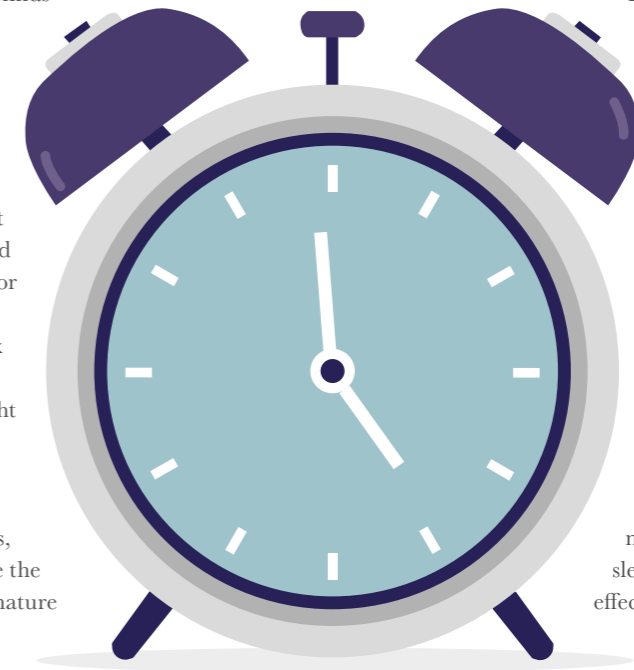
that you're likely to spend fewer hours than most with an electrical device in your hand, so you're less at risk from the modern-day overload of information. That's another tick in the box."

A healthy diet, a cool sleeping environment and a regular routine, where possible, will also help. With light levels, timing and temperature sorted, all that remains is to create a cocoon of night-time comfort with a suitable mattress and appropriate bedding.

"Ideally, develop an approach where you can sleep anywhere, anytime," advises Nick. "Choose things that are transferable for trips away, such as a favourite pillow, and pack sleep kit in the back of the lorry for overnight stays."

We spend a third of our lives trying to sleep, yet how many of us stop to listen to our own internal body clock?

Instead of reaching for caffeine or sugar as a daily pick-me-up, discovering more about our natural sleep needs could be the most effective way to recharge both body and mind. ■



## CASE STUDY: SLEEP

Busy dressage trainer Alison Short is the first to admit that her habits don't always help her get a good night's sleep. While her training download company iRide relies on technology, the blue light emitted by her smartphone keeps her awake long into the night.

"It's plugged in beside my bed and I can still be on Facebook at midnight," she says. "My brain is whirring, then I can't wind down and drop off."

Alison, who keeps her horses at home, has identified other reasons for a lack of quality sleep.

"I run my own diary and usually finish a

long day of teaching with an evening spent answering texts and sorting lesson bookings," says Alison, a British Dressage UKCC 3 accredited coach. "I'm then half asleep by the time I go out to check the horses before bed. I don't just do late-night haynets – I'm skipping out and filling water buckets, too, so after that I'm wide awake again."

Alison has started wearing a Fitbit, which tracks her sleep patterns and even suggests what time she needs to go to bed.

"This has made me more aware that the late nights are probably not a good idea," she says. "Old riding injuries to my back and hip were

keeping me awake, but an orthopaedic mattress with a memory foam topper has helped. We also have black-out blinds to darken the bedroom.

"I'm much more susceptible to stimulants than I used to be, so I don't drink any coffee after midday – not even decaffeinated," she adds. "My motivation and energy levels are higher when I get more sleep, but being attached to my phone is my undoing. Someone pings me a message and out comes the diary, no matter how late it is."

