

## WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR STRESS STEALS YOUR SLEEP

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How many nights in the past month have you struggled to get to sleep? How many of those nights were you up thinking about several things that you were unable to change at that moment?

Several factors can affect how well and for how long you sleep at night. These can be unhealthy habits before sleep, such as watching Netflix way too late because you want to finish “just one more episode,” poor eating habits, lack of physical activity throughout the day, and your age. Medical issues can also be one of the causes, which is why it’s important to rule out any other possible reasons. However, if you tend to feel keyed up during the day, restless, find your mind wandering when you are trying to focus on that Zoom meeting for work, or can’t stop reading articles about COVID-19, stress and anxiety may be a likely culprit.

**The term for chronic sleep difficulties is insomnia.**

The Mayo Clinic lists stress as the number one factor that tends to lead to insomnia. Anxiety and lack of sleep go hand in hand. This leads to a multitude of factors that create a vicious cycle when it comes to your sleep.

You are up all night worrying about something. And this can be something way back in your past, an argument you had with a loved one the day before, a task you need to complete for the next day at work, or simply worrying about the fact that you can’t sleep. I know! That last one is ironic. You start counting how many hours you have left until your alarm goes off, which further raises your stress level. The next day, you are tired, can’t focus, and may be a little irritable. You might deal with this by drinking more coffee, stress eating, and making mistakes at work. These then further impact your level of stress ability to sleep that night and you start telling yourself “not this again. I’m never going to get to sleep.”

**So, why does insomnia happen in the first place?**

Why do some people tend to worry so much at night? Sometimes, your brain confuses worrying with problem-solving.

There is a healthy degree of worry. Some worry can lead to focusing on problems rather than ignoring them. If you are focused on a problem, it will be more likely that you will come up with some ways to solve it rather than simply sweeping it under the rug.

However, your level of worry can be dialed up way too high. It can cause you to overthink things or create doubt for possible solutions. Often, you may worry incessantly about things that don't even have a solution. These may be unsolvable problems.

If you're up late worrying about when a vaccine will be created for COVID-19, a vaccine isn't then going to be discovered any faster. If you're up ruminating about something that happened six months ago, there probably isn't anything you can do about it now. And certainly not in the middle of the night when you're trying to sleep. You might even be thinking to yourself "These are some of the things I worry about but I *know* that these things aren't true. I worry constantly about getting sick or my loved ones getting sick and I know my worrying won't speed up the creation of a vaccine. But I can't shut my brain off."

The problem is that we most likely believe these things on an intellectual level. "I know that thinking about something that happened in the past won't change what happened." "I know that worrying isn't necessarily going to make me any safer." However, sometimes our brains can't tell the difference between problems happening to us right now that we can work through and problems that we either can't control or can't solve until a later time.

How many times do you worry about things that end up *never* happening? Worry is your brain's way of trying to prepare you for a problem. But worry tends to lead to more worry, not necessarily solutions. This is especially true at night when you are trying to get some rest and don't have as many distractions as you have throughout the day. In a way, your defenses are down and it becomes more likely that anxious thoughts may creep into your head.

I have worked with some individuals who are very effective at keeping worrying thoughts at bay during the day, but once their head hits the pillow, their thoughts start racing. One of the best ways you can start taking control of your sleep again is by developing a healthy nighttime routine. This will quiet down those loud and incessant thoughts at night.

### **Stop Doom Scrolling!**

You may be asking, what the heck is "*doom scrolling??*" With new technology comes new funny-sounding lingo.

Do you ever get stuck reading Facebook or Twitter and start reading one scary or upsetting news story and then go deeper down this rabbit hole of articles, posts, and comments until you look at the time and you've just spent 2 hours in mental anguish? That's doom scrolling.

The infinite barrage of news, facts, misinformation, angry comments, and upsetting imagery that make up your news feed creates a desire to keep reading more. Your brain takes in all of this information and tries to find a way to gain control. You try to gain control by reading more and more and in an attempt to inform yourself or battle people on social media, which are both endless pursuits. You rile yourself up to becoming even more anxious, angry, and helpless. These are not the emotions you want before bedtime.

How often do you find yourself engaging in this before bed? Looking at screens before bed isn't recommended as it is. I would certainly recommend turning off all screens before bed if I didn't stare at screens before bed myself!

But if you can't quite bring yourself to drop the screens altogether, it's important to at least change what you are reading and watching before bed. Stick to media where you know you won't come across something upsetting. This most likely eliminates Facebook and Twitter. Try watching a light comedy before bed or something funny on YouTube. Listen to a guided meditation podcast or a recording through a mindfulness service such as Headspace.

### **Stop Thinking and Start Writing**

When some people hear the word "journaling" they think about a secret book that holds their deepest and most personal thoughts. But journaling can also just be the act of writing down your racing thoughts to get them out of your head.

Many chronic worriers spend their nights planning for the next day. "What should I say at that meeting tomorrow?" "I have so much to get done. How am I going to get through the day?" "Did my kid really mean what he said to me when we were arguing?" Some of these issues may have a solution, such as building up the confidence to speak up at those difficult meetings, prioritizing tasks better, or talking with a loved one about that conversation that went awry. However, 2:00 am is not the time to problem-solve.

You might be awake worrying because you think that if given more time, a solution will come to you. Therefore, your brain spends countless hours ruminating about whatever you are worried about, trying to make sense of challenging situations, and playing scenarios like a movie in your head over and over.

The act of writing (or typing if you prefer) out the things that are clogging up your mind can externalize your worries. My wife would agree that one of my many loves in life is to-do lists. I wasn't one to use to-do lists or calendars until after college. Once life started to get more complicated, I had to create more structure in my life using do lists and calendars and I stress the use of these in my sessions with clients. They help organize the messy and complicated things in our lives and give a sense of control.

Often, our brains tend to quiet down just by jotting down our problems. Not necessarily by solving them. If you put your problems down on paper, your brain may not feel as inclined to keep those problems swimming around in your head all night. Just knowing that these problems are more tangible on paper, your brain doesn't need to hold onto it as much at night since you know that you will come back to them at a later time.

### **Accept the Things You Can't Control**

Sometimes, finding solutions isn't the answer to the problems you face. We all face problems that simply don't have an answer. Worrying and over-analyzing these problems is your brain's way of trying to gain control. However, in situations when a problem cannot be changed or controlled, coping strategies such as challenging thoughts and changing the way you look at things can be helpful.

These strategies don't tend to come naturally and can require a great deal of practice. Some find these easier to work on with the guidance of a Cognitive Behavioral Therapist. Cognitive Behavioral Therapists examine the ways your thoughts influence your feelings. When you encounter unchangeable problems, a therapist can help you identify the unhealthy or unproductive thoughts that perpetuate the problem and worsen your feelings about it and find different ways of viewing it. This won't get rid of the problem, but can lessen the degree of distress or suffering from excessively ruminating about it.

If you are struggling to manage your sleep due to stress and anxiety, don't hesitate to reach out for help. Difficulty sleeping is a common symptom of anxiety, depression, and many other mental health challenges and a licensed professional can help you turn your restless nights into eight hours of restful sleep.