Consistency is the cornerstone of a healthy sleep routine. What does consistency do for sleep? Going to bed and waking at the same time each day can make you more likely to get a sufficient amount of sleep on a regular basis, and to avoid sleep deprivation and sleep debt. We’re creatures of habit in so many ways—there is comfort and security in having routines in place for many aspects of our waking lives. Routines help make our daily lives easier, and help us to be more efficient with our time and effort. Sleep is really no different. I’ve seen it happen countless times with my patients: adhering to a sleep schedule has helped them become better and more efficient sleepers.

A consistent routine can make both falling asleep and getting up in the morning easier, less stressful, and more relaxing. With a routine in place, your need to think and choose a course of action at the last minute decreases significantly, and this can help to diminish the stress that can so easily occur around bedtime and in the morning. Less stress is always good for sleep.

When we talk about consistency in terms of sleep, we’re talking about not only a regular bedtime, but also a regular wake time. If I asked you to make a list of the habits and routines that are most helpful to your sleep, you’d likely find that most of your ideas revolve around nighttime behavior. When it comes to sleep, we tend to talk a lot about what happens at night in the hours before bed. There’s good reason for that. How you approach bedtime can make an enormous difference to the quality of your sleep. Avoiding stimulants like caffeine, and preparing for sleep with relaxing evening routines, can help you transition to sleep more easily. Setting a regular bedtime—and sticking to it—also can help you get the sleep you need on a regular basis.

TIP: Go to bed—and get up—at the same time every day.

But in truth, the move toward a good night’s sleep begins the moment you wake. In fact, when creating a sleep-wake schedule, you should get up at the same time every day. Rising in the morning is the time your body resets itself each and every day due to exposure to early-morning light.
sunlight. When you are working to establish consistency, the morning is a natural place to begin. It’s also important to establish a schedule that is sustainable and realistic for your life, with its particular demands. There’s not much good to be found in a schedule you can’t live with on a regular basis. Come morning, most of us have places to be and responsibilities to tend to—work, or family, or both—on schedules that aren’t entirely within our control. Starting with wake time allows you to create a sleep-wake schedule that gives you ample time for rest, while taking into account the requirements and realities of your daily life. For this reason, I recommend to my patients that they begin by setting a wake time, and work backward from that point to set a bedtime. Here’s how it works:

• Think about your mornings—what you need to get done and what time you need to be out the door or engaged with your day.
• Select a wake time that gives you enough time to complete your morning routine without rushing. Be realistic about this. I encourage people to give themselves no less than an hour for the simplest wake-up routine that includes rising, bathing, having breakfast, and getting oriented for the day.
• Once your wake time is set, work back 7 to 8 hours to determine the right bedtime for you. Most adults need this amount of sleep to function well during the day. And remember, this is your actual bedtime—not the time you start to get ready for bed. To wind down before bed, give yourself another full hour before your actual bedtime.
• Be prepared to make adjustments once you’ve started sleeping and waking on a regular schedule.

• Allow yourself time to get comfortable. No routine, even the most healthful one, feels perfectly effortless right from the start. It may take you a little time to acclimate to your new sleep-wake schedule. Be patient with yourself. It will get easier. If you stick with it, a routine of regular bed and wake times can eventually feel both natural and welcome.

In addition to making sleep less stressful and more consistent, a routine of regular bedtimes and wake times may also strengthen your sleep-wake cycle, by reinforcing the work of the internal systems that help to drive that cycle. Sleep is driven by two different physiological systems. Our homeostatic sleep system is the body’s internal drive for sleep. It takes its cues primarily from how long it’s been since you last slept, although it can be overridden by factors such as hunger or stress. The longer you’ve been awake, the stronger your body’s homeostatic sleep drive—and the urge you feel to sleep—becomes. The other force in our sleeping lives? Our circadian system. The body’s circadian rhythms help regulate the timing of sleep and wakefulness over the course of a 24-hour night and day. Powerfully influenced by exposure to both darkness and light, circadian rhythms help spur alertness in the morning and throughout the day, and help bring about drowsiness at night in preparation for sleep.

A regular bedtime and wake time schedule can help to reinforce both of your body’s sleep regulation systems. Your body’s homeostatic system works to maintain balance between sleep and wakefulness. A consistent sleep routine that includes regular bedtimes and wake times can help you avoid the extremes of sleep—both
sleep deprivation and oversleeping—that can throw your body’s sleep drive out of whack. Going to bed and getting up at the same time also can strengthen your body’s circadian rhythms, helping to keep this sensitive “sleep clock” synchronized.

Let’s talk about weekends. For many of us, the weekend brings a welcome change from the Monday to Friday routine. When it comes to sleep, however, it’s important to maintain the consistency of your sleep schedule even on the weekends. Sleeping in on the weekend can result in having to readjust to that weekday schedule you’ve worked hard to establish, and that can be difficult to do successfully. A sleep schedule that varies significantly between weekdays and weekends sends mixed messages to your body and mind, including to those very important sleep systems. Slight changes to your sleep-wake schedule aren’t likely to pose problems. But in order to maintain the consistency that is so beneficial to sleep, I recommend not allowing your bedtime or wake time to shift by more than an hour.

If you’re not already on a regular sleep schedule that includes consistent bedtimes and wake times, give this a try. You may surprise yourself at how quickly you take to this new, sleep-enhancing routine.