A SHORT GUIDE FROM SABRINA DUONG, LCSW

Five things to try tonight when you can't sleep

These come from cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I), the treatment sleep specialists recommend before medication. None of them require buying anything. Pick one or two tonight; you don't need all five.

1 If you've been awake about 20 minutes, get up.

Go to another room, keep the lights low, and do something quiet and slightly boring: fold laundry, read something dull, listen to a calm podcast. Go back to bed only when you feel sleepy, not just tired. Repeat as often as needed.

Why: lying awake teaches your brain that bed is a place for being awake and frustrated. Getting up breaks that link, and it is the single most effective CBT-I technique.

2 Turn the clock away, and don't check your phone.

Put the clock face-down or across the room. If you wake, resist calculating how many hours are left. You can't do anything with that number except worry about it.

Why: clock-watching turns a normal wake-up into a math problem, and the math raises your heart rate. Most people wake briefly several times a night and simply don't remember.

3 Empty your head onto paper before bed.

Spend five minutes writing down what you're carrying: the list for tomorrow, the conversation you keep replaying, the thing you're dreading. Next to each item, write the one next step, even if it's "decide on Friday." Then close the notebook.

Why: your mind rehearses unfinished business to keep it from being forgotten. Once it's written down with a next step, the rehearsing has less to do.

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4 Breathe out longer than you breathe in.

Lying in bed: breathe in through your nose for a count of four, then out slowly through your mouth for a count of six or more. Do ten rounds. If your mind wanders, that's normal; return to counting.

Why: a long exhale nudges the nervous system from "alert" toward "rest." It won't knock you out, but it lowers the alarm enough for sleep to find you.

5 Set one wake-up time, and keep it tomorrow no matter what.

Even after a bad night, get up at your usual time, open the curtains or step outside for a few minutes of daylight, and skip the nap. Tonight will be easier because of it.

Why: a steady wake time anchors your body clock. Sleeping in or napping to "catch up" spreads the problem into the next night.

What helps over the next few weeks

Keep caffeine before noon. Keep alcohol away from bedtime; it helps you fall asleep and then wakes you at 3 a.m. Give yourself a 30-minute wind-down with screens off. Keep the bedroom for sleep and intimacy, not work or scrolling.

When to get help

If you've had trouble falling or staying asleep three or more nights a week for three months, or sleep is affecting your mood, work, or safety, CBT-I works for most people in six to eight sessions. Talk to your doctor too, especially if you snore loudly, stop breathing in your sleep, or have restless legs.

Want the whole method? The book I recommend most is *Quiet Your Mind and Get to Sleep: Solutions to Insomnia for Those with Depression, Anxiety, or Chronic Pain* by Colleen E. Carney, PhD, and Rachel Manber, PhD (New Harbinger, 2009). It walks through the full CBT-I program these five tips come from, with worksheets, and it is written for people whose sleep problems sit alongside low mood, worry, or pain. Their shorter follow-up, *Goodnight Mind* (2013), is about the racing thoughts in particular.

If you are in crisis or thinking about harming yourself, call or text 988 (US and Canada) or go to the nearest emergency room. This guide is general education, not treatment, and does not replace care from a professional who knows you.

Based on cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) as described in Carney & Manber, *Quiet Your Mind and Get to Sleep* (New Harbinger, 2009): stimulus control, sleep scheduling, constructive worry, and relaxation.

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