

To Sleep or Quiet a Busy Mind

When rest feels impossible without something to switch the brain off

People rarely turn to substances or addictive behaviours for no reason. The behaviour may begin as curiosity, relief, belonging, stimulation, pain management or a way to survive difficult feelings. Understanding the reason does not excuse harm; it helps us work out what support and replacement coping strategies are actually needed.

Insomnia and racing thoughts

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Using alcohol, cannabis or medication to wind down

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Sedation is not always restorative sleep

Poor sleep can make emotions, concentration and cravings harder to manage. Although some substances make a person feel sleepy, sedation is not necessarily the same as restorative sleep. Treating the underlying sleep difficulty can be an important part of recovery.

Tolerance can increase reliance

Tolerance means more may be needed to achieve the previous effect. Dependence can include cravings and withdrawal symptoms. These are health issues rather than evidence of weak character. Some withdrawals, particularly alcohol and benzodiazepines, can require medical management.

Sleep difficulties deserve their own assessment and support

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Questions to explore

What happens immediately before the urge? What changes while using? What feeling, sensation or situation becomes easier? What happens afterwards? What might offer even 10% of the same relief with less harm?

Moving from the reason to a safer response

Understanding the 'why' is most useful when it leads to a practical alternative.

If I need relief	Grounding, breathing, changing environment, talking to someone, professional support.
If I need stimulation	Movement, music, novelty, structured activity, ADHD-informed strategies where appropriate.
If I need connection	A trusted person, peer group, recovery community, shared activity or therapy.
If I need sleep	Sleep assessment, routine, reducing triggers and discussing persistent insomnia with a clinician.
If I need escape	Create immediate safety and stabilisation; trauma work should be paced and professionally supported.
If I am physically dependent	Seek medical or specialist substance-use advice; do not assume abrupt stopping is safe.

Books & places for support

The Unexpected Joy of Being Sober

Catherine Gray

An accessible lived-experience account focused on alcohol and building a life beyond drinking.

Beyond Addiction

Jeffrey Foote, Carrie Wilkens, Nicole Kosanke & Stephanie Higgs

A compassionate evidence-informed book particularly useful for families who want to support change without confrontation.

In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts

Gabor Maté

Explores addiction, suffering and connection. Best considered as one perspective alongside mainstream clinical guidance.

UK help

NHS / GP	A GP can discuss alcohol or drug concerns and local treatment. You can ask for help before things reach crisis point.
FRANK	Confidential drug information and local-service finder. Helpline: 0300 123 6600.
Adfam	Support for families affected by another person's drinking, drug use or gambling.
SMART Recovery	Practical meetings and tools supporting motivation, coping with urges, thoughts/behaviours and balanced living. Family & Friends support is also available.
Local drug & alcohol services	Community services can offer assessment, harm-reduction advice, psychological support, recovery groups and treatment pathways.
Emergency help	Call 999 for suspected overdose, collapse, seizure, severe breathing difficulty or immediate danger. Physical dependence on alcohol or benzodiazepines can make abrupt withdrawal dangerous.

Educational resource - not a substitute for individual medical, psychological or emergency care.