
When sleep won't come

Trying hard to sleep is one of the surest ways to stay awake. Sleep tends to come when we stop chasing it.

Rest, without trying to sleep

- Give yourself permission to stay awake, and make the job resting rather than sleeping. Lie comfortably in the dark, eyes open or closed.
- Quiet rest is still good for you, even when it isn't sleep.
- Let thoughts pass like traffic outside. Nothing needs solving at 2 am.
- Let your body be heavy: the weight of the covers, the mattress holding you. Tense and let go can help.
- Turn the clock away. Checking the time adds pressure.

If you're lying there frustrated

If you've been awake a while and you're getting wound up (a rough sense is enough; no clock needed), get up. Go somewhere dim and warm and do something quiet and dull: an undemanding book, folding washing, calm music. Go back to bed when you feel sleepy. Do this as often as you need to.

A worry list

Keep a notepad by the bed. If tomorrow is running through your head, write each worry down with one next step, or "nothing to do tonight". Then it can wait until morning.

In the daytime

- Get up at about the same time each day, even after a bad night.
- Get some daylight early in the day.
- Keep naps short and early, or skip them.
- Caffeine after midday and alcohol in the evening both make sleep lighter.

Worth seeing your GP

If poor sleep goes on for more than a few weeks, or you snore heavily, stop breathing in your sleep, or feel very sleepy during the day.

Not trying to sleep is sometimes called paradoxical intention. The idea goes back to Viktor Frankl, and it is one of the approaches used in cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia (CBT-I).