

THE SLEEP RESET

Quiet the Racing Mind

Evidence-Based Ways to Empty Your Head Before Bed



REST DEEPLY. WAKE REFRESHED. LIVE WELL.

THE NIGHTTIME MIND

You're exhausted. Your body is ready for sleep. And your brain has decided this is the perfect time to replay an awkward conversation from three years ago, remind you about a work deadline, and draft a grocery list — all at once.

A racing mind at bedtime is one of the most common reasons people struggle to fall asleep, and it's rarely about willpower. Your brain doesn't distinguish well between "important enough to think about now" and "important enough to think about at 2pm tomorrow" — so unresolved thoughts tend to surface exactly when the day's distractions disappear.

This guide walks through three techniques for quieting a racing mind before sleep: the worry dump, constructive worry, and cognitive defusion for thoughts that don't have a clean solution. Each is backed by real research, and each takes just a few minutes to learn.

A quick note: these techniques are educational tools for everyday racing thoughts, not a replacement for treatment of clinical anxiety or insomnia.

TECHNIQUE 1

The Worry Dump

Racing thoughts at bedtime usually aren't random — they're your brain trying to hold onto something important so it doesn't get lost overnight. The problem is that "holding onto it" in your head feels a lot like rehearsing it, which keeps your nervous system alert exactly when it needs to power down. A worry dump interrupts that loop by moving the thought out of your head and onto paper, where your brain no longer has to keep guarding it.

How to Do It

- Set a timer for 5–10 minutes, 1–2 hours before bed (not lying in bed).
- Write down everything on your mind — tasks, worries, half-finished thoughts — without editing or organizing.
- Don't try to solve anything yet. The goal is capture, not resolution.
- Close the notebook when the timer ends, even if the list feels incomplete.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND IT

A 2018 study out of Baylor University by Scullin and colleagues compared people who wrote a to-do list of upcoming tasks before bed with people who wrote about tasks they'd already completed. The to-do list group fell asleep faster — and the more specific their list, the faster they fell asleep, which is the opposite of what most people assume about thinking through tomorrow right before lights-out.

Separately, a 2011 pilot trial by Digdon and Koble tested a related technique called constructive worry: writing down a worry alongside one concrete next step for addressing it, earlier in the evening. Participants who practiced this reported less time spent lying awake worrying and improvements in sleep quality, suggesting the benefit comes not just from unloading thoughts, but from giving the brain a sense that a plan already exists.

TECHNIQUE 2

Constructive Worry, Not Just a To-Do List

A plain worry dump helps, but you can make it more effective by pairing each worry with a next action — even a small, imperfect one. This gives your brain permission to let go of the thought, because it no longer needs to keep replaying it as a way of "making sure it doesn't get forgotten."

How to Do It

- In one column, write down each worry or open loop.
- In a second column, write one concrete next step — even "decide tomorrow morning" counts.
- Keep this earlier in the evening rather than right at bedtime, so there's a buffer between naming the worry and trying to sleep.
- If a worry resurfaces in bed, briefly remind yourself: "It's on the list, with a plan."

THE SCIENCE BEHIND IT

The constructive worry technique is grounded in a well-established idea in sleep psychology: unresolved concerns create cognitive arousal, and cognitive arousal is one of the strongest predictors of trouble falling asleep. Digdon and Koble's 2011 pilot trial found that briefly writing worries down alongside a planned next step, completed earlier in the evening, reduced pre-sleep worry and was associated with improved sleep-onset outcomes compared to a control condition.

This pairs naturally with the Scullin et al. 2018 to-do list findings — both point to the same underlying mechanism: externalizing an intention (writing it down with a plan) appears to satisfy the brain's need to "keep track," which is often what's actually driving the racing-thoughts feeling at bedtime.

TECHNIQUE 3

Cognitive Defusion for Intrusive Thoughts

Some racing thoughts aren't practical worries with a next step — they're intrusive, repetitive, or emotionally charged, and trying to "solve" them at 11pm usually makes them louder. Cognitive defusion, a technique from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), doesn't try to stop or fix the thought. Instead, it changes your relationship to it — helping you notice a thought as just a thought, rather than a fact demanding your full attention.

How to Do It

- Notice the thought and mentally (or quietly, out loud) preface it: "I'm having the thought that..." — for example, "I'm having the thought that I forgot to reply to that email."
- This small linguistic shift creates distance between you and the thought, rather than being fused with it.
- Let the thought sit there without pushing it away or engaging with its content. You're not ignoring it — you're just not wrestling with it.
- If it returns, repeat the same labeling. Repetition is normal and doesn't mean the technique isn't working.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND IT

Cognitive defusion is one of the core processes in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and mindfulness- and acceptance-based approaches have a growing evidence base for reducing insomnia severity — largely by interrupting the struggle against a thought, which tends to amplify it rather than quiet it.

The mechanism is different from constructive worry: rather than resolving the content of the thought, defusion targets the meta-level relationship you have with your own thinking. For thoughts that don't have a clean "next step" — intrusive replays, what-ifs, or emotionally sticky moments from the day — this makes it a useful complementary tool alongside the worry dump and constructive worry techniques above.

Bringing It Together

A racing mind at bedtime isn't a character flaw or a sign that something is wrong with you — it's usually just an unfinished mental process looking for somewhere to land. The worry dump and constructive worry give practical concerns a place to go besides your head. Cognitive defusion gives you a way to coexist with the thoughts that don't have a tidy resolution.

You don't need to use all three every night. Many people find that a 5-minute worry dump earlier in the evening, done consistently, is enough on its own. Save constructive worry for seasons when specific stressors are weighing on you, and keep cognitive defusion in your back pocket for the nights when a thought just won't let go.

If racing thoughts are a nightly occurrence that significantly affects your sleep or daytime functioning, it's worth talking to a doctor or therapist — these techniques work well alongside professional support, including CBT-I, but aren't a replacement for it when something more persistent is going on.

SOURCES

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