



Healthy & Resilient You

Wide Awake at 3 A.M.

Techniques to cope when your
mind won't clock out for the night.



Why is it that when we wake up in the middle of the night, we think it's a good idea to start doing math? "If I go back to sleep right now, I can still get a total of seven hours and 22 minutes. Not quite eight, but I'll be alright...right?"

Then you think, "Wait! Did I turn the oven off?" Which leads to wondering whether you paid the gas bill, what you're going to make for dinner, and, randomly, why you said that weird thing in a meeting three days ago.

It's now 3:26. You're exhausted, but your brain has clearly decided the day has begun. Next thing you know, you're playing Wordle until it's coffee time.

Let the under-eye bags begin!

Waking Isn't the Problem

[Sleep naturally shifts through different stages](#), and we often wake several times throughout the night. Mostly we don't even notice it. Sometimes we notice it too much, and that's when the struggle begins.

Why am I awake...how long have I been up...what if I can't get back to sleep...what if Rihanna never puts out another album...how am I going to function tomorrow?

Suddenly, a natural change in your sleep cycle feels like a problem that you've got to solve as quickly as possible. And that self-imposed pressure can make it harder to settle back down.

Your Brain Is Trying to Help

It's almost unfair how capable your brain can become in the middle of the night. Remembering this and that, replaying conversations, problem-solving — all great stuff when it isn't 3 a.m. and you're in your jammies.

It's not doing it to annoy you. It's doing what brains do: noticing patterns, looking for answers, and trying to connect problems with solutions. But the timing is terrible, and all that hard work to fall back asleep can keep you even more awake.

What if, counterintuitively, to get back to sleep you should stop trying?

Taking Sleep off Your 3 A.M. To-Do List

There's no single trick to magically put you back to sleep. But a few small shifts can help break the overthinking cycle that turns a quick wake-up into a two-hour hostage negotiation with your own brain.



Stop It with the Sleep Math – Once you start in on sleep calculations, every passing minute can feel more important and the situation increasingly hopeless. If you keep anxiously checking the clock, turn it away or put it out of easy reach. You don't need a running scoreboard to get back to sleep, but if you need to count something, count sheep.



Don't Try to Solve Tomorrow Tonight –

Remember, not everything that pops into your head is urgent. If something comes up that you genuinely need to address, chances are you won't be able to do much about it at 3 a.m. Write it down in just a few words and leave it for daylight. Jotting "Email Maria" in a bedside notebook can be useful. Mentally drafting the email 14 times over probably isn't.



Remove the Pressure – Sleep becomes harder when we try to force it. Instead of thinking, "*I have to get back to sleep!*" try giving your brain permission to be still and get some rest. You might think, "*We're having a lot of thoughts right now, brain, but you know what? All of it can wait. It's OK to take the night off.*"



If All Else Fails, Change the Scene – If you've been awake long enough to get frustrated and can't stop the thought loop, it may help to get out of bed for a little while. Keep things quiet and low-key if you can. Read something calming. Listen to soft music. Stretch. Sit somewhere that's comfortable, and head back to bed once you start to feel sleepy.



PRO TIP:

Tackle Actual Challenges After the Rooster Crows –

Sometimes the same thoughts keep showing up because they really do need your attention. (Just not at 3 a.m.) So, if work stress, money worries, relationship concerns, family responsibilities, or other issues regularly follow you into bed, make space for them during the day. Journal about it. Talk it over with an expert and make a plan.

Concern offers a variety of support for whatever keeps you up at night. Counseling or coaching can help when stress, emotions, or feeling stuck are weighing you down. Money coaching, legal consultations, adult care resources, or parenting and childcare referrals can help with practical issues or situations you don't know how to handle on your own.

And, if insomnia is pronounced or persistent, talk with your health care provider.

Finally, Let Nighttime Be for Night-Night

The next time you find yourself staring at the ceiling while the rest of the world is fast asleep, resist the urge to turn it into a problem to be fixed. You don't have to count the minutes until morning or solve every problem. You most definitely don't have to win an imaginary argument with your own brain.

Sometimes the most helpful step toward falling asleep is to stop finding reasons to stay awake. Everything will still be there tomorrow. Tackle it then.

Sweet dreams.



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