



## ZENTRUM FÜR POSTINFEKTÖSE MULTISYSTEM-ERKRANKUNGEN

Individualized medicine for children, adolescents, and adults  
with ME/CFS, Long COVID, Post-Vac & related conditions

# Sleep & Stress Management in ME/CFS, Long COVID & Post-Vac

## Why Is Sleep Disrupted?

Sleep is often disturbed because the nervous system remains under constant stress – even during rest. Symptoms such as pain, inner restlessness, or restless legs syndrome significantly interfere with recovery. This often leads to a disrupted sleep-wake rhythm, further destabilizing sleep patterns.

## Sleep in Different Phases of Illness

- **Crash Phase (Acute)**  
In this stage, sleep should not be interrupted or "normalized." Sleep serves as a critical protective mechanism. Rest, withdrawal, and avoiding stimuli like noise and light are essential.
- **Stable Chronic Phase**  
Even if sleep seems unhelpful, reinforcing daily structure and routines is important. This can gradually stabilize the sleep rhythm and improve long-term sleep quality.
- **Recovery Phase**  
Sleep becomes more consistent but remains sensitive to stress. Maintaining sleep hygiene and carefully increasing daily activity helps further stabilize rhythms and strengthen stress resilience.

## What Parents Can Do

- Establish consistent sleep times, including quiet rest periods during the day
- Optimize the sleep environment: dark, cool, quiet, and free of electronics
- Create calming evening rituals: tea, quiet reading, gentle music, hot water bottle, calming scents
- In some cases, medications may help – but always consult a physician. Please do not self-medicate.



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### Recognizing and Reducing Stress

Children and adolescents with ME/CFS or Long COVID have highly sensitive nervous systems. Even everyday stimuli – light, noise, social demands – can overwhelm them. This constant overstimulation often leads to symptoms such as inner agitation, rapid exhaustion, irritability, and concentration problems.

Common stress triggers include:

- School: performance pressure, noise, sensory overload
- Social interactions: fear of not keeping up or being excluded
- Internal expectations: the desire to be “normal” again

### Practical Exercises for Stress Reduction

In the Acute Phase – When even reading or listening feels like too much

In this phase, the child is extremely sensitive to stimuli. Even small tasks can be overwhelming. The goal is maximum sensory reduction and gentle, body-oriented relaxation.

- Silent breath awareness  
The child lies comfortably (on the side or back). Invite them to quietly notice how their breath naturally flows into their belly – without trying to change it. 1–2 minutes is enough. This helps calm the nervous system through soft self-awareness.
- Soothing sensory input that signals safety  
Familiar sensations can be stabilizing: a hot water bottle on the belly, a soft stuffed animal or blanket, a familiar scent.

Always respect your child’s preferences and sensitivities. New or unfamiliar stimuli can overwhelm them in this fragile state. Avoid trying anything new unless you’re sure your child can tolerate it. Prioritize familiarity, predictability, and individual comfort.

### In a More Stable Phase

As the child becomes more resilient, they can listen again and gently engage with inner imagery or movement. Relaxation techniques can now be slightly more imaginative or active – but still very gentle.



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- Guided imagery (fantasy journeys)  
Short stories invite the child to imagine a peaceful, beautiful place:
  - A walk through a quiet forest
  - Floating on a soft cloud  
Stories should be told slowly, with rich imagery and a soft voice.
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR), adapted for children  
Gentle tensing and releasing of muscles helps reduce stress:
  - Example: "Make your hands into tight fists... hold... and now let go."  
Keep sessions short and effortless – it's not about strength but gentle body awareness.
- Meditative breathing exercises  
The child lies down and observes their breath without changing it. They count silently:
  - Inhale – 1, Exhale – 2
  - Inhale – 3, Exhale – 4
  - ...up to 10  
This isn't about getting it "right" – it's about calm focus, fostering mindfulness and inner peace.

## The Role of Parents

You are part of your child's healing system. Your exhaustion, worry, and helplessness are completely valid. You don't have to manage everything alone. Connect with other families (e.g. [nichtgenesenkids.de](https://www.nichtgenesenkids.de))