

Strategies to help when you are having trouble sleeping

The self-help tools below are not intended to be a substitute for treatment. If you are continuing to have difficulty with your sleep after trying the strategies below, we encourage you to speak to your healthcare provider.

What to do in the evening before bed

- **Creating a closure to the day.** This involves taking a few minutes during the day to identify the day's loose ends and creating a plan to address them the next day. This practice is most helpful if conducted at a time that is not right before bed or in the middle of the night. This can include identifying small things (errands to complete) and big, unsolvable things (ongoing stressors). Planning to address loose ends is relatively easy to do for things that are in your control, but many things are partially or fully out of your control. It can help to start by labeling what is in and out of your control, and to identify initial steps you can take for the things that are in your control.
- **Unwinding before sleep.** Unwinding involves doing activities that you enjoy and that are calming. The goal is to give yourself time to transition from the activities of the day to a restful night. Things that are calming may be different for different people. The key is to carefully select those things that are relaxing for *you*. For example, if you enjoy reading or watching TV, you can do that before bed but be sure to pick content that is not too activating. It is also important to pick something that you can stop or put down when you start feeling sleepy, because the best time to go to bed is when you are feeling sleepy. You may also choose to lower indoor lighting, as bright lights can be activating.
- **Going to bed only when calm and sleepy.** Listen to your body. Do not try to sleep when you are alert, fully awake, or worried. If you are not sleepy at bedtime, extend your wind down time until you are.

What to do at night when you are having difficulty sleeping

- **Stop trying to sleep.** Trying harder to sleep does not make sleep come any faster. It is better to take a break from trying to sleep and come back to it later when you are sleepy. During this break, you can do something quiet, such as reading or listening to audio content that is not too activating or exciting. There are many methods for relaxation, you can also do relaxing activities like reading, audio, or watching TV. When feasible and safe, it is most helpful to spend this time awake outside of the bed and return to bed only when sleepy.
- **The key is to rest.** When you are in a restful state, it allows your sleep system to do its job and sleep naturally unfolds. When you are trying to sleep or worrying about sleep, you are not resting. There is also benefit to rest itself- think about how it feels to take a break from working hard on something, whether the work is mental or physical.

- **Avoid engaging activities** that are likely to increase your level of activation (reading the news, working, engaging with stressful content).
- **Avoid worrying about sleep.** Worrying about anything, including sleep, makes it harder to sleep. Thoughts that can make it harder to sleep are ones such as: “How can I cope with not sleeping well?” “How will I be able to function tomorrow?” Such anxious thoughts about sleep create performance anxiety about sleep and make it even harder to sleep. If you cannot let go of your worries in bed, consider engaging in a relaxing activity instead.
- **Avoid checking the time.** Checking time is likely to make you anxious about not sleeping and will increase ‘performance anxiety’ making it even more difficult to sleep. Put your timepiece (like your phone) under the bed or in a drawer where you won’t be tempted to look at it.

Daytime Strategies

The key is to avoid overreacting to sleep loss. Instead, after a bad night, it is best to...

- **Avoid sleeping in the next morning.** Instead, wake up at roughly the same time every morning, regardless of how well or how much you slept.
- **Avoid going to bed earlier than usual the following night, even if you are sleepy.** If you are having trouble staying awake, keep your evening activities engaging to help you stay alert.
- If you realize that you are casting a wider net for sleep than you were before sleep difficulties emerged, consider returning to your typical schedule, even if it means you lose out on some sleep in the short term. This is an investment in your longer-term sleep.
- **Avoid taking long naps or naps late in the day,** unless safety (such as driving) might be compromised if you are sleepy. When it comes to napping, duration and timing matter. A “power nap” is 15-30 minutes early in the afternoon. If you end up napping longer or later in the afternoon, you might have trouble sleeping at night. Short power naps when taken early enough in the day can preserve daytime function without compromising nighttime sleep; they can also help prevent unintentionally dozing off later in the evening.
- **Worry time.** When we are in bed trying to sleep, it can be very hard to quiet our minds. Some worries, particularly those for which we do not have full control over, cannot easily be dismissed. Creating a worry time practice can help us quiet our mind at night. Putting worries on hold at night does not mean we are not doing our part or that we will not deal with what worries us; it means that night is not the time to think about these worries and that we have a plan to come back to them tomorrow. Scheduling 15 min per day to do constructive work on your worries can be helpful. Ideally, schedule this practice at least two hours away from bedtime because it can be temporarily activating.

Constructive worry time can take many forms. For example, during this time, you can write down your worries and identify what is within and outside of your control. For components in your control, identify your next to-do step. For components out of your control, take a few minutes to reflect and recognize that this is out of your control. Then, if worries come up at night, remind yourself that you will look at them in the clear light of day tomorrow. For many of us, it has become a habit to think about our worries if we are awake at night, and consistent practice of scheduling a time to worry can change this pattern.

- People who have difficulty waking up in the morning may find that obtaining 30 minutes of light exposure, shortly after waking, is helpful in increasing alertness.

Key Points

1. Make space to work on worries during the day, so your mind does not need to work on them at night.
2. Give yourself time to transition from a busy day to a restful night by unwinding.
3. When you are experiencing difficulty falling or returning to sleep, stop trying to sleep. Instead, do something else. When feasible and safe, it is most helpful to spend this time awake outside of the bed and return to bed only when sleepy.
4. Keep in mind that sleep cannot be forced; rest is the next best thing.
5. Wake up at roughly the same time every morning, even after a bad night.
6. Avoid going to bed earlier than usual following a bad night.
7. Avoid taking long naps or naps late in the day. A short nap (<20 min) early in the afternoon is ok and unlikely to interfere with the next night's sleep.

Remember, just like learning any new hobby like tennis or a new musical instrument, it takes practice to get good at it. Don't expect changes right away. Keep practicing these techniques until they become a habit. If, however, your sleep difficulties do not improve after about 3-4 weeks, consider participating in [CBT-I](#), a treatment that addresses insomnia symptoms.