

The Racing Mind

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We've all been there - awake at night, staring at the ceiling, with our minds racing at a hundred miles an hour. The so-called "racing mind" is very common, and can stop us from both getting to sleep at the start of the night and getting back to sleep after waking.

The content of our thoughts at these times can be highly varied, but most fit into one of a handful of categories. Planning and problem-solving thoughts involve ruminating on past events or worries about things happening in the future. Sleep thoughts are worries about not sleeping and possible negative consequences the next day. Heightened awareness thoughts are a focus on sounds or physical sensations - either external to us (music from a neighbour, lights from the street) or within us (our heart beat). Finally, we can think about thinking itself - get frustrated with the volume of trivial or nonsense thoughts occupying our mind.

In this guide we look at a few evidence-based techniques to help overcome the racing mind and encourage sleep to come.

Challenge your thoughts

One approach to dealing with intrusive negative thoughts is to use information to challenge them. When we're awake at night, tired and frustrated, our thoughts can be exaggerated by emotions. The key is to remember our thoughts and beliefs are just that - beliefs. If we can calmly stand back from them and look at them unemotionally for what they are we can reduce the effect they have on us.

So for example, we might think a thought like

"I won't sleep a wink tonight - and tomorrow is going to be a total disaster - I won't be able to function at all!"

If we take a step back, and calmly consider the facts based on our experience and knowledge we might be able to adjust our perspective. We might say to ourselves,

"Well, even on my worst nights I tend to get at least some sleep, so technically it's not true that I probably won't sleep a wink. And if I think back to the last time I had a bad night, the next day certainly wasn't one of my best but I got through it - and it was nowhere near as bad as I was dreading!"

By calmly using facts in this way we can defuse our negative thoughts and provide a more balanced perspective...which

should make us feel calmer and more in control, and in turn make sleep more likely to come.

Take a Mindful Approach

An approach that many people find productive is to step back from their negative thoughts and just accept them. This awareness, so that you can take a 'helicopter view' of your thinking, is called mindfulness. It allows you to remove yourself from the emotional struggle involved in such thinking and simply let your thoughts go.

A good analogy is the weather - this changes from bright sunshine to dark and stormy, and can have a huge impact on how we feel. But it's wasted energy spent on getting frustrated with it, and impossible to control - the weather will do what it will do, whatever efforts or complaints we make.

So, as thoughts enter our minds, like clouds entering a blue sky, we should try to just observe them and let them pass at their own speed. They may be fluffy clouds - positive thoughts - or dark, stormy clouds - worries and stresses - but we should treat them all the same. Let them do what they will do - stay, move on, at their own pace.

So next time you find yourself lying awake with thoughts racing through your mind, try gently pulling back from them, and see if you can observe without reacting to them.

The Thought Locker

When we're tired and frustrated we're in far from the best state to solve problems that are bothering us. Yet at night is the time when worries can rear their ugly heads and demand our attention.

In times such as this a useful technique is put these thoughts and worries in a safe place to be dealt with later, when you're awake and alert and far better placed to find a good solution. One approach is to put a notebook and pen by your bed, so if you find yourself running through problems that need to be solved you can easily jot them down, to be dealt with in the morning by your "future self".

But even if you don't have a notepad to hand, you can mentally put those worries away for a future you to deal with. With your eyes closed simply imagine a sturdy glass box floating above your head, attached to the wall. This is your thought locker. Now open the lid of that box with your mind, put the bothersome worry into the box, and let the lid shut firmly behind it.

With the topic trapped in that sturdy locker, ready to be looked at afresh in the morning, you can focus on the most productive thing you can do - rest and relax. If any further thoughts appear, open that lid and drop them in the locker. And if you find yourself returning to any topic, just remind yourself that it's already safely in the locker to be sorted out in the cold light of morning.