

Creating Your Buffer Zone

Quiet, low-arousal activities to support stimulus control and reduce sleep effort

A buffer zone is a planned set of calm, low-arousal activities used before bed or when awake during the night. The goal is to step away from sleep effort and let sleepiness return naturally.

■ In the evening

- Choose clothes for the next day.
- Prepare lunch or simple food for the next day.
- Take a bath or long shower.
- Write a short thank-you note, journal entry, or supportive message.
- Watch a calm, familiar show - avoid action or emotionally intense content.
- Take a leisurely walk or groom pets.
- Listen to slow, relaxing, or instrumental music.
- Fold laundry, polish shoes, iron, mend clothing, or organize tools.
- Do gentle stretches to relax your muscles.
- Do a manicure, pedicure, facial, knitting, or simple arts and crafts.

■ During the night

- Look through catalogs or read light material.
- Play solitaire with cards, or use a dim screen only if it stays boring and brief.
- Clean out the refrigerator or a small drawer.
- Make a grocery list or a detailed menu for the week.
- De-clutter a coffee table, dining table, counter, or desk.
- Create a list of enjoyable weekend or vacation ideas.
- Work on photo albums or scrapbooks.
- Fold or put away clothes.
- Make a list of household projects without starting anything intense.

Best fit: choose activities that are calm, boring, familiar, and easy to stop when sleepiness returns.

Buffer Zone Activity Ideas

Use these ideas to plan what you will do outside of bed when you are not sleepy.

■ More night options

- Choose one or two drawers to clean out.
- Organize collections such as CDs, DVDs, books, files, receipts, or coupons.
- Write in a journal or jot thoughts on a notepad.
- Read comforting or positive light material, such as children's books.

■ Early morning support

- Open curtains and blinds to get morning light.
- Meditate, pray, or watch the sunrise.
- Make the bed and tidy your bedroom.
- Walk the dog or take a light walk.
- Review your to-do list for the day or week.
- Go to the gym or do a light home workout.
- Go to a store that opens early, if needed.
- Sort donations, start laundry, or organize mail and receipts.
- Prep meals for later, sweep the porch, garden lightly, or water plants.

My plan for this week

One evening buffer zone activity I can try:

One nighttime activity I can do outside of bed if I am awake:

One morning activity that can help me get out of bed:

Evidence-Based Notes for Using a Buffer Zone

A buffer zone works best when it supports stimulus control: reduce sleep effort, leave the bed when awake and frustrated, and return only when sleepiness returns.

Why a buffer zone helps

- It gives patients a clear alternative to staying in bed awake, frustrated, or trying hard to sleep.
- The goal is not to make sleep happen. The goal is to reduce arousal and allow sleepiness to return naturally.

Use with stimulus control

- Use the bed for sleep and sex only.
- If sleep becomes a struggle, get out of bed and move to a quiet, dimly lit space.
- Return to bed only when sleepy again. Repeat as needed without clock-watching.

Choosing good buffer zone activities

- Choose activities that are mildly pleasant, quiet, repetitive, and not emotionally activating.
- Avoid work, bright screens, exciting shows, problem-solving, or intense exercise.
- If using a screen, keep it dim, boring, and brief; non-screen options are usually preferred.

Morning and daytime support

- Keep a consistent morning rise time, even after a poor night of sleep, to strengthen the body clock.
- Avoid naps when possible so sleep pressure can build for the next night. Safety comes first if you are too sleepy to drive or function safely.

Clinical framing for patients

- Buffer zone practice is not relaxation as performance. It is a way to step out of sleep effort.
- Helpful phrase: I am not trying to force sleep. I am creating conditions where sleep can return.