# The Better Sleep Workshop Series

Winter 2026

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# Sleep Diary

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## What is it?

The sleep diary is a practical tool used to identify patterns in sleep timing, quality, and habits. By tracking information such as bedtime, wake time, night awakenings, and daytime naps, we can better understand what may be influencing your sleep.

## How to use it:

- Complete it each morning within 30-60 minutes of waking up
- Use your best estimate, no need for clock watching throughout the night
- Record:
  - What time you went to bed
  - What time you woke up
  - Restfulness on a scale from 1-10 (10 being “great”, 1 being “poor”)
- If relevant, briefly note factors that may have influenced your sleep, such as:
  - Stress
  - Alcohol
  - Caffeine
  - Exercise
  - Wake-ups in the night
  - Illness
- Fill it out daily even after a difficult night, patterns matter more than any single entry

Consistency is more important than accuracy. The goal is awareness, not perfect data.

# Sleep Diary

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| Day | Bedtime | Wake up time | Restfulness (1-10) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Monday | | | |
| Tuesday | | | |
| Wednesday | | | |
| Thursday | | | |
| Friday | | | |
| Saturday | | | |
| Sunday | | | |

# Behavioural Strategies

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## What is it?

Behavioural strategies focus on changing the habits and patterns that influence your sleep. Sleep is not just something that "happens" at night, it is shaped by what you do during the day, in the evening, and even in bed. Over time, certain behaviours can accidentally teach the brain to stay alert at bedtime. These strategies gently retrain your body and mind to associate bed with sleep, rebuild a strong sleep rhythm, and reduce factors that interfere with rest.

Consistency is key. These approaches may feel simple, but when practiced regularly, they are some of the most effective ways to improve sleep naturally and sustainably.

## What to expect

Some strategies may feel uncomfortable at first. You may notice temporary tiredness or frustration. This is part of the adjustment process. Improvements typically occur gradually over 1–3 weeks with consistent practice. You do not need to implement everything at once. Start with one or two areas and build steadily.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid:

1. Expecting immediate results
2. Changing too many things at once
3. Inconsistency between weekends and weekdays
4. Staying in bed awake for long periods
5. Giving up after a setback
6. Napping to "make up" for a bad night

# Evening Routines

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## What is it?

Sleep doesn't switch on like a light. Your brain and body need a gradual transition from "day mode" to "night mode." A wind-down window is a protected period of time, usually 30–60 minutes before bed, dedicated to slowing down physically and mentally.

Many sleep difficulties happen because we move directly from stimulation (work, screens, problem-solving, social media, chores) into bed without giving the nervous system time to settle. A consistent evening routine signals to the brain that sleep is approaching, allowing melatonin to rise naturally and the body to prepare for rest.

## How to create a routine

To start:

- Choose a consistent **start time** each night
- Dim lights and reduce stimulation
- Avoid work, problem-solving, and emotionally activating conversations
- Keep activities calm, predictable, and low effort

Some Helpful wind-down activities:

- Light stretching
- Gentle reading  (non-stimulating material)
- Warm shower or bath
- Soft music or calming audio
- Journaling or a brief brain dump
- Relaxation or breathing exercises

This is not about creating a "perfect" routine. It's about repetition. When done consistently, your wind-down window becomes a cue that helps your body shift toward sleep more easily.

# Stimulus Control

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## What is it?

Stimulus control is designed to rebuild a strong mental connection between your bed and sleep.

Over time, if you've spent long periods awake in bed (worrying, scrolling, watching TV, or trying hard to sleep) your brain can start to associate the bed with alertness, frustration, or wakefulness instead of rest. Stimulus control gently retrains this association.

The goal is simple: **Bed = Sleep** (and intimacy only).

## Core Principles

1. Go to bed only when you feel sleepy
   - Sleepy means your eyes are heavy, you're yawning, or you're struggling to stay awake
2. Use the bed only for sleep (and intimacy)
   - Avoid reading, watching TV, scrolling, eating, or problem-solving in bed
3. If you cannot sleep, get out of bed
   - If you've been awake for what feels like about 15–20 minutes (no clock-watching), get out of bed and go to a dimly lit, quiet space.
   - Do something calm and low-stimulation until you feel sleepy again, then return to bed
   - Repeat as needed
4. Wake up at the same time every morning
   - Even after a difficult night, this strengthens your body clock and builds sleep pressure for the next evening
5. Avoid daytime napping (or keep it shorter and earlier in the day)
   - Napping reduces sleep drive and can make it harder to fall asleep at night

# Cognitive Strategies

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## What is it?

