

Drivers of Sleep: Relaxing Routine

Why Relaxation Matters for Sleep

To fall asleep, your body needs to activate the **Rest and Digest system**—also known as the **parasympathetic nervous system**. This system helps you relax and recover. In contrast, the **sympathetic nervous system**—your fight-or-flight response—keeps you alert and awake when it detects threats.

Because sleep is a vulnerable state, your brain will stay activated if it senses danger. Pain, stress, or worry can heighten this threat response and make it harder to relax and fall asleep.

The Role of Routine

Your bed and bedtime routine help signal safety and familiarity. These cues remind your brain that you've slept here before and were safe—making it easier to relax.

- Habits like brushing your teeth, changing into sleepwear, or dimming the lights become powerful **sleep associations**.
- These routines help activate the **rest and digest** system, preparing your body for sleep.

However, if you often lie awake tossing and turning, your bed and routine may start to signal **wakefulness** instead of sleep. This can disrupt your ability to fall asleep over time. Rather than spending lots of time tossing and turning in bed

- Get up if your body and mind can't settle to sleep. After a (little) while, repeat the going to bed routine

Stress, Pain, and Sleep

Stressors—like pain or worry—can keep your brain in problem-solving mode. When your brain is focused on solving a threat, it cannot switch into sleep mode and can get stuck on the activated state

- People with chronic pain often experience sleep disturbances due to **stress and worry**, not just pain.
- Worrying about sleep itself can increase alertness and prevent sleep.



Activating Your Rest and Digest System

The key to falling asleep is giving your brain a **non-threatening focus**.

- Focusing on your **breath** is a simple and effective way to shift into relaxation.
- Other helpful strategies include:
 - Listening to calming music, podcasts, or ambient sounds
 - Reading or doing light puzzles
 - Gentle stretching or mindfulness exercises

Everyone is different—what relaxes one person may not work for another. The goal is to find what helps **your body** feel safe and relaxed.



✓ Tips for a Relaxing Bedtime Routine

- Choose activities that help you unwind and feel safe.
- Avoid stimulating tasks or screens close to bedtime.
- Observe how your body responds—does your routine activate relaxation or alertness?
- Slow your breathing and release tension from your muscles, like your shoulders
- Make relaxation a **consistent part** of your bedtime ritual.

