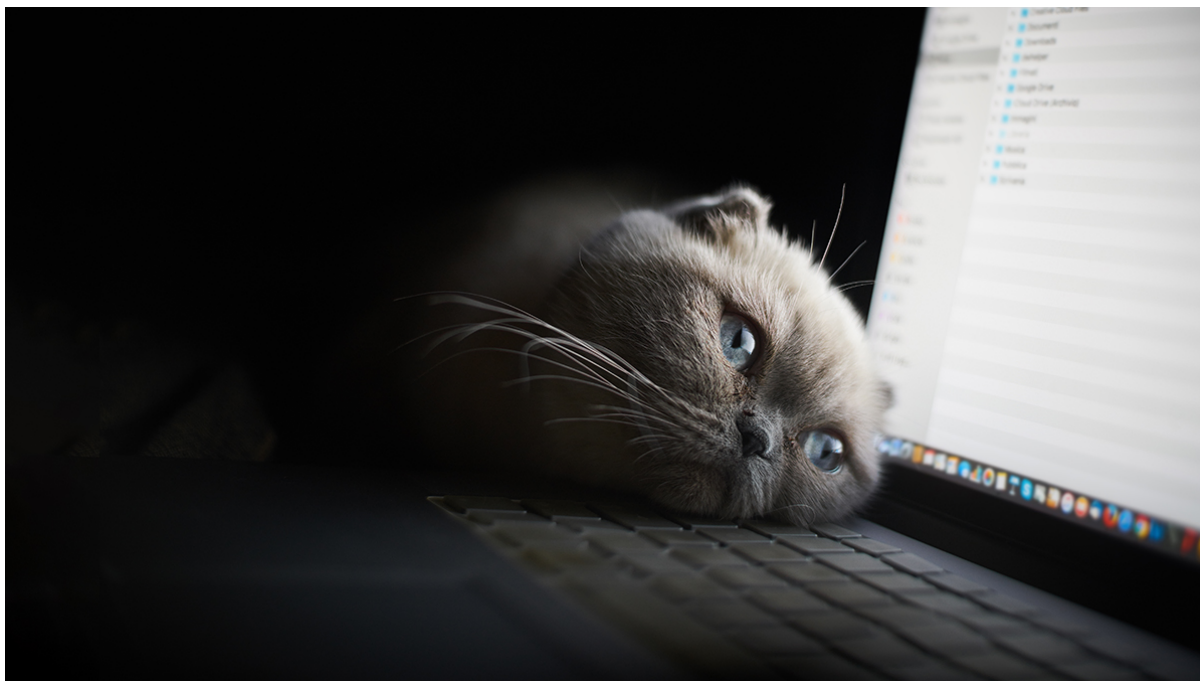


Health

How to Stop Thinking About Work at 3am

by Rebecca Zucker

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Summary. Work stress is inevitable, but it doesn't have to get in the way of a good night's sleep. To avoid thinking about work in the middle of the night, the author offers five strategies: 1) Make a to-do list. The act of writing down uncompleted tasks... [more](#)

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Many of us think about work outside of the office — that’s where some of our best ideas emerge. However, thinking about work often means stressing about work, which can keep us up at night or have us waking up feeling anxious, hours before the alarm clock sounds. According to a Korn Ferry study, stress caused sleep deprivation for 66% of American workers in 2018. Moreover, sleep deprivation can exacerbate our work stress, by negatively impacting cognitive functions such as judgment, critical thinking, problem solving, planning, and organization.

To avoid thinking about work in the middle of the night, try the following strategies:

Make a to-do list. There is always more work to be done. Research by Baylor University and Emory University shows that making a to-do list for the following day before bed helps you to fall asleep faster — by virtually as much as taking a sleep aid — as well as helps you to wake up fewer times during the night. Unfinished tasks cycling through your mind stay at a “heightened level of cognitive activation,” explains Michael Scullin, the lead author of the study. This is essentially what is causing you to stay up at night. The act of writing down these uncompleted tasks decreases cognitive arousal, rumination, and worry. And if you do wake up in the middle of the night, suddenly remembering a pressing task, keep a piece of paper and pen on your nightstand to capture it so you can let it go from your mind and go back to sleep.

Keep a journal. Toby, a client of mine at a professional services firm, was experiencing significant work stress due to friction with a difficult colleague. After a particularly distressing incident, he wrote an email to me describing what had happened and what made him so

upset about it. While his initial purpose was to update me and to give me a heads up of what he wanted to talk about in our next meeting, he shared that by writing about his experience and how it made him feel, he was able to offload it and sleep peacefully that evening. Journaling or writing down your thoughts and feelings, rather than just thinking about them, has been shown to help process emotions and reduce stress and anxiety, as it requires a greater level of psychological processing. Also including more positive events and what you are grateful for in your writing can help in getting longer, more refreshing sleep. In a study of college students who suffered from worrying at bedtime, the group of students who were randomly assigned to journal every night for a week before bed, experienced reduced bedtime stress and worry, in addition to improved sleep duration and quality.

Exercise self-compassion. Sara was head of strategy at a tech company whose stock was struggling. She presented their M&A strategy to the board and got pummeled with tough questions that she didn't anticipate or answer as well as she could have. She choked. Instead of looking at this as a learning experience, albeit a painful one, for future board meetings, she played it back in her mind over and over again, beating herself up, and lost sleep over it for weeks. Kristin Neff, author of *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*, describes self-compassion as showing yourself the same kindness, care and concern you would show a good friend. Practicing self-compassion and recognizing that we are all imperfect human beings allows you to break the cycle of negative thoughts and self-judgment that come with rumination, which is linked to several negative effects, including insomnia. Additional research from Texas State University and Sun-yat Sen University reinforced findings that self-compassion reduces stress-related poor sleep.

Engage in physical activity. Research shows that a single instance of moderately intense exercise can decrease the rumination that keeps us up at night. There is also strong evidence that, in general, as little as 30 minutes of aerobic exercise can help us fall asleep faster, and improves sleep quality. Not only does exercise increase the amount of deep sleep we get, it decompresses the mind, which Charlene Gamaldo, Medical Director for the Johns Hopkins Center for Sleep, calls a “cognitive process that is important for naturally transitioning to sleep.” For some people, however, exercising too close to bedtime can interfere with sleep. If you are one of these people, it is recommended to exercise at least one to two hours before bedtime.

Practice meditation. Similar to self-compassion, mindfulness — the practice of being fully present and focusing your attention on thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations without judgment — is also an antidote to the rumination that can keep you up at night. By being fully present in the moment, you are not rehashing past events or worrying about future events. There is ample research on the positive effects of meditation on anxiety and stress. Further, researchers in the Netherlands found that even small amounts of mindful meditation (10 minutes before and after work for two work weeks) helped calm racing minds, improve sleep quality, and sleep duration.

Work stress is inevitable, but it doesn't have to get in the way of a good night's sleep. By employing the strategies above, you can increase your ability to wake up feeling refreshed and ready to tackle the workday.

Rebecca Zucker is an executive coach and a founding Partner at Next Step Partners, a boutique leadership development firm. Her clients include Amazon, Clorox, Morrison Foerster, the James Irvine Foundation, Skoll Foundation, and high-growth technology companies like DocuSign and Dropbox. You can follow her on Twitter: @rszucker.