

## **Newcastle Regional Sleep Service**

# **Cognitive Control Techniques - How to Deal with a Racing Mind**

## **Introduction**

Many people with insomnia describe the feeling of not being able to switch off as they get into bed. "It's as if the lights switch on," is something we often hear in the clinic. Others describe a racing mind, with the mind becoming more active rather than less when they lie down in bed. This leaflet has been written to show you some simple techniques that can be very effective at calming down those racing thoughts and putting something more relaxing in their place that is more likely to lead to you falling asleep. Different people think in different ways. This is why we will describe several different techniques. You may find one thing works for you while another doesn't, or you may want to try a couple of different techniques.

All of these techniques are described as cognitive control. This simply means getting more control over your thinking.

## **Visualisation**

Think of a fruit that is easy to put into your mind in great detail, for example a banana. Think about it very carefully. Try to imagine the most perfect banana that you have ever seen, from the stalk all the way along the yellow lines, including the small dark marks. Once the picture is absolutely perfect, then change the colour. Think of exactly the same piece of fruit, but as a blue colour. Again take your time to make the image as perfect as possible, as it would be in a painting. Think about how the brown stalk may now look blackish. When it is perfect, change the colour again. You are unlikely to need to go through too many colours before you drift off to sleep.

## **Verbal techniques (Articulatory suppression)**

Think about a category of objects, for example American states or fruits or animals. Don't pick anything that is too close to something that you are emotionally involved in. For example, a vet might not want to choose animals. If you are using American states, think of the first American state that pops into your mind, for example Alabama, and then think of another state that begins with the last letter of the first. Keep working through the sequence of words. It doesn't matter if you get them wrong and it doesn't matter if they are in any particular order. This is simply a way of creating a stream of words that doesn't have any particular emotion attached. It breaks the cycle of your mind fixing on any one thing. Switch categories if you are running out of ideas, but again most people find that they don't get through too many items before falling asleep.

## Number techniques

Some people think in a more mathematical fashion. If you do then this technique may be worth trying. Start with the number 1000 and take away seven. Keep on going down, e.g. 1000, 993, 986 and so on. Again, it doesn't matter if you make a mistake, but just keep working through the number sequence.

Try any of these techniques if you are lying in bed and you feel as if your mind is starting to race or you are starting to feel agitated and bothered about not getting off to sleep.

## For further information

### Contact details

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The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) can offer on-the-spot advice and information about the NHS. You can contact them on freephone 0800 032 02 02 or e-mail [northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk](mailto:northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk)

### Useful websites

If you would like further information about health conditions and treatment options, you may wish to have a look at the NHS Choices website at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk). On this website there is an information prescription generator [www.nhs.uk/ips](http://www.nhs.uk/ips) which brings together a wealth of approved patient information from the NHS and charity partners which you may find helpful

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