A fact sheet about

Switching off at night

Understanding Zoe

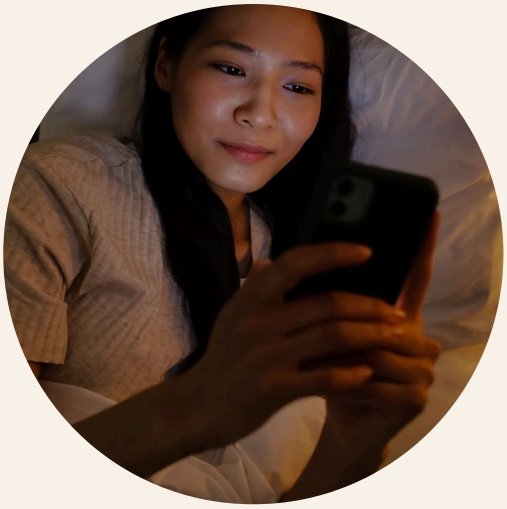
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Switching off at night

Why your mind gets busy at night, and one way to put it down.



Key points

- In the day, what is going on around you keeps your mind busy, so a lot of what you think and feel gets put aside for later.
- At night that input stops, and what you held all day can arrive at once: thoughts, feelings, plans and the buzz from noise and people.
- So you may feel wired just when you want to rest. Many autistic, ADHD and other neurodivergent adults take a long time to fall asleep, and it is not a failure to relax.
- A short brain dump (definition below) before bed, where you get what is on your mind out of your head, may help you put it down for the night.

Why the day catches up with you at night

The house is quiet at last, and you get into bed tired. Then your mind starts. A chat from lunch plays back, and you remember the form you did not send. A feeling you had no time for at three o'clock turns up now. Your body still feels like it is in the shops.

Most sleep advice tells you to relax, but that is hard while the day is still waiting to be sorted. What is often missing is a place to put it, not more effort to switch off.

In the day, a lot is coming in: people, noise, light, messages and jobs to do. Your mind is busy with what is in front of you. So other things get put aside: a worry about a bill, a hard moment with a friend or a plan for tomorrow.

You may also hold things in on purpose. If you mask around people, you hold back how you feel, how you move or what you want to share. Many neurodivergent adults say that holding back takes effort, and that they need time alone to let it out. You can read more about what masking can cost you here.

Noise and people can stay with you too. Some neurodivergent adults described overwhelm as something they feel in the body, like a traffic jam of things still to process.

At night the room is dark and quiet, and nobody needs anything from you. For many people, that is when the things they put aside come back, all at once. Worry about what you still have to do is one of the things that can keep people awake.

Why it can take longer to fall asleep

In an Australian study, autistic adults took longer to fall asleep than other adults, and more of them slept poorly. Experts in adult ADHD describe a mind that keeps going at night for some ADHD adults, and many find it hard to fall asleep.

For many ADHD adults, and some autistic adults, a body clock that runs late is part of it too. You can read more about why your body clock may be different here.

Most of this research is with autistic and ADHD adults, and there is less with adults who are neurodivergent in other ways. If that is you, you may still recognise some of this.

More broadly, research on autism, ADHD and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: a brain dump before bed

A brain dump means getting what is on your mind out of your head and into a note. Then you do not have to hold it all night. Try it for about five minutes, before you get into bed. Some ideas to choose from:

- write tomorrow's to-do list, as specific as you can make it, like "email Sam about Friday" rather than "emails"
- put each worry on its own line, and add "tomorrow" next to the ones you can do something about
- name a feeling you had no time for in the day, in a word or two
- type it, draw it or record a voice note, if writing is not your way

Leave the note where you will see it in the morning, so you know it is kept. You can keep it in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app by typing it before heading to bed or voice noting it.

In one sleep study, young adults wrote for five minutes at bedtime. Those who wrote a specific to-do list fell asleep faster than those who wrote about what they had done. Writing more detail helped people fall asleep sooner. Those ideas are anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

If a thought turns up once you are in bed, a pad by the bed lets you catch it in a few words. You can read more about catching a thought before it slips here. It may take a few nights to feel a change, and on some nights it will not be enough.

If night is your only time alone

For some people, night is the first time all day that nobody needs them. In one study, several autistic adults said that staying up after everyone else was their only time alone, even though it cost them sleep.

If that sounds like you, staying up may be meeting a real need. So it may help to find a little time alone earlier in the evening, even fifteen minutes. That could be a walk, a shower, sitting in the car before you go inside or time with an interest. You can read more about recovering after time with people here, and read more about sleep ideas that suit your senses here.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether this happens most nights or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help with sleep and with the worries that keep you awake, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Tell your GP if worry keeps you up most nights, or if nothing feels good any more, because that needs its own conversation.

If you are not safe right now, call Lifeline on 13 11 14, at any time of the day or night.

Sources

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UnderstandingZoe

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

for more information, you can contact

hello@understandingzoe.com

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