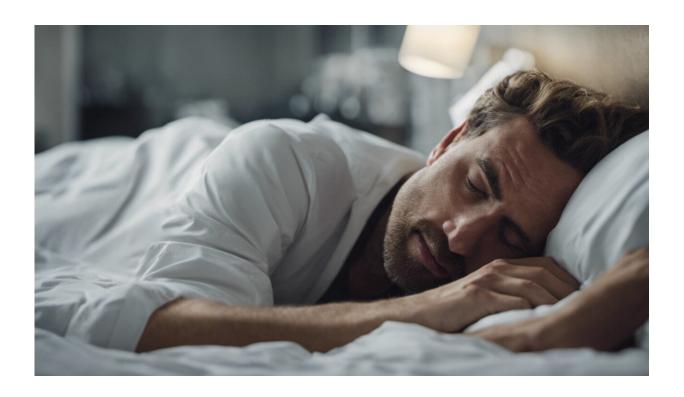# Studies show that what you think about before sleep, influences how you sleep

September 26 2023, by Melinda Jackson and Hailey Meaklim

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

You're lying in bed, trying to fall asleep but the racing thoughts won't stop. Instead, your brain is busy making detailed plans for the next day, replaying embarrassing moments ("why did I say that?"), or producing seemingly random thoughts ("where is my birth certificate?").

Many [social media users](#) have shared [videos](#) on how to fall asleep faster by [conjuring](#) up "[fake scenarios](#)", such as a romance storyline where you're the main character.

But what does the research say? Does what we think about before bed influence how we sleep?

How you think in bed affects how you sleep

It turns out people who sleep well and those who sleep poorly have different kinds of thoughts before bed.

[Good sleepers report](#) experiencing mostly visual sensory images as they drift to sleep—seeing people and objects, and having dream-like experiences.

They may have less ordered thoughts and more hallucinatory experiences, such as imagining you're participating in events in the real world.

For people with insomnia, pre-sleep thoughts tend to be less visual and more focused on planning and problem-solving. These thoughts are also generally more unpleasant and less random than those of good sleepers.

People with insomnia are also more likely to stress about sleep as they're trying to sleep, leading to a vicious cycle; putting effort into sleep actually wakes you up more.

People with insomnia often [report](#) worrying, planning, or thinking about important things at [bedtime](#), or focusing on problems or noises in the environment and having a general preoccupation with not sleeping.

Unfortunately, all this pre-sleep [mental activity](#) can prevent you drifting

off.

One [study](link) found even people who are normally good sleepers can have sleep problems if they're stressed about something at bedtime (such as the prospect of having to give a speech when they wake up). Even [moderate levels of stress at bedtime](link) could affect sleep that night.

Another [study](link) of 400 [young adults](link) looked at how binge viewing might affect sleep. The researchers found higher levels of binge viewing were associated with poorer sleep quality, more fatigue, and increased insomnia symptoms. "Cognitive arousal," or mental activation, caused by an interesting narrative and identifying with characters, could play a role.

The good news is there are techniques you can use to change the style and content of your pre-sleep thoughts. They could help reduce nighttime cognitive arousal or to replace unwanted thoughts with more pleasant ones. These techniques are called "cognitive refocusing."

What is cognitive refocusing?

Cognitive refocusing, developed by US psychology researcher [Les Gellis](link), involves distracting yourself with pleasant thoughts before bed. It's like the "fake scenarios" social media users post about—but the trick is to think of a scenario that's not too interesting.

Decide before you go to bed what you'll focus on as you lie there waiting for sleep to come.

Pick an engaging cognitive task with enough scope and breadth to maintain your interest and attention—without causing emotional or physical arousal. So, nothing too scary, thrilling or stressful.

For example, if you like interior decorating, you might imagine

redesigning a room in your house.

If you're a football fan, you might mentally replay a passage of play or imagine a game plan.

A music fan might mentally recite lyrics from their favorite album. A knitter might imagine knitting a blanket.

Whatever you choose, make sure it's suited to you and your interests. The task needs to feel pleasant, without being overstimulating.

Cognitive refocusing is not a silver bullet, but it can help.

One [study](link) of people with insomnia found those who tried cognitive refocusing had significant improvements in insomnia symptoms compared to a [control group](link).

How ancient wisdom can help us sleep

Another age-old technique is [mindfulness meditation](link).

Meditation practice can increase our [self-awareness](link) and make us more aware of our thoughts. This can be useful for helping with rumination; often when we try to block or stop thoughts, it can make matters worse.

Mindfulness training can help us recognize when we're getting into a rumination spiral and allow us to sit back, almost like a passive observer.

Try just watching the thoughts, without judgment. You might even like to say "hello" to your thoughts and just let them come and go. Allow them to be there and see them for what they are: just thoughts, nothing more.

Research from our group has shown mindfulness-based therapies can help people with insomnia. It may also help people with psychiatric conditions such as bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and schizophrenia get more sleep.

What can help ease your pre-sleep thoughts?

Good sleep starts the moment you wake up. To give yourself your best shot at a good night's sleep, start by getting up at the same time each day and getting some morning light exposure (regardless of how much sleep you had the night before).

Have a consistent bedtime, reduce technology use in the evening, and do regular exercise during the day.

If your mind is busy at bedtime, try cognitive refocusing. Pick a "fake scenario" that will hold your attention but not be too scary or exciting. Rehearse this scenario in your mind at bedtime and enjoy the experience.

You might also like to try:

- keeping a consistent bedtime routine, so your brain can wind down
- writing down worries earlier in the day (so you don't think about them at bedtime)
- adopting a more self-compassionate mindset (don't beat yourself up at bedtime over your imagined shortcomings!).

This article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article.

Provided by The Conversation