

# How Cognitive Shuffling Helps Quiet Racing Thoughts and Support Better Sleep

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Cognitive shuffling helps transition your mind to sleep by mimicking your brain's natural shift from focused thinking to random, dreamlike patterns
- › Instead of trying to clear your mind, choose a simple word and think of other words starting with each letter to gently redirect overthinking
- › The technique works by providing just enough mental distraction without stimulation, making it ideal for people with racing bedtime thoughts
- › Adding visualization and coordinated breathing enhances the effectiveness by engaging your senses and activating your body's relaxation response
- › With consistent practice, your brain learns to associate the shuffling process with winding down, creating a sustainable sleep routine without sleep aids

Many people struggle to fall asleep not because of pain, noise, or light – but because their minds won't shut off. The internal noise of planning, worrying, or reliving conversations keeps your brain in a state of high alert, long past the moment your head hits the pillow. It's not just frustrating. Sleep deprivation has been linked to anxiety, depression, cognitive decline and even heart disease.

You lie in bed exhausted, but your thoughts feel like a ping-pong match between memory and future stress. Conventional advice like "just relax" or "clear your mind" often backfires, intensifying the stress. Instead of trying to silence your brain

completely, there's a smarter approach that works with how your mind naturally transitions into sleep.

Luc Beaudoin, a cognitive scientist at Simon Fraser University, developed a technique called cognitive shuffling to mimic your brain's natural shift into disorganized, dreamy thought patterns.

Rather than demanding stillness, it steers your thinking toward low-stakes, random associations that gently ease your nervous system into rest. If your mind is constantly busy at night, cognitive shuffling offers a practical, accessible way to break the cycle — and tonight might be the right time to try it.

## **Cognitive Shuffling Gives Your Brain Something Better to Do Than Overthink**

An article by Calm explains that when you're on the edge of sleep, your brain naturally shifts from focused, linear thinking to random, fragmented images and ideas.<sup>1</sup> This is your brain's way of loosening its grip on reality and preparing for dream states. Cognitive shuffling nudges this process along by introducing random, emotionally neutral words into your thoughts, helping your brain shift gears sooner.

- **Cognitive shuffling is simple and requires no training or tools** — All you have to do is choose a short, boring word — like “lamp” — and then think of other words that start with each of its letters. For “L,” you might think of “lemon,” “ladder” or “lint.” Once you run out of “L” words, you move to “A,” then “M,” then “P.” This exercise uses just enough mental energy to keep you from spiraling into anxious thoughts, but not so much that it keeps you awake.
- **It's designed to gently override your overactive mind** — The goal isn't to clear your mind — it's to give it something else to do. Calm explains that trying to force your thoughts to stop usually makes you more awake. Instead, cognitive shuffling works by steering your brain into the exact kind of scattered thinking that happens naturally when you're falling asleep. It's a redirect, not a shutdown.

- **You don't need to be good at it for it to work** – This is not a concentration game. If you forget the word you started with, lose track of where you are in the letter sequence or fall asleep mid-list, you're doing it right. The randomness of the process is the point – it mimics the way dreams begin and distracts your brain just enough to let sleep take over.

## **Cognitive Shuffling Rewires Your Sleep Routine Through Repetition and Rhythm**

For many people, bedtime becomes a performance: You're trying to fall asleep, watching the clock, **worrying about the next day** and judging yourself when you fail. Cognitive shuffling removes the performance aspect. There's no success or failure – just a quiet, low-effort distraction. Calm points out that this technique is forgiving, repeatable and adaptable to your preferences and mood each night.<sup>2</sup>

- **Consistency helps your brain learn the routine** – Calm notes that cognitive shuffling doesn't always work instantly. It's often a gradual process, especially for people who are used to being mentally active at night. But with regular use, your brain starts to associate the word-listing process with winding down. Over time, it becomes a cue for sleep, helping you build a healthy routine without needing supplements or sleep aids.
- **The method uses natural brain rhythms to support rest** – Beaudoin discovered that the mind transitions into sleep by becoming disorganized – flashes of disconnected ideas and images replace structured thoughts. By mimicking this disorganization intentionally, cognitive shuffling gets ahead of the curve and helps you enter the pre-sleep state faster.
- **It aligns with cognitive load management principles** – The strategy works because it respects how your brain processes information under stress. Instead of demanding mental silence – which increases cognitive strain – cognitive shuffling

reduces your brain's workload to something simple and rhythmic. This drop in cognitive load encourages your nervous system to relax, making it easier for you to fall asleep.

- **Gamifying sleep makes it less stressful** – Calm suggests choosing a new word every night to keep the process interesting and playful. Turning the exercise into a sort of mental puzzle adds novelty, which keeps your attention just enough to hold off stress. This light gamification introduces a small sense of fun into your sleep routine, which makes a big difference in how your body responds.

## **Mental Overactivity Blocks Sleep by Hijacking Your Executive Brain**

An article by Renée Miller, perinatal clinical psychologist with the Antenatal & Postnatal Psychology Network in Australia, explains how your brain's executive functions – planning, evaluating, remembering, and problem-solving – keep your mental engines running long after you're physically exhausted.<sup>3</sup> Beaudoin developed the term “mental perturbation” to describe this persistent overactivation that **hijacks your ability to relax** at night.

- **Busy parents and overstimulated adults are especially affected** – The article focuses on parents trying to fall asleep after a long day – when the house is finally quiet and it's supposed to be “your time.” But rather than shutting down, your brain starts sorting tasks, reliving mistakes or strategizing the next day.

