

You are getting sleepy.

CALENDAR

FOR ALUMNI & FRIENDS

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FOR REAL! TWEEN SCIENCE

Like many kids, you might sleep with a favorite stuffed animal or soft blanket. These snuggly buddies are a huge comfort when you lie down to rest, and there are some likely scientific reasons for this:

Stuffed animals and blankets help you to relax. To fall asleep, your brain needs to feel safe and secure. Feeling Mr. Cuddles’s tail is probably enough to do the trick.

A stuffy can also train your brain to fall asleep. You see Mr. Cuddles as you get ready for bed, so your brain thinks of sleep whenever you look at and hold him. This is why comfort objects are called transitional objects. They let your brain know it’s time to rest and help you to switch from being awake to falling asleep.

Weighted blankets can help you relax, too. They are filled with beads or pellets, which makes them super heavy. To work, the blanket should weigh about 10 percent of what you weigh. Once you get under the heavy blankie, it will gently press on your body in a soothing way. Scientists aren’t sure, but they think people have a natural reflex that responds to this gentle pressure, which helps them to catch some z’s.

So next time you reach for that plush buddy, you can fall asleep knowing that comforting feeling isn’t all fluff! —Alyce Palko

Thanks to Katherine Duggan, a psychology researcher at North Dakota State University who trained at Pitt, for the lowdown on the wind down.

Is there a topic you’d like us to explore? Drop us a line: medmag@pitt.edu.