



3-step ACT strategy for managing insomnia

A guide for practitioners

Created by Contextual Consulting with
Dr Maja Schaedel from the Good Sleep Clinic



Introduction

Insomnia is a challenge many clients grapple with, not just because they struggle to sleep, but because of the ripple effects it creates in their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. As ACT practitioners, we recognise that insomnia often leads clients to become entangled in self-critical or fear-driven thinking, which can magnify their distress and maintain a cycle of sleeplessness.

This guide outlines a 3-step ACT-based strategy, shared with Contextual Consulting by Dr Maja Schaedel, sleep expert, to support clients in relating to their insomnia with greater acceptance and psychological flexibility. By using this approach, you can empower clients to break free from the struggle and move towards actions that align with their values, even during sleepless nights.

STEP 1: Recognising and labelling thoughts

What this involves

The first step is to help clients develop an awareness of the thoughts that arise during sleeplessness. Often, these thoughts are automatic and unhelpful, such as “I’ll feel awful tomorrow” or “There’s something wrong with me because I can’t sleep.” Clients might not even realise how much these thoughts fuel their distress until they start to notice them consciously.

Practical examples:

- Thought journaling: Encourage clients to keep a small notebook or use a notes app to jot down recurring sleep-related thoughts. For example, they might write, “Here’s my ‘I’ll never sleep again’ thought” or “There’s my ‘Everyone else is sleeping’ story.”
- ACT metaphors: Use metaphors like the “passengers on the bus” to explain that these thoughts are like noisy passengers – they may be there, but they don’t have to take the wheel.

Ways practitioners can support:

- Normalise the experience: Reassure clients that having intrusive thoughts about sleep is common and not a sign of failure.
- Guide mindful noticing: Practise thought labelling together in sessions to build confidence. For instance, ask them to close their eyes, notice a thought, and say aloud, “Here’s my ‘I’ll feel terrible tomorrow’ thought.” This practice helps make the skill real and accessible.





STEP 2: Making peace with the thoughts

What this involves

Many clients believe they need to fight or eliminate their sleep-related thoughts to improve their insomnia. This step involves shifting the focus from control to acceptance, helping clients make peace with their inner experiences instead of struggling against them.

Practical examples:

- Self-compassion phrases: Teach clients to respond to their thoughts with compassion. For example, they might say, “Thank you, mind, for trying to help me,” or “I notice that thought is here, but I don’t have to act on it.”
- Leaves on a stream exercise: Guide clients through this visualisation, asking them to imagine placing each thought on a leaf and watching it float down a stream. This helps them practise allowing thoughts to come and go naturally.
- Mindfulness of the breath: Teach clients to anchor themselves in their breathing while gently allowing thoughts to pass, rather than engaging with them.

Ways practitioners can support:

- Model acceptance: Use your own examples of accepting difficult thoughts to show that this process is normal and achievable. For instance, you might say, “Even I sometimes notice a thought like ‘I won’t be good enough,’ but I let it come and go.”
- Validate their struggle: Acknowledge that making peace with thoughts can feel counterintuitive or uncomfortable at first, especially if they’ve been trying to fight them for years. Normalise this response and encourage patience.

STEP 3: Doing something different

What this involves

When clients feel stuck in sleeplessness, they often become trapped in a cycle of overthinking and frustration. This step is about breaking that cycle by encouraging clients to step away from the struggle and engage in alternative actions that align with their values or support relaxation.

Practical examples:

- Creating a “night-time toolkit”: Work with clients to develop a list of activities they can turn to when they’re unable to sleep. This might include reading a soothing book, listening to an audiobook, or practising gentle yoga stretches.
- Mindfulness of surroundings: Suggest simple grounding exercises, like focusing on the texture of their sheets, the sound of their breathing, or the feeling of their body resting.
- Values-based actions: Explore how clients can use these moments of wakefulness to engage with their values. For example, if creativity is a core value, they might sketch or write in a journal during sleepless nights.

Ways practitioners can support:

- Explore options together: During sessions, brainstorm calming or meaningful activities that resonate with the client’s preferences and values.
- Discuss choice: Highlight that while they may not control when sleep happens, they can choose how to respond to sleeplessness. This empowers clients to shift their perspective from helplessness to agency.
- Use metaphors: The “itch you don’t scratch” metaphor can illustrate the concept of resisting the urge to engage with unhelpful thoughts, showing how this can lead to longer-term relief.





Tailoring the strategy to your client's needs

As with all ACT interventions, this 3-step strategy should be tailored to each client's unique circumstances, values, and experiences. Some clients may feel deeply entrenched in their struggle with insomnia, especially if it's been a longstanding issue. In these cases, approach their experience with curiosity and compassion, and normalise their difficulty.

Consider integrating this strategy with other ACT processes, such as values clarification. For example, you could explore how developing a healthier relationship with insomnia connects to their broader values, like being present for family, maintaining focus at work, or enjoying their hobbies.



Empowering clients to move forward

Helping clients recognise and label their thoughts, make peace with their inner experiences, and shift their focus to something different equips them with a powerful framework for navigating insomnia. The goal is not to eliminate sleeplessness but to support clients in building a more workable and compassionate relationship with it.

By moving away from the struggle and towards acceptance, clients can align their actions with their values, even during the most challenging nights. And as ACT practitioners, we have the privilege of guiding them on this journey towards greater flexibility, resilience, and self-compassion.

About this guide

This guide is designed for practitioners of ACT, including psychologists, therapists, and coaches, who are committed to helping clients build meaningful, values-driven lives. Whether you are new to ACT or looking to deepen your practice, the principles in this guide can serve as a foundation for impactful therapeutic work.

About Contextual Consulting

Contextual Consulting are specialists in ACT, an evidence-based psychotherapy approach. ACT focuses on mindfulness, accepting difficult emotions, and aligning your actions with your values to create a more meaningful life.

We are committed to providing leading edge evidence-based ACT training to therapists and practitioners so that they can deliver the very best outcomes for their clients. We only engage the very best world-renowned ACT experts as trainers and presenters to ensure that practitioners attending our courses receive the most up to date and practical ACT training and techniques. And we endeavour to make our training as affordable and convenient as possible.

Learn more about how ACT can support you on our website: contextualconsulting.co.uk

About Maja Schaedel

Dr Maja Schaedel, DClinPsy CPsychol MSc BA(Hons) PGCert is an experienced Clinical Psychologist who now specialises exclusively in the area of sleep and trauma-related sleep difficulties.

As an advanced ACT practitioner Maja developed a combined ACT and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I) group treatment protocol within an NHS service. She now uses ACT as a core treatment for insomnia and difficult-to-treat sleep difficulties. Maja is a practitioner of Eye Movement Desensitisation Reprocessing (EMDR), Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) & CBT-I.

Since 2016 Maja has led the Psychology team within two regional NHS sleep disorder centres and in 2019 she co-founded The Good Sleep Clinic, an organisation offering evidence-based psychological therapy to people with Insomnia and other sleep difficulties in children and adults. She works at the Sleep Disorder Centre at Guy's & St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust where she treats people with complex sleep difficulties.

Maja's previous clinical experience includes working as Principle Clinical Psychologist at Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital and Head of Psychological Therapies at the Queen Victoria NHS Hospital in West Sussex. Maja teaches on the assessment and treatment of sleep difficulties for the clinical psychology doctoral training programmes at Royal Holloway and Canterbury Christ Church universities and postgraduate diploma in psychological therapies course.



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