

The Power of Not Now “Mind Management” Enables Surer, Sounder Sleep

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“If you do fight against your country's foes,
Cares keep you awake.” —Shakespeare, King Richard III

Shakespeare was right: cares *do* keep you awake. And that's also the take-home message of a study of insomniacs and healthy sleepers conducted at Oxford University. Psychology researcher Allison Harvey asked subjects to list their thoughts while drifting off to sleep. Troubled sleepers listed red meat issues like health, relationships, jobs, and taxes. Among healthy sleepers, the subject most frequently mentioned was “nothing in particular.”

If you're one of the millions who suffers from some form of sleep disturbance, the results of this study probably sound familiar. You already know that no matter how weary your body may be after a hard day's work, troubling thoughts can delay the onset of sleep. And if you awaken during the night, they can prevent you from getting back to sleep, too. Whether you're planning the defense against your country's foes or merely fretting over personal woes an overactive mind can be one of the principle obstacles to sleep.

The basic mechanism behind this sleep-sapping effect is not hard to grasp: At bedtime, our closed eyes, reclining posture, and physical stillness set the scene for a gradual

descent into sleep. But issue-oriented thoughts, especially those with a disturbing edge, have quite the opposite effect. Not only do they spike the cortex to produce faster, waking-type brainwaves that accompany thinking, they also trigger a response of the body's stress response system, the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. As a result the body secretes higher levels of cortisol and other stress hormones that effectively halt the process of falling asleep and can even trigger anxiety attacks.

As you can see, what I'm describing here is a sure-fire recipe for insomnia. And it's not only the brain that's cooking. The rest of the body is also heating up. You may be lying still, but your muscles become activated, as if you were preparing to take arms against that sea of mental troubles. Or you may toss and turn, grinding your teeth, while repeating the same thought pattern over and over in an endless loop. In either case, that combination of mental and muscular activity sends potent neural signals to the brain telling it to wake up. As a result, you can be sure that sleep is not on the agenda any time in the near future.

Mind Management Basics

So what is to be done about these troubling thoughts that invade your mind and keep you awake past your bedtime? Can you banish them from your mind? Can you control or suppress them? The answer is a resounding *no*. Psychologists who study the mechanisms of thought suppression have concluded that any attempt to suppress a

thought almost always has the paradoxical effect of entrenching it more firmly in the mind.

Happily, control isn't the only way to work with your mind. I favor an approach I call "mind management." It has worked very well for me and many of those I've trained in it. Mind management is a big subject, and there are many possible applications, but here's the general idea.

Imagine you are the owner or manager of a business. One of your employees comes to you constantly with questions and concerns. At the very least, you will find this distracting. At worst, answering this person's questions can become a full time job, preventing you from doing your own work!

As a good manager, what should you do? Should you simply dismiss the person, and tell them to quit bothering you? Probably not. Rather, you might instruct them to keep a list of all their questions as they arise, and then schedule a meeting at which you will address all their concerns. Then, if the employee comes to you with questions outside that appointed time, you can politely say to them, "Not now."

In doing this, it's important to note that you are neither ignoring nor suppressing the concerns of this employee. On the contrary, you are giving them the respect and attention they deserve. At the same time, you are setting certain boundaries to protect your own time and attention, and to ensure that both of you can be as productive as possible. You are making it clear that there are certain times when

this kind of questioning is appropriate, and other times when it's not. This is good management.

With “mind management” you use much the same approach in your own mind. The fundamental principle of mind management is that *you are the manager of your mind*. Therefore, when your mind raises a question or concern, you are the one who will determine the time, place, and conditions under which to address it.

One of the fundamental properties of the human mind is that *it wanders*. The purpose of mind management is to acknowledge this essential quality of mind, and to harness it for our own benefit. Remember, thoughts can't be suppressed without undesirable consequences. But you can decide when, how, and under what conditions to most effectively address them. That way, you won't waste time and energy on unproductive, or even counterproductive mental activity. I am sure that you will know exactly what to do with all the time and energy this saves you!

Mind Management at Bedtime

As you can imagine, the mind management principle has broad applications in almost every field of human endeavor—psychology, business, sports, science, and the arts. But I've found that it is particularly useful for achieving natural, restful sleep. The reason is that bedtime is a special case in which, as noted above, *the less you think, the better*. At bedtime, our sole intent should be to achieve *quiet rest and a calm, clear mind*. If we can do

that, it puts us in just the right frame of mind for natural, restful sleep. The body's natural, inborn physiological process can take over, lulling us into blissful slumber.

To that end, here is an easily learned, three-step process to help you achieve quiet rest and a calm clear mind. It can help you to fall asleep more easily at bedtime, and to recover quickly from unwanted awakenings during the night.

Step 1. “Nothing in Particular.”

When you lie down to sleep, do as sound sleepers do: close your eyes, rest quietly, set aside all mundane concerns, and think of *nothing in particular*.

Step 2. “Only Rest.”

Next, remind yourself that bedtime has a very specific purpose: *rest, and rest only*. At this moment, nothing else is required of you but quiet rest and a calm, clear mind. Should you notice yourself attending to anything else, gently redirect your mind by silently repeating, “*Only rest. Quiet rest and a calm, clear mind.*”

Step 3. “Not Now.”

If, as you rest quietly like that, you encounter intrusive, disturbing, or repetitive thoughts of any kind, say to them silently, “*Not now! At this moment I choose quiet rest. Nothing else is required of me at this time — only quiet rest and a calm, clear mind.*”

Finally, direct your attention to the sound of your breath. Each time you breathe in, imagine that your breath is making the sound of the word “not.” Each time you breathe out, imagine that your breath is making the sound of the word “now.” Breathe naturally, without hurry or effort, and listen to your breath as it says, “Not...now.” Repeat as desired.

Remember, when you practice this mind management technique, you are not suppressing your thoughts. In the morning when you are fully rested, alert, and aware, you will give them all the respect and attention they deserve. But “*Not now!*”

You may use it alone, or in concert with the somatic sleep techniques described in my book, *The Insomnia Solution: The Natural, Drug-Free Way To A Good Night's Sleep* (Warner Books, 2005).