Cognitive strategies focus on the thoughts, beliefs, and mental habits that influence sleep.
Many sleep difficulties are not caused only by behaviour, they are also maintained by worry about sleep, pressure to sleep, frustration after difficult nights, or unhelpful predictions about the next day. When the mind becomes activated at night, the nervous system follows.
These strategies are designed to gently reduce mental arousal, shift your relationship with sleep-related thoughts, and create a calmer internal environment for rest.

## Why this matters

The brain cannot force sleep , and trying harder often backfires. When sleep becomes something you monitor, analyse, or strive to control, it can increase alertness instead of reducing it.

Cognitive strategies help you:

- Step back from unhelpul thought patterns
- Reduce catasrophic or “all-or-nothing” thinking
- Lower performance pressure around sleep
- Build a more flexible, balanced mindset

Over time, this reduces night-time mental activation and makes it easier for sleep to emerge naturally.
You do not need to eliminate thoughts. The goal is to change how you respond to them.

# Brain Dump Exercise

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## What is it?

A brain dump is a simple but powerful way to reduce mental overload before bed.

Many people notice that the moment their head hits the pillow, their mind becomes busy, replaying conversations, planning tomorrow, solving problems, or worrying about sleep itself. This happens because the mind finally has space to process what was pushed aside during the day.

A brain dump gives your thoughts a place to go before you get into bed.

## How to use it:

When to do it:

- During your wind-down window
- 30-60 minutes before bed
- Not in bed

How to do it:

- Take a blank page
- Write down everything on your mind
  - Tasks, worries, to-do lists, reminders, random thoughts
- Do not organise, edit, or judge what you write
- Set a timer or keep going until you feel mentally lighter (usually 5-15 minutes)

The brain is less likely to repeatedly rehearse thoughts that have been written down. By moving concerns onto paper, you reduce the need for your mind to hold them overnight.

If thoughts return in bed, gently remind yourself: “I’ve written that down. I can return to it tomorrow.”

# Brian Dump Exercise

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For the next five minutes, you'll write continuously about anything on your mind, worries, to-do lists, thoughts, or feelings.
There's no structure, no grammar rules, and no need to make sense. Don't worry about handwriting or neatness, it could just be scribbles that make no sense. The goal is simply to move thoughts out of your head and onto paper.
During this time, try not to pause or edit yourself.
If you get stuck, you can write something like 'I don't know what to write,' until new thoughts come.

# Gentle Thought Labeling

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## What is it?

Gentle thought labeling is a mindfulness-based strategy that helps you relate to your thoughts differently, especially at night. When we're lying awake, thoughts can feel urgent, important, or threatening. The mind generates stories such as: "I don't sleep, tomorrow will be a disaster." The goal of gentle labeling is not to stop these thoughts, it is to create a small amount of space between you and them.

## How to use it:

**Step 1: Identify the Thought**

- What thought is showing up?
  - Ex. "I don't sleep, tomorrow will be a disaster"

**Step 2: Rate the Belief**

- How strongly do you believe this thought?
- 0% (not at all) – 100% (completely)
  - Rating: _____%
- How did it make you feel?
  - Emotions: _____

**Step 3: Examine the Evidence**

- Which evidence supports this thought?
- Which evidence does NOT support this thought?

*Balance is key here

**Step 4: Create a more gentle thought**

- What is a more realistic, compassionate, or balanced way to view this situation?
- Ex. "I may feel tired tomorrow, but I've handled tired days before. One night does not determine everything"

**Step 5: Re-rate the belief**

- Rating: _____%
- How do you feel now?

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# What is it?

Journaling is a structured way to process thoughts, emotions, and experiences through writing.
Unlike a quick brain dump (which is about emptying your mind), reflective writing is slower and more intentional. It helps you explore patterns, clarify feelings, and reduce the emotional charge attached to stressors that may be affecting your sleep.

# How to use it:

- Set aside 10-20 minutes during your wind-down window
- Write freely without worrying about grammar or structure
- Focus on expression, not perfection
- Close the notebook when your time is up
- Avoid journaling in bed

**Helpful Prompts**

- What felt heavy or unfinished today?
- What is my mind still holding onto?
- What am I worried about right now?
- What is within my control? What is outside of my control?
- What story is my mind telling me about sleep?
- What would a compassionate voice say to me right now?
- What went well today?
- What am I grateful for right now?
- What would help tomorrow feel more manageable?

Let the page hold what your mind doesn't need to carry overnight.

# Relaxation Strategies

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## What is it?

Relaxation strategies are practical techniques designed to calm the body and quiet the mind before sleep.

When we experience stress, worry, or pressure around sleep, the nervous system can shift into a state of alertness, sometimes called “fight or flight.” In this state, heart rate increases, muscles tighten, breathing becomes shallow, and the mind becomes more active. This is not a state that supports sleep.

Relaxation practices help activate the opposite response, often called the “rest and digest” state, which allows the body to soften and prepare for sleep.

