

MANAGING YOUR INSOMNIA: A FOCUS ON NIGHTTIME WORRYING

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Do worried thoughts keep you awake at night? Do you find yourself tossing and turning, or staring at the ceiling, unable to quiet your mind and drift off to sleep? If so, you are not alone. Stress and anxiety about daily life keeps people from falling asleep easily, and from sleeping soundly and well throughout the night. Worrying about money, fretting about work, thinking about how your kids are doing in school—there often seems no shortage of things about which to feel stress. Unfortunately, nighttime can be a prime time for worried thoughts to take over our minds, at the expense of sleep. Losing sleep to worry is among the most common issues I hear about from patients.

Negative thoughts and worries can create stress at bedtime, just as they can at any other time of day. Those worried thoughts—and the stress they create—may leave you feeling alert. You may feel unable to relax physically as well as mentally. When you carry worries with you to bed, they can interfere with falling asleep. They also can lead you to more easily wake throughout the night, or to wake very early in the morning. Over time, the daily worries that follow you to bed can be compounded by another: worry about sleep itself, and about your ability to fall asleep.

Creating a nighttime routine that emphasizes relaxation can help you shake loose daily concerns, quiet your mind, and prepare to fall asleep. The first step often involves simply slowing down. It's all too easy to fill your evening hours with tasks from your to-do list right up until you're ready to sleep. Instead, create a buffer of time—60 minutes—between your daily routine and bedtime. This “power down hour” is a time

for you to slow down, step away from the issues of the day, and allow your body and mind to relax. Take a warm shower or bath. Read a good book

or listen to relaxing music. Meditate, or do some gentle stretching. These kinds of soothing activities can become nightly rituals that help you sleep easier and more soundly.

TIP: To prepare for sleep, take your worries off your mind by writing them down.

Another strategy for coping with nighttime worries that interfere with sleep is to create a “worry journal.” This is a technique I use frequently with patients who are struggling to let go of their thoughts at night. Writing worries down before bed gives your mind permission to let go of these thoughts before sleep. Part of keeping a worry journal also includes forming a plan to address your concerns—at times other than bedtime.

My Suggestion: Creating a Worry Journal

1. Select a notebook or notepad. On a blank page, draw a line down the center, creating 2 columns. Do this on 3 pages.



2. At the top of the first page, write: *I need to remember to take care of...*
3. At the top of the second page, write: *I can't forget to...*
4. At the top of the third page, write: *I am so worried about...*
5. In the left column of each page, finish the sentence at the top, writing down everything that occurs to you.
6. In the right column, address the concern, worry, or task, by scheduling a time to think about it or deal with it.

When writing in your worry journal, do your best not to censor or to judge yourself. This is a purely private exercise, a place for you to be honest about what's really on your mind. No worry is too small or too strange.

The practice of keeping a worry journal can help you keep daily concerns and anxieties from becoming exaggerated in your mind. When you're tired, you may be more likely to feel overwhelmed, less in control, and more prone to magnify your worries and their possible negative outcomes. This tendency to imagine worst-case scenarios is known as *catastrophizing*. It's not hard to see why this kind of worrying might keep you up at night, struggling to fall asleep. There can be a cyclical effect to this kind of thinking, and its impact on sleep. Low on sleep, feeling tired and fatigued, you may be more vulnerable to the very thought patterns that prevent you from resting well at night.

The key to breaking this cycle is to reset your thinking. A worry journal can help you do this, providing you with some very helpful distance from the issues that are causing you stress at

night. When you find yourself preoccupied with worries at night, it can also be helpful to ask yourself: How might I feel differently about this issue during the day? Take your most stressful concern and consider whether the anxiety you feel over this issue would be as intensely worrisome in the clear light of morning. Very often, you'll find that those big worries aren't nearly as big as your nighttime brain imagines them to be.

These strategies can serve as a kind of "stop sign" to keep negative thought patterns from escalating. Changing thoughts is often the first step toward changing behavior. In the case of sleep, changing behavior can mean moving toward a more relaxed bedtime, and an easier and more peaceful dropping off to sleep.

If you find that these techniques aren't helping you ratchet down your nighttime anxiety, you may want to consider consulting with a sleep specialist to explore other treatment options, including cognitive-behavior therapy for sleep.

What exactly is cognitive-behavioral therapy? As its name suggests, this is a two-part strategy of treatment. One aspect involves addressing cognition—thinking—while the other focuses on behavior. Research has shown that cognitive-behavioral therapy (often referred to as CBT) can be effective in helping to resolve sleep issues.

CBT for sleep includes first identifying and ultimately changing ways of thinking about sleep so that you can fall asleep with less difficulty. Changing thinking about sleep involves addressing the daily worries you bring to bed, as well as transforming attitudes you may have about sleep and your ability to sleep successfully.

The behavioral aspect of CBT for sleep centers on actions you take in preparing for sleep and after you've gone to bed. There are a number of behavioral strategies that can help, including relaxation techniques, removing sources of stimulation from your sleep environment, and avoiding staying in bed when you're not sleeping. A sleep specialist can help guide you through both the cognitive and behavioral aspects of this form of treatment for sleep problems.

Don't let worry keep you up at night. Paying attention to where your mind goes in the evening hours can tell you a great deal about whether stress and the anxieties of daily life may be interfering with your nightly rest. If that's the case, put pen and paper by your bedside, and try offloading your worries from your mind to the page tonight. You may find this simple practice delivers you the peace of mind you need to drift off to sleep.