

Why Can't I Switch Off at Night?

You've made it through the day. You're tired. Maybe you've even spent the last few hours looking forward to finally getting into bed.

Your body stops. And your mind carries on.

Suddenly you're thinking about the conversation you had earlier. Something that happened at work. The email you need to send tomorrow. What time you need to get up. Something you forgot to do. Something you wish you had done differently.

Or perhaps your thoughts don't stay anywhere for very long at all. They jump from one thing to another, seemingly at random, until eventually you find yourself wide awake wondering why your brain has chosen *now* to think about all of this.

Your body may have stopped for the day, but your mind hasn't caught up yet.

Why does everything come into my head when I'm trying to sleep?

Think about how much of the day we spend doing.

We work. We travel. We talk to people. We answer messages. We make decisions. We look after other people. We plan. We solve problems. We scroll. We cook dinner. We watch television.

Even when we think we're relaxing, our attention is often occupied by something. Then we go to bed.

The room becomes quiet. Our body is still. The things that have been competing for our attention all day begin to disappear. And sometimes, for the first time all day, our mind has space.

This is something I hear in therapy quite often. People tell me that they don't think about certain things while they're busy. They can get through the working day, complete everything that needs to be done and keep functioning.

It's when they finally stop that the thoughts arrive. Keeping busy hasn't necessarily made those thoughts disappear. It may simply have delayed them.

One thought can quickly become another

Nighttime thinking doesn't always look like worrying about one particular problem. Perhaps you start thinking about what you need to do tomorrow. Then you remember how stressful today was. And tomorrow you have to do it all over again. You begin thinking about everything you managed to get done today — and how nobody seemed to notice.

That becomes:

Why does nobody appreciate what I do?

Which becomes:

Maybe I'm not doing enough.

And eventually:

Maybe I'm just not good enough.

Before you know it, your mind has travelled from tomorrow's to-do list to something that happened years ago. At 3am, our thoughts can take us a very long way.

Sometimes you feel it in your body too

A busy mind at night isn't always just a stream of thoughts. You may notice your body beginning to react as well.

Your chest feels tight. Your breathing feels different. Your muscles tense. You become anxious or emotional.

Now you're lying perfectly still, but internally you feel anything but relaxed. And that can be confusing.

You're safe in bed. Nothing is actually happening at that moment. So why does your body feel as though something is? Our bodies can respond to what we're thinking about even when the situation itself isn't happening right now.

Replaying a difficult conversation, imagining tomorrow going badly or revisiting something painful from the past can bring some of those feelings into the present.

But I'm supposed to be resting

There can also be something uncomfortable about simply doing nothing. During the day, there is always another task available. Another email. Another job. Another thing we *could* be doing. Then suddenly we're lying in bed and we're supposed to stop.

Sometimes even rest can bring guilt.

I should have done more today.

I need to get everything done tomorrow.

I shouldn't be lying here.

Or perhaps you're next to a partner who has gone to sleep while you feel anything but sleepy. You lie there quietly because this is what you're supposed to be doing at this time of night, even though part of you wants to get up and *do something*.

We talk a lot about needing rest. But allowing ourselves to rest can be much harder. For some people, there may even be a feeling that they haven't quite earned it yet.

Why can't I just stop thinking?

Once you notice that you can't switch off, another problem can begin. You start trying to make yourself stop.

Don't think about it.

Just go to sleep. I need to sleep. Why am I still thinking about this?

And now you're not only thinking about the original problem. You're frustrated with yourself for thinking about it. The aim doesn't need to be to completely empty your mind. Our brains don't work like light switches, however convenient that would be.

Instead, we can begin by noticing where our mind has gone.

I'm thinking about work again.

I'm replaying that conversation.

I'm planning tomorrow.

I'm worrying about something I can't do anything about tonight.

You can have a thought without having to follow it wherever it wants to take you.

What are you accomplishing by thinking about it at 3am?

This is something I might ask someone in therapy. Not because the thing they're thinking about doesn't matter. It might matter enormously.

But **what can you actually do about it from your bed at 3am?**

If there is nothing you can do at that moment, can you allow yourself to think about it for a moment, acknowledge that it's there, and then put it down until morning?

Not force it away. Not tell yourself you're ridiculous for thinking about it.

Simply recognise:

This matters to me. But I don't have to solve it right now.

Tomorrow you may be able to make the phone call. Have the conversation. Send the email. Make the decision. Ask for help. At 3am, you probably can't.

Things can look different in the morning

We've probably all had moments when something felt enormous during the night and looked slightly different when we woke up. A new day can bring perspective.

Sometimes there's a sense of calm that simply wasn't available to us in the middle of the night. That doesn't mean the problem has disappeared. And sometimes those thoughts will return as soon as the day begins. The difference is that now you may actually be in a position to respond to them.

You don't have to solve tomorrow while you're still lying in today.

Final Thoughts

If your mind becomes busiest when everything around you becomes quiet, perhaps the question isn't simply:

Why can't I switch off?

It may be worth becoming curious about what appears when you finally stop. What have you been carrying through the day? What keeps returning when there are no distractions? What hasn't had space yet?

And what are you asking yourself to solve at a time when there is very little you can actually do about it?

Sometimes switching off isn't about getting rid of our thoughts. It can be about allowing them to be there without feeling that we have to do something with every single one.

Your body has stopped for the day. Perhaps your mind needs a little time — and permission — to catch up.

 **Therapist's Reflection:** When someone tells me they can't switch off at night, I'm often curious about what their mind is trying to do in those quiet hours.

We can spend so much of the day being busy, functioning and getting through what needs to be done that there isn't always much space to notice what we're carrying. Then we lie down, everything becomes quiet, and suddenly our mind has our full attention.

Rather than trying to force those thoughts away, I might ask: **What is being accomplished by thinking about this at 3am?**

That isn't about dismissing the thought or pretending it doesn't matter. It's about recognising that this may not be the moment when you can do anything about it. Can you allow yourself to have the thought, acknowledge that it's there, and then let it go for now?

You can come back to it in the morning, when you may have more perspective — and when you're actually in a position to do something about it. Sometimes the goal isn't to stop our minds from thinking.

It's learning that **we don't have to solve everything the moment our mind presents it to us.**

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