

Ways to Quiet your Mind at Night

Developed by Ottawa West Health Group, 2014

Many of us worry in bed, lying awake feeling upset and frustrated. Worrying in bed can be an occasional problem that arises when we are stressed, or it can become an ingrained habit that causes us to have countless restless nights and become sleep deprived. The good news is that it is possible to return to having more restful sleep. Here are some tips:

1. **Do not go to bed unless you are sleepy.** Going to bed before you are feeling sleepy works against you. Set a time when you will always get up in the morning, but do not have a set a time to go to bed. Waiting until you are sleepy increases your chances of going to sleep within a short period after getting into bed and reduces the time to begin worrying. This way your bed stays associated with sleep rather than wakefulness.
2. **Increase your exercise.** When you are trying to improve your sleep, it is good to exercise your body more than usual for a few days in a row. A tired body can quiet your mind and increase your physical fatigue level, helping you settle down to sleep.
3. **Worry at a set time every day.** Many of us have the habit of worrying during the night when we are in bed. Choose a time every day to sit down and **actively worry**. Make it a time when you can focus but not too close to bedtime. Write down your list of concerns. Under each one find possible solutions – more than one if possible. Then decide if there is anything you can do about it –something that is possible to do today for each concern (or choose to tackle one issue per day and decide what you can tackle each day). For example, you might decide to make a phone call, find the paperwork, or call and make an appointment with your doctor. When you find yourself worrying in bed, remind yourself that you have time set aside each day to address worries in a better way.
4. **Journal during the day or evening.** Write down all of your thoughts and concerns before going to bed. Let your mind go to your deepest feelings. Get the thoughts and feelings down on paper and let yourself know that you do not have to wait until you have finally stopped for the day and are in bed in order to pay attention to your feelings.

5. **Reframe your thoughts about being awake at night.** Remember a time when you really enjoyed yourself at the same time at night as when you are in bed and wakeful (remember the fantastic party that went on until 4:00 am; the time you set your alarm for 3:30 a.m. so that you could get to the airport to catch the plane for a fantastic holiday; the night you and your friend talked all night). Appreciate that you have the opportunity to be awake in a quiet space without the hubbub of the day.
6. **Get up to settle down.** If you find yourself lying in bed being worried, anxious or frustrated at night, then get out of bed (after about 15 minutes). You do not want to learn to associate bedtime with anxiety and frustration. If possible move to a chair or another room and do a quiet activity such as listening to music or an audio-book. Turn on a soft light if you need to read. Try to avoid blue light (such as is on your TV or your computer). Do not do activities that are hard to stop once you start such as playing a video game. Once you notice that you are calm and sleepy, return to bed.
7. **Tell yourself you are probably sleeping.** During the early stages of sleep it is possible to think and be somewhat aware of your surroundings. Instead of worrying about being awake, remind yourself that you might be asleep already, and invite yourself to let your sleep deepen.
8. **Practice a relaxation exercise such as abdominal breathing or practice a meditation exercise.** Our minds and our physical states are connected. Relaxation takes about 3-5 minutes to kick-in (stress hormones are turned off). Focus on your breathing or do a simple body/mind relaxation, such as relaxing muscle by muscle as you imagine your body is warmed by the sunshine on a beautiful beach. As your body relaxes, your mind will follow.
9. **Use visual imagery.** Science has taught us that we tend to shift from thinking verbally to thinking in imagery as we go from wakefulness to sleep. You may find that building a visual image helps you build a bridge to sleep. For example, imagine filling a balloon with worries and setting it free and watch the balloon rise into the air and slowly disappear. You may need to release more than one balloon in order to fall asleep on some nights.
10. **Distract your mind.** You need to strike a balance when distracting yourself from worrying at night between finding something too stimulating and something too boring. *Your worries will invade your activity. Just notice them and name them "worries," and then return to your activity by remembering where you left off.* Counting sheep is probably too boring an activity for most people and the thoughts invade. Counting backwards from some high number (change it every time you do the exercise) works for some people and takes your brain to a less emotional place. Coming up with two boy's names and two girl's names for every letter of the alphabet or a similar exercise

works for some people. Some people systematically build or decorate their dream home, room by room in their imaginations. Some people remember a pleasant or neutral event that occurred that day and then recall it detail by detail as though they were writing a screen play about it. *Experiment and find the right distraction that holds your interest but does not keep you from drifting off to sleep.*