

Sunday Night Anxiety

WHEN THE WEEK AHEAD FEELS OVERWHELMING

When Sunday stops feeling like part of the weekend

For some people, Sunday evening is not restful. Somewhere between the afternoon and bedtime, the working week begins arriving early. Thoughts turn towards Monday's alarm, the journey, unread emails, meetings, deadlines, difficult relationships, unfinished work or simply the effort required to become the version of ourselves that work expects. The body can respond as though Monday is already happening: a tight chest, churning stomach, irritability, restlessness, headache, racing thoughts or a feeling of dread that is difficult to explain.

Sunday night anxiety is sometimes described casually as the 'Sunday scaries', but that phrase can make a very real experience sound trivial. For someone who repeatedly loses part of every weekend to anticipatory anxiety, this can affect sleep, relationships, appetite, concentration and the ability to recover from the previous week. By Monday morning they may already feel depleted.

If your nervous system starts preparing for work before you have even gone to bed, that is worth understanding rather than dismissing.

Why does it happen?

There is rarely one single reason. Sometimes Monday represents uncertainty: not knowing what will be waiting, whether something has gone wrong, how much work has accumulated or what mood another person will be in. Sometimes it is workload. Sometimes it is social anxiety, a difficult manager, bullying, sensory overload, commuting, meetings or fear of making mistakes. For neurodivergent people, the transition from a self-directed weekend into a highly demanding environment can itself require considerable mental preparation.

The anxiety can also become learned. If many Mondays have been difficult, the brain may begin predicting danger before anything has actually happened. Sunday evening becomes a cue. The body remembers the pattern and starts mobilising for it. This does not mean the anxiety is imaginary. It means your mind and body may be responding to what they have learned about work.

Notice what your anxiety is pointing towards

Instead of beginning with 'How do I stop feeling anxious?', try asking 'What does my anxiety expect tomorrow?' Is it one particular meeting? The volume of work? Having to mask? A person? The commute? Noise? Not knowing what is expected? Fear that you have forgotten something? Returning after absence? Or simply the thought of another five days when you have not recovered from the last five?

Naming the feared part can turn a large, shapeless feeling into something that can be understood. Sometimes the answer also reveals that the solution cannot be relaxation alone; something about work may need attention.

Helping Sunday Feel Like Sunday Again

It is tempting to spend Sunday preparing for every possible problem. Checking emails can feel as though it will reduce uncertainty, but it may bring work fully into your recovery time. Making endless lists can do the same. Preparation is useful when it creates containment; it becomes less useful when it turns the whole evening into an unpaid extension of Monday.

Create a small landing place for Monday

If your mind is repeatedly reminding you of things, write them down once. Keep the list short: what genuinely needs attention first, what can wait and anything you are afraid you will forget. Then close it. You are giving your brain somewhere to put the information rather than asking it to rehearse it all night.

Prepare only what helps

Some people feel calmer if clothes, medication, lunch, travel arrangements or a work bag are ready. Others find that too much Sunday preparation makes them feel as though work owns the evening. There is no correct routine. Ask whether an activity genuinely reduces demand tomorrow or simply keeps you mentally at work tonight.

Make the transition gentler

The jump from weekend autonomy to Monday demands can be particularly difficult with ADHD, autism, anxiety or burnout. A predictable Sunday-evening routine may help: lower stimulation, reduce decision-making, choose familiar food, prepare sensory supports, avoid packing the final hour before sleep with tasks and allow extra time in the morning if possible. The purpose is not to create a perfect wellness routine. It is to reduce unnecessary demands on an already activated nervous system.

When your mind starts rehearsing Monday

Try separating what is happening now from what may happen tomorrow. You might say to yourself: 'I am in my home on Sunday evening. The meeting is tomorrow, not now.' This is not pretending the meeting does not exist. It is reminding the nervous system that anticipation and the event are two different moments.

If a thought needs action, put the action on your Monday list. If it does not need action tonight, practise letting it remain unfinished. Anxiety often asks us to solve tomorrow before we are allowed to rest today.

Rest is not something you have to earn by becoming completely prepared for Monday.

What if sleep becomes the next worry?

Sunday anxiety can create a second layer: 'If I do not sleep now, tomorrow will be awful.' Watching the clock and calculating remaining sleep can increase arousal. If possible, move the clock out of direct view and shift the aim from forcing sleep to allowing rest. A difficult night may make Monday harder, but the pressure to achieve perfect sleep can make falling asleep even more difficult.

When Sunday Anxiety Is Telling You Something About Work

Coping strategies can help, but they should not be used to make an unhealthy working situation tolerable indefinitely. If dread appears every week, becomes stronger, begins earlier in the weekend or is connected to a specific person or workplace condition, look beyond the Sunday evening itself.

Ask what could change

Would clearer priorities help? Fewer Monday-morning meetings? Written instructions? A quieter workspace? A later start or flexible hours? Reduced sensory demands? More predictable communication? Support with workload? A conversation about bullying or relationships? A reasonable adjustment? Occupational-health input? Sometimes one practical change reduces far more anxiety than another breathing exercise.

Keep a short pattern record

For three or four weeks, notice when the anxiety begins, what thoughts appear, what you feel physically and what happens at work the following day. You may discover a pattern that is difficult to see while you are inside it. Perhaps Sunday anxiety peaks before a particular weekly meeting. Perhaps it follows weeks where you worked through breaks. Perhaps it improves when expectations are clear. Patterns can give you useful information for a conversation with a manager, occupational health, therapist or GP.

When to reach for more support

Consider additional support if anxiety is repeatedly affecting sleep, appetite, physical health, relationships or your ability to function; if you are experiencing panic; if you are relying increasingly on alcohol, substances or other behaviours to get through Sunday; or if work dread is becoming difficult to manage alone. A GP, therapist, occupational health professional or appropriate workplace service can help you understand what is happening and what support may be useful.

If your workplace is contributing significantly to distress, support should include looking at the work environment rather than treating the entire problem as something inside you.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

There is something particularly difficult about watching the final hours of a weekend disappear into worry. It can feel as though work has reached into time that was supposed to belong to you. If this happens regularly, I would not want you simply to become better at tolerating it. I would want you to become curious about what your mind and body are trying to tell you.

Maybe you need a gentler transition. Maybe you need clearer boundaries. Maybe something at work needs to change. Maybe you need more support than you currently have. Whatever the answer, Sunday night anxiety is not a personal failure. It is information. We can listen to that information without allowing it to take the whole evening away.

You do not need to live Monday twice — once in your head on Sunday night and again when Monday actually arrives.

Try this tonight: Write down the three things that genuinely need your attention tomorrow. Put the list somewhere you will see it in the morning. Then ask yourself: 'Is there anything else I can realistically do about Monday tonight?' If the answer is no, give yourself permission to return to Sunday.

Important: This resource provides general wellbeing information and does not replace individual medical, psychological or occupational-health advice.