

Sleep and self-care: an ACT-based approach to better rest

The struggle switch: why trying to sleep often backfires

Have you ever tried really hard to fall asleep; only to stay wide awake? Sleep doesn't respond well to pressure. The more we struggle with thoughts like "I have to sleep now or I'll be exhausted tomorrow", the more alert and tense we become.

ACT helps us unhook from these thoughts and gently shift our focus toward what we can control, things like creating a peaceful environment, responding kindly to discomfort, and aligning with what matters.

Healthy sleep foundations, also known as sleep hygiene tips

✓ Keep a consistent sleep schedule

Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day, even on weekends.

✓ Create a wind-down routine

Build a gentle 30–60 minute pre-sleep routine (e.g., reading, stretching, music). Repetition helps your brain learn: "It's time to rest."

✓ Limit screens and stimulation in the evening

Try dimming lights and turning off screens 1 hour before bed; blue light and content can wake the brain up.

✓ Create a calm sleep environment

Cool, quiet, and dark tends to work best. Consider blackout blinds, white noise, or calming scents like lavender.

✓ Be mindful of caffeine, alcohol, and large meals

All three can disrupt sleep, especially in the hours before bed.

✓ Move your body during the day

Regular physical activity can improve sleep (but avoid vigorous exercise right before bed).

✓ Use your bed for sleep and intimacy only

This helps your brain associate bed with rest and not wakefulness, work, or worry.

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ACT tools for when sleep is hard

Even with good habits, there will be nights when sleep doesn't come easily. Here's how ACT can help:

Defuse from racing thoughts

Rather than trying to "get rid of" thoughts, try naming them:

"There's the 'I'll be wrecked tomorrow' story."

"Here's the 'I can't cope if I don't sleep' thought."

Treat thoughts like passing clouds rather than commands to act on.

Drop the struggle with how you feel

You might feel wired, restless, or anxious. Instead of fighting it, try this:

"Can I make room for this feeling, just for now?"

"Can I lie here and rest, even if I'm not asleep?"

You don't need to feel sleepy to rest. You can rest with discomfort, gently and kindly.

Come back to the present

Try anchoring your attention to something real and here:

Your breath moving in and out

The feel of the sheets

The rise and fall of your chest

Each time your mind wanders, gently return. This isn't about control, it's about connection.

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Choose what matters

Ask: If I can't sleep right now, what would help me treat myself with care?

Maybe it's reading a book, listening to a podcast, or having a cup of herbal tea; not to force sleep, but to honour your wellbeing.

A compassionate reminder

You are not broken. Your body knows how to sleep, it may just need patience, support, and less pressure.

Rather than chasing sleep, ACT invites you to create the conditions for rest and let go of the struggle.

When we stop battling our minds and start caring for ourselves, sleep often follows.