## Why this matters

Sleep is a biological process that unfolds most easily when the nervous system feels safe and settled. You cannot force sleep, but you can create the conditions that make it more likely.

Relxation strategies help by:

- Lowering physical tension
- Slowing heart rate and breathing
- Reducing stress hormones
- Decreasing mental overactivity
- Signalling safety to the brain

Over time, regularly practicing relaxation can reduce night-time arousal and make it easier for sleep to come naturally.

These techniques are not about “doing them perfectly.” Even small reductions in tension can meaningfully shift your body toward rest.

# Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

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## What is it?

Progressive Muscle Relaxation is a guided technique that involves gently tensing and then releasing different muscle groups throughout the body. By deliberately tightening muscles for a few seconds and then fully relaxing them, you become more aware of physical tension, and more able to let it go. Many people carry subtle muscle tension without realising it, especially in the jaw, shoulders, neck, and hands. PMR helps interrupt this pattern and promotes a deeper sense of physical ease before sleep.

## How to use it:

General Format:

- Practice during your wind-down or while in bed
- Start at your feet and slowly work upwards
  - Feet → Legs → Abdomen → Hands → Arms → Shoulders → Face
- Gently tense each muscle group for about 5 seconds
- Fully release for 10-15 seconds before moving on
- Focus on the sensation of relaxation as you let go

The tension should be firm but never painful. If your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to the physical sensations of tightening and releasing. With repetition, your body will become more responsive to the “release” phase.

There are many helpful videos online and on YouTube. Find an example HERE.

# Body Scan Meditation

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## What is it?

Body Scan Meditation is a mindfulness practice that involves slowly moving your attention through different areas of the body, noticing physical sensations without trying to change them.
Unlike Progressive Muscle Relaxation, you do not intentionally tense muscles. Instead, you simply observe sensations such as warmth, heaviness, tightness, tingling, or ease.

## How to use it:

General Format:

- Practice during your wind-down or while in bed
- Lie comfortably on your back or side
- Begin at the top of your head (or your feet) and slowly move your attention downward (or upward)
- Spend 10-20 seconds noticing each area
- Simply observe sensations without judging or trying to fix them

If you notice tension, you can gently breathe into that area, but avoid trying to "make" it relax. If your mind wanders (which is normal), gently guide your attention back to the body part you were focusing on.

There are many helpful videos online and on YouTube. Find an example HERE.

# Bilateral Drawing Exercise

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## What is it?

Bilateral drawing is a calming technique that involves using both hands at the same time to create simple, mirrored movements on paper. This might include drawing lines, shapes, or patterns simultaneously with both hands. The focus is not on artistic skill, it is on movement, rhythm, and sensory experience. The repetitive, side-to-side motion engages both hemispheres of the brain and can help settle emotional and mental activation.

## How to use it:

Instructions:

- Sit at a table with a blank sheet of paper
- Hold a pen or pencil in each hand
  - Coloured pencils/pens optional
- Begin drawing simple mirrored shapes
  - Lines, waves, circles, spirals
- Move both hands at the same time in a slow and steady rhythm
- Continue for 5-10 minutes

You do not need to think about what you are drawing. Let the movement be repetitive and gentle. If your mind wanders, bring your attention back to the physical sensation of both hands moving across the page. This can be done during your wind-down window, especially on evenings when you feel mentally or emotionally heightened.

There are many helpful videos online and on YouTube. Find an example HERE.

# Breath-Focused Mindfulness

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## What is it?

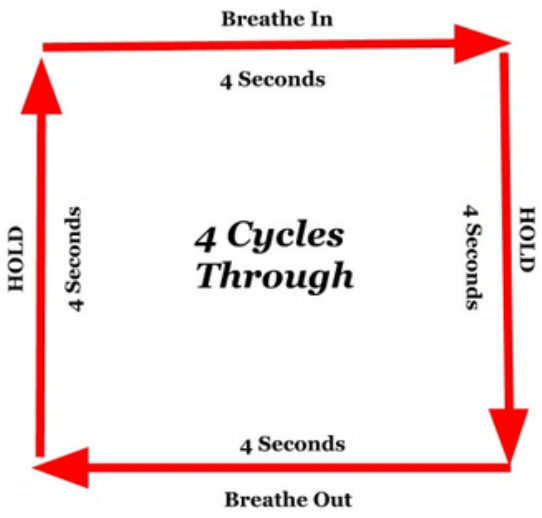
Breath-focused mindfulness is a practice of gently placing your attention on your natural breathing. Rather than changing your breath, you simply observe it, noticing the sensation of air moving in and out, the rise and fall of your chest or abdomen, or the subtle pause between breaths. The breath becomes an anchor for attention when the mind feels busy or restless.

