

When You Can't Sleep

Heightened mental alertness is an adaptive response. Your body is wise. It's trying to help you out—even if the help it's giving isn't at this moment particularly helpful.

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Let's say you've got an event tomorrow, and it's one for which you've been training for months or years, if not more. You know you need rest. And, yet, your mind is active. You're running through scenarios or checklists—and/or you're desperately queuing up [meditation](#) apps to get your mind quiet. Or quieter. In the meantime, you can't stop yourself from thinking about what time it is now and how much closer every sleepless minute is bringing you to the imminent blare of your alarm.

We've all been there. During intense or exciting activities—and preparation for intense or exciting activities can be, in

and of itself, pretty intense and exciting—your body is pumping out activating [hormones](#) that create physiological changes in your body, including heightened mental alertness (as well as elevated heart rate, increased muscle tension, elevated body temperature, and faster breathing). These are adaptive responses that help us keep prepared to act, because something important is coming, and your body knows it.

Acknowledging Your Body's Efforts

Acknowledging that this is an adaptive response—that your body is [wise](#) and it's trying to help you out (even if the help it's giving isn't at this moment particularly helpful)—can be an important step toward the rest you need. Thanking your body for its offering—even if it's an offering you don't need or want right now—can be one way of lowering the activation your body is giving you. Try thinking of your body as a beloved child. This precious child gives you a gift: let's say it's a magical peanut. And you don't really need a magical peanut. You may even have an allergy to peanuts, magical or otherwise. But you're probably not going to berate the child for giving you the gift

you don't especially need that may even possibly be (unintentionally!) harmful to you. You're probably going to be touched that they thought of you in the first place, that they wanted to give you something.

So, one way to begin might be to thank your body like you'd thank the child who thought of you with enough love that they wanted to give you something. And then, when you're ready, you might offer yourself some of the following practices.

Intention Setting

One practice to explore is intention setting. An intention, different than a goal, is a present moment statement, in which you invite yourself to embody your own intention. So an intention here could be "I am resting." With this intention, you invite yourself to rest and remove the pressure to sleep. Maybe you sleep, maybe you don't, but you are resting, and that is something your body needs that you can give it. Maybe you add a breath to this intention, breathing in "I am"; breathing out "resting." Maybe you breathe the "resting" a little bit slowly, drawing out the word and the breath. And if you notice your [mind wandering](#)—to-

ward checklists or situations or self-criticisms or judgments of your present absence of sleep—maybe you notice this wandering and remind yourself of your intention, “I am...resting...”

There are many other options for inviting your breath to support your rest. [The lengthening of your exhale](#) (relative to your inhalation) is perhaps the most direct cue you can offer your [nervous system](#) of “okayness” to be right here, right now, as you are.

Movement and/or Touch

Another option is to use movement and/or touch to let go of muscular tension and stimulate a relaxation response. This could include contracting and relaxing your shoulders or stimulating acupuncture points associated with relief of [anxiety](#) and the invitation to relax—for example, Heart 7, just beneath the condyle of your wrist on the pinky side of your arm, or the An Mian point, sometimes called “Peaceful Sleep,” that is located in the shallow divot of your skull behind your earlobe.

A consistent yoga practice, a bedtime routine, distance from screens, and an environment that promotes sleep hygiene are of course all helpful. But you may or may not have any control over these factors in the moment you need rest. So returning to what you can control: your intention, your capacity to rest if not to sleep, your acknowledgment of your body and what it's trying to offer you, and what you can offer back to your body. You may not fall asleep. But rest with no pressure to sleep can serve your body's needs, too.