



How to Unwind

Softer lighting, quiet music, and a hot bath are some of the ways to let your brain and body know you're switching out of active mode.

BY AKANKSHA SINGH

THERE ARE TWO TYPES of people in this world: those who fall asleep moments after their heads hit the pillow and, well, the rest of us. The ones who await sleep in bed, as thoughts ping-pong in our brains and the glowing numbers on the clock remind us we're still awake.

According to Jade Wu, PhD, a Durham, North Carolina-based sleep medicine specialist and researcher, what you do in the hours before bed impacts the quality of your sleep immensely. "My general philosophy is to switch from 'doing' mode to 'being' mode," says Wu. That means you should put away things that are meant to be "productive" and spend the time on things you enjoy.

Do what you know helps you decompress and feel at ease—whether it's reading, cuddling with a partner or pet, listening to a podcast, or something else.

"These activities will relax the body and mind," says Wu. "Try to be intentional about doing

something that contributes to your well-being instead of simply distracting from boredom." In other words, don't doomscroll.

You want to avoid working right up until bedtime. In a culture obsessed with productivity, it's easy to pressure yourself into working longer and harder. But if you're one of those people who powers off your laptop right before you turn out the lights, stop.

This isn't simply because electronic devices emit blue light that's known to suppress melatonin, the sleep-inducing hormone, but because your brain is active in work mode.

"You need a wind-down period to relax your body, process your thoughts, and generally allow the hustle and bustle of the day to cool off," explains Wu.

While you should shut down your computer for work in the evening, feel free to catch up on texts to friends or play a few

rounds of online solitaire in the hours leading up to bedtime. "Screens are perfectly fine to use in the evening—if you get enough bright light exposure during the day," says Wu.

The key, she explains, is "to have a big contrast in how much light you're exposed to during the day versus evening." This lets your brain know the difference between day and night and helps keep your circadian rhythms on track. "Too



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much bright light in the evening and not enough during the day will confuse your internal clock and make it harder to sleep well at night and harder to feel good during the day.”

Lights on low

To that end, be sure to draw the blinds or curtains and dim the lights at least one hour before bedtime. This lets your body know it’s nearing bedtime by boosting melatonin. If you can, swap out cool-toned LED lights and fluorescents for warm-toned lights. Although LEDs are environmentally friendly, many of them contain blue light, which hampers melatonin production.

The relaxing effects of a bath or shower may seem obvious, but they’re also backed by science. According to a meta-analysis published in *Sleep Medicine Reviews*, a hot shower or bath 90 minutes before bed helps you sleep faster. The hot water can lower your body’s core temperature—sort of like how you cool down when you sweat—and the temp decrease tells your body it’s time for bed. (Some experts recommend a warm bath, as they believe the hot water may interfere with your pre-sleep drop in body temperature.)

A bath closer to bedtime could relax you, but an hour and a half prior is optimal because of

how long it takes for your body temp to go down.

Consider unwinding to soothing, mellow music, like smooth jazz or classical—it can serve the same function lullabies once did. “It’s important to ‘downregulate’ the nervous system using our built-in neural networks that are hard-wired to respond to certain sounds our mothers made to lull us to sleep,” says Jeanette Raymond, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Los Angeles.

The write stuff

Quiet your mind by journaling or making lists before bed—it’s great for getting thoughts out. “Writing down everything that’s on your mind is an effective way of releasing anger, fear, and shame,” says Raymond.

“Seeing it and editing it will give you a sense of having done something that will relieve anxiety and make you feel more competent,” she says, “[and this] in turn can lead to lowered stress hormones and your body moving into sleep rhythms.”

Similarly, adds Raymond, if your mind is racing because you are rehearsing for a confrontation or another situation where you have to speak up for yourself, before going to bed, write down what you want to say.

While regular exercise during the day is great for sleep, exer-

cising at night signals to your body that you’re up and active. So get your workout in at least a few hours before you go to bed (ideally, no later than 6 p.m.).

Closer to bedtime, try light stretching or progressive muscle relaxation. A study in which participants stretched for one hour three times a week for four months concluded that stretching aided sleep quality. (Turn the page for a stretching routine to do at night.)

To practice progressive muscle relaxation, tense then relax your muscles, starting at your forehead (tense brows!) and working down to your toes (who knew you carried tension in your feet!).

A session of deep breathing or a mindfulness activity can also help you unwind. When you do mindful meditation, you “stay in the present” by focusing on your

breathing while noticing how your body feels.

The idea is to redirect thoughts that evoke anxiety (say, planning for that big meeting tomorrow) back to your chest and its rising and falling with each in-and-out breath. Mindful meditation has been shown to help fight insomnia and improve sleep quality.

What won’t help you unwind—but, rather, may get you wound up—is scolding yourself for slipping up. Had a late night? That’s OK, it happens. “Avoid telling yourself you have to sleep for a certain amount of time or else you’ve failed,” says Raymond. “Harsh self-talk adds stress.”

Instead, remind yourself this is just one night and try to get your full seven or eight hours tomorrow. The last thing anyone needs is to be stressed out by their downtime. ■



TIPS FROM THE PROS

We asked psychology experts how they quiet their minds at bedtime.

“I imagine writing my worries on a piece of paper, putting the paper in a box, and closing the lid. Then I put that box in a slightly larger box, close the lid, and lock it. The boxes can be wood or bejeweled or even glass. I try to imagine all of this as realistically as possible. I continue through successive boxes until I fall asleep.”

—Dana Harron, PsyD, founder and director of Monarch Wellness & Psychotherapy in Washington, DC

“Depending on the temperature in my bedroom, I wear either a hot or cold eye mask, and inhale breaths of calm thoughts, and exhale breaths of racing thoughts.”

—Devita Allen, licensed professional counselor in Manalapan Township, New Jersey

“I turn my focus to my senses. I list five things I can see, four things I can touch, three things I can hear, two things I can smell, and one thing I can taste. Then I repeat the exercise until I fall asleep.”

—Tracy Cooper, co-owner of Fit Therapy of Texas in San Antonio

“I picture parts of my body relaxing under the weight of a warm, soothing blanket. I begin at the feet, then move up to my ankles, then calves, all the way to the crown of my head.”

—Sarah Thacker, integrative therapist in New York City

—Hannah Harper