## How to use it:

**Boxed Breathing Exercise:** also called square breathing, is a structured breathing technique that involves inhaling, holding, exhaling, and pausing for equal counts. It provides a simple rhythm that helps slow breathing and stabilise the nervous system.

1. Inhale slowly through your nose for a count of 4
2. Hold your breath for a count of 4
3. Exhale slowly through your mouth for a count of 4
4. Pause for a count of 4 before inhaling again

There are many helpful videos online and on YouTube. Find an example HERE.



# Visualization Exercises

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## What is it?

Visualisation is a relaxation technique that involves imagining calming, peaceful, or pleasant scenes in detail. You might picture a quiet beach, a forest path, a mountain view, or any place that feels safe and soothing to you. The goal is to gently engage your senses, sight, sound, touch, even smell, to create a vivid internal experience. It is not about escaping reality, but about guiding the mind toward imagery that supports calm.

## How to use it:

**Floating Leaves Meditation:** a visualisation-based mindfulness exercise designed to help you disengage from repetitive or intrusive thoughts.

1. Close your eyes and imagine sitting beside a gently flowing stream
2. When a thought arises, place it on a leaf
3. Watch the leaf float away at its own pace
4. If the thought returns, place it on another leaf
5. Continue for several minutes

There are many helpful videos online and on YouTube. Find an example HERE.

# Environmental Strategies

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## What is it?

Environmental strategies focus on optimising your physical sleep environment to better support rest. Your bedroom conditions, including light, temperature, noise, comfort, and even air quality, influence how easily your body transitions into sleep and how well you stay asleep throughout the night. While thoughts and behaviours play an important role in sleep, your environment also sends powerful signals to your brain about whether it is time to be alert or to rest. Environmental adjustments are often simple, practical changes that remove unnecessary barriers to sleep.

## Why this matters

Sleep is highly sensitive to external cues. Light, sound, temperature, and physical discomfort can activate the brain's alerting systems, even if you are not fully aware of it. Optimising your environment helps to:

- Support melatonin production
- Reduce night-time awakenings
- Lower sensory stimulation
- Improve physical comfort
- Reinforce the association between bedroom and sleep

When your environment consistently signals safety, darkness, and comfort, your nervous system can settle more easily. These changes are not about creating a "perfect" bedroom, they are about reducing friction so your natural sleep processes can unfold more smoothly.

# Creating a Comfortable Sleeping Environment

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## What is it?

A comfortable sleeping environment is one that supports your body's natural transition into sleep by reducing sensory disruption. This includes, light (brightness, screens, streetlight exposure), noise (household sounds, traffic, devices), temperature (room temperature, bedding, airflow), and physical comfort (mattress, pillow, bedding).

Your bedroom should signal one clear message to your brain: *this is a place for rest*.

## Why this matters

Sleep is highly sensitive to environmental cues. Even subtle discomfort or stimulation can increase alertness without you fully realising it.

- **Light**: exposure to light, especially blue light from screens, can suppress melatonin, the hormone that supports sleep onset.
- **Noise**: unexpected or inconsistent sounds can trigger micro-awakenings or lighter sleep stages, even if you do not fully wake up.
- **Temperature**: your body temperature naturally drops before sleep. A room that is too warm or too cold can interfere with this process.

Creating a supportive sleep environment helps to:

- Promote melatonin release
- Reduce night-time awakenings
- Support deeper sleep stages
- Lower sensory stimulation
- Reinforce the bed–sleep connection

Small environmental adjustments can make a noticeable difference, particularly when combined with behavioural and cognitive strategies.

# Evening Food, Drink & Sleep

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## What is it?

This strategy focuses on how caffeine, alcohol, heavy meals, and late-night eating can influence your ability to fall and stay asleep.
What you consume, and when you consume it, affects your nervous system, digestion, and sleep cycles.
The goal is not restriction, but awareness and timing.

## Why this matters

Certain substances directly affect sleep biology:

- **Caffeine**: blocks adenosine, the chemical that builds sleep pressure throughout the day. Even if you "feel fine," caffeine consumed in the afternoon or evening can reduce sleep depth and delay sleep onset.
- **Alcohol**: although alcohol can make you feel sleepy initially, it disrupts sleep cycles later in the night and increases awakenings.
- **Heavy or Late Meals**: close to bedtime can cause discomfort, reflux, and increased digestive activity, all of which can interfere with falling asleep.
- **Sugary or Highly Stimulating Foods**: may increase energy levels or cause blood sugar fluctuations that affect sleep stability.

Being mindful of evening intake helps to:

- Strengthen natural sleep drive
- Reduce night-time awakenings
- Support deeper sleep stages
- Lower physiological activation

Small timing adjustments can significantly improve sleep quality over time.

# CONTACT

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