Coping with a busy mind

People who find it difficult to sleep often complain of a busy mind. They find themselves in bed with lots of worries racing around their head. They may worry about what has or will happen and put pressure on themselves to sleep. Worries like these create anxiety and stop us from sleeping.

Dealing with worries

Spending too much time talking about worries often makes them feel bigger and worse than they really are.

* Limit the amount of time you spend worrying. Give yourself 10 minutes each evening to “download your head” and write your worries down on a piece of paper. Writing them down is a way of taking worries out of your head.
* Now look at your list. Some worries may have passed and can be crossed off whilst others may not seem so important once they are written down.
* For the rest, sort them into those that you can do something about and those you can’t.
* For those worries that you can do something about (e.g. forgetting their gym kit), work out a plan to take the worry away (e.g. pack gym kit before bed and leave gym bag by the front door)
* Try to accept those worries that you are unable to do anything about (e.g. will my friend be at school tomorrow). Try to keep your mind focused on the here and now rather than worrying about the future.

Divert your attention

The more attention you give your worries the bigger they become. Try to switch your attention away from your worries to something else.

* Try some relaxation and really concentrate on relaxing and tensing your muscles
* Try to create your calming place and really focus on making this as real as possible.

When you become aware of your racing mind divert your attention and focus on relaxation exercises and calming images.

Focus on the here and now

Many of our worries focus on the past (things that have happened) or the future (what will happen) and we spend little time focusing on what is happening here and now.

Another way of diverting your attention away from past or future worries is to learn to focus on what is happening here and now.

This process (FOCUS) involves the following five steps.

* **F**ocus your attention
* **O**bserve what is happening
* Be **C**urious
* **U**se your senses
* **S**uspend judgement

A useful way to do this at night time is to focus on your breathing

* Focus your attention: Breathe slowly in through your nose and out through your mouth.
* Observe what is happening: Notice how your chest rises and falls as you breathe in and out. Feel the muscles in your chest tense and relax with each breath.
* Be curious: Notice how long it takes to breathe in and out
* Use your senses: Listen to the sound of your breath as you breathe in and out. Feel the cold air in your nose as you breathe in and the warm air in your mouth as you breathe out.
* Suspend judgement: You will notice that thoughts will pop into your mind. This is OK so don’t worry. Just notice these thoughts Don’t argue with them or engage with them. Simply notice them as passing thoughts and bring your attention back to your breathing.

The idea is to use the FOCUS process as soon as you notice your mind is racing with past or future worries. The more you practice the more helpful you will find this.