

SLEEP

When Your Mind Won't Switch Off

A personal reflection

There is a particular kind of tiredness that comes from desperately wanting to sleep while your mind seems determined to stay awake. Your body may feel heavy, your eyes may sting, and yet the moment the room becomes quiet your thoughts become louder. You remember something you forgot to do. You replay a conversation. You start thinking about tomorrow. Then you notice the time, calculate how many hours are left, and the pressure to sleep becomes another reason you cannot settle.

I think this is one of the hardest parts of poor sleep: it is not only the tiredness. It is the relationship we can develop with bedtime. The bed can stop feeling like somewhere we rest and start feeling like somewhere we are tested. We can begin judging ourselves by whether we slept, how quickly we fell asleep, how often we woke, and whether we will be able to function the next day.

Rest is not the same as failure

Sometimes the most helpful shift is to stop making sleep the task. We cannot command the brain to switch off on demand. What we can do is reduce the fight around being awake. Resting quietly still gives the body a pause. Closing your eyes, softening your muscles, slowing the pace of the evening and allowing yourself to be still can have value even before sleep arrives.

This does not mean pretending that chronic sleep problems are easy or that a few calming ideas will fix everything. Sleep can be affected by stress, anxiety, neurodivergence, pain, hormones, medication, environment, physical health and changes in routine. For some people, the mind becomes most active at night because it is the first quiet space it has had all day.

A gentle check-in

What is happening in me tonight?	What does my system seem to need?
My body feels... 	Less stimulation / reassurance / warmth / space / movement / quiet / something else:
My mind keeps returning to... 	One thing I can leave until tomorrow is...

WHAT CAN HELP?

Not a perfect bedtime — a kinder one

When sleep is difficult, adding a long list of rules can create more pressure. Rather than trying to do everything, choose one or two things that make the evening feel less demanding. The aim is to help your nervous system recognise that the day is ending, not to perform a flawless sleep routine.

Give the brain somewhere to put tomorrow

If your mind starts producing reminders as soon as you lie down, write them somewhere before bed. Keep it brief: what needs remembering, what can wait, and the first thing you will do tomorrow. You are not trying to solve the whole problem at night; you are showing your brain that the thought has somewhere to go.

Lower the stimulation rather than chasing sleep

A quieter final part of the evening can help: softer lighting, less emotionally demanding content, fewer work decisions and a familiar activity that does not ask much of you. Consistency can be useful, but it does not need to become rigid. A routine should support you, not become another standard you feel you have failed.

If you wake in the night

Try not to turn the clock into a countdown. Notice your jaw, shoulders, hands and stomach and let them soften where you can. If staying in bed is making you increasingly frustrated or alert, a short period of quiet activity in low light may be more helpful than continuing the battle. Return when you feel sleepier.

Protect the morning after a poor night

A bad night often creates a second struggle the next morning: we expect ourselves to operate exactly as usual. Where possible, reduce unnecessary demands, eat and drink regularly, get some daylight, and make decisions simpler. Being tired is information about your capacity; it is not evidence that you are lazy or failing.

My sleep check-in

Tonight I want less of...	Tonight I want more of...
One thing I can do before bed	One thing I can stop asking of myself

When to ask for more help

If sleep difficulties continue, are significantly affecting your daytime life, or you experience loud snoring, gasping or pauses in breathing, unusual night-time movements, or severe daytime sleepiness, speak with a GP or appropriate healthcare professional. Persistent sleep problems can have different causes and sometimes need assessment rather than more self-help.

A final reminder

You do not have to earn the right to rest. You do not have to make tonight perfect. Sometimes the kindest starting point is simply to stop fighting

yourself and ask: what would make this moment a little easier?

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This resource is for information and support and does not replace individual medical advice, diagnosis or treatment.