This isn't simple stress – it's the result of an executive system that doesn't know when to quit. That's where cognitive shuffling offers a practical way to break the cycle.

- **Adding visualization deepens the effect and calms your body** – The technique is more powerful when you not only think of the words but also picture them. If your word is “broom,” you imagine the broom. Then the next “B” word, like “beach,” you picture that too.

Visualization helps draw your attention away from internal dialogue and creates a sensory experience that mimics dreaming. This visual layering enhances the disorganization that helps your brain drift off.

- **Breath control is a hidden part of the shuffle's success** — You can also use **intentional breathing** as part of the technique. Try breathing in while thinking of the word and breathing out while visualizing it. Longer exhales naturally activate your parasympathetic nervous system — your body's "rest and digest" mode — making the process even more physically relaxing.

## **How to Use Cognitive Shuffling to Quiet Your Mind and Fall Asleep Faster**

If your mind feels like it's running a marathon the moment you lie down, you're not alone. Racing thoughts don't just keep you awake — they trigger your stress response, keep **cortisol elevated**, and pull your brain into high-alert mode when it should be shifting into sleep. The root of the issue is that your brain's executive system doesn't know how to shut down without help.

Instead of trying to force silence, the smarter move is to redirect that mental energy with a technique that mimics how your brain naturally falls asleep. That's where cognitive shuffling comes in. This isn't meditation. It's not about clearing your mind or focusing on your breath.

It's about giving your brain something harmless, simple and disorganized to do — so it stops trying to solve tomorrow's problems at 11 p.m. If you're wired at night or wake up and can't get back to sleep, try these five steps:

1. **Start with your sleep environment** — Get your bedroom as calm, dark and quiet as possible. Turn out all lights, power down your devices — or better yet your **Wi-Fi** — and keep the temperature cool. If you live in a noisy area or your partner snores, turn on a fan or try a white noise machine to block out distractions. The less stimulation you have from the outside, the easier it is for your brain to switch gears.

- 2. Pick a simple, neutral word to start the shuffle** – Choose something ordinary that doesn't trigger emotion or memories. Words like "lamp," "chair" or "apple" work well. You want something familiar but boring – nothing connected to your work, relationships or problems. If you're a visual thinker, try picking a word you can picture clearly, like "ball" or "tree."
- 3. Break the word into letters and think of other words** – For each letter of your chosen word, think of new words that start with that letter. If your word is "blanket," for example, you'd start with "B" and think of "book," "bird," "bucket," etc. Then move to "L" and do the same. Don't worry if you run out of words or forget where you were – that's actually a good sign your brain is losing steam.
- 4. Add visualization and breath to deepen the effect** – Picture each word you think of in your mind. If you think of "balloon," imagine the shape, color and how it floats. Breathe in when the word comes to mind. Breathe out as you visualize it. The longer exhale helps your body relax and settle into rest. This adds a physical layer of calm on top of the mental distraction.
- 5. Repeat with a new word if needed** – If you're still awake after one round, don't get frustrated. Just pick a new word and start again. The goal isn't perfection – it's distraction. The more you practice, the more your brain learns to associate this shuffle with winding down. Over time, it becomes a cue for your body to enter sleep mode, just like brushing your teeth or turning off the light.

This technique gives your mind something to do that doesn't involve stress, problem-solving or memory. It works with your biology instead of against it. And best of all, it's something you can try tonight – no tools, no tracking, just you and your thoughts, gently shuffled into sleep. For more help, review my [50 Tips to Improve Your Sleep](#).

## **FAQs About Cognitive Shuffling**

**Q: What is cognitive shuffling, and how does it help with sleep?**

**A:** Cognitive shuffling is a mental technique that uses random, neutral word associations to gently distract your brain and help you fall asleep. Instead of forcing your mind to go blank, you give it a light, non-stimulating task – like thinking of words that start with each letter of a chosen word. This mimics your brain’s natural transition into sleep and reduces nighttime overthinking.

**Q: Why do racing thoughts keep me awake at night?**

**A:** When your brain’s executive functions – like planning, evaluating, or problem-solving – stay active, they prevent your body from entering a restful state. Cognitive shuffling interrupts that cycle by scrambling structured thinking and encouraging your brain to let go.

**Q: How do I practice cognitive shuffling?**

**A:** Start by choosing a simple word, such as “lamp” or “table.” Then, think of other words that begin with each letter of your chosen word. Add visualization by picturing each new word, and coordinate it with slow breathing – in on the thought, out on the image. If you lose track or fall asleep mid-process, that’s a sign it’s working.

**Q: What makes cognitive shuffling different from other relaxation techniques?**

**A:** Unlike meditation or breathing exercises that require focus or stillness, cognitive shuffling uses mild mental stimulation to redirect your thoughts. It’s a practical, low-effort technique that doesn’t rely on silence or concentration – and it’s especially helpful for people who struggle to shut off their minds at night.

**Q: Can cognitive shuffling work for everyone, including children or anxious sleepers?**

**A:** Yes. This method is simple, adaptable and doesn't require any special tools or training. It works well for adults, busy parents and even children. You can personalize it by choosing different words each night or turning it into a mental game. The key is consistency – over time, your brain will associate the technique with bedtime, making it easier to fall asleep.

## Sources and References

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- [1, 2 Calm, How Cognitive Shuffling Can Quiet Racing Thoughts at Bedtime](#)
- [3 Antenatal & Postnatal Psychology Network April 18, 2024](#)