

# Good Housekeeping

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## The Mirror Test

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Do wouldas and shouldas keep you up all night? Here's a way to stop berating yourself and fall asleep with a sense of accomplishment.

The bedside clock read 11:00 p.m. The alarm was set. Teeth brushed. Lights out. And my tired brain was wide awake, rerunning the day like a movie in reverse.

Should have called my mom. Forgot to schedule the car inspection. Why didn't I tell off Stewart in accounting? Ate too much pasta. And, of course, the minute-by-minute rundown of my job as head of an advertising agency. Welcome to my nightly "performance review," where I rarely got four stars or even a thumbs-up.

Next came the coming attractions: tomorrow's schedule. Got to pick up my gray suit from the cleaners. How can I get the dog to the vet before I go to the office? Will the presentation be ready by three?

So many shouldas and wouldas, keeping me awake, worrying the sleep out of me. And I knew I wasn't alone.

Falling asleep, Mary Lynn Ellis, 46, of Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, would reflect on all her roles-as wife, mom (to two boys, ages 17 and 15), daughter, teacher, and school administrator: "I'd think about how I taught a lesson and how I might do it better next time," she says. "I'd stew about a statement my son made at dinner. And then came the hardest moment: I would realize it was my goddaughter's birthday, and I'd forgotten to call-or the anniversary of my grandmother's death, and I'd forgotten to phone my mother. It's the personal stuff that gets lost in the shuffle."

As women, we worry constantly about everyone else and criticize ourselves for not doing enough. But caring is one thing, obsessing is another. With my job, I found I was reliving every decision, every remark, every victory and defeat. Even after I fell asleep, I'd be up again at 2:00 a.m., to pace the apartment, worrying about the day to come. I'd leave voice mails on coworkers' phones, write e-mails, make lists on any piece of paper I could find. And the more I thought about the "to dos," the harder it was to fall asleep again.

It took a lot of years of lying awake, thinking about this kind of thing, for me to finally come up with a solution. I call it the mirror test because I came to the conclusion that the only real judge of whether I was doing my best was the pair of eyes that looked back at

me in the mirror.

The mirror test is a simple way to assess my day and fall asleep with a sense of accomplishment. The test is brief, on purpose: three questions that cover only what really matters-questions that focus on long-term goals and are designed to make me feel good about myself, rather than anxious about my real or imagined shortcomings. Once I answer the questions, I'm able to eliminate all the nit-picking stuff and fall asleep.

In the beginning, my three questions were all related to how I was doing my job. My goal was to see if I'd done the best I could, not some superhuman best. By choosing only the essentials, I was able to focus on the big picture.

For example, I'd ask myself, How did I help my clients today? Did I encourage the people who work for me? The mirror test helped me change from being my own worst critic to being my own inspiring coach. Because coaches push for success through positive reinforcement. I stopped beating myself up for the small misses.

It was working for me, so I asked Mary Lynn what her three mirror-test questions would be. Here's what she came up with: Did I make a positive difference in a kid's life today? Did I manage to walk the fine line between guiding my sons and letting them be independent? Did I have a moment of real communication with someone who matters-family, student, colleague, friend? What's important about Mary Lynn's list is that it is geared toward achievement, toward a positive result from her day. Most of the time she can come up with some kind of affirmative answer to her questions. and as a consequence, she cuts down on the late-night judgments on insignificant issues.

The mirror test helped me simplify my life. Still, in time I realized it was too job-centered, that I was giving too much attention to my career and letting everything else slide. I realized that something was missing from my mirror test: my personal life-my family and friends. Oh, yeah: and me.

So I came up with a new test. Work is still an important part, but now I also ask what I've done for the important people in my life-and how I'm doing on the job of taking care of myself. For example: Did I try to get closer to my family today-to my husband, Joe, brother, Jack, and my mom and dad? Did I help anyone in my family to be happier?

Then, switching to the personal, I might ask: Did I enjoy any peaceful moments today-a conversation with a friend or a walk home from work? What did I build into today that was good for me? (That one's always a good thought-starter for what I might try out tomorrow.)

Like Mary Lynn, I frame the questions in a positive way that assumes I'm trying my best-as so many of us are. The mirror test has helped make my days more balanced. As for my night, I'm happy to report that sleep now comes sooner and surer.

### How to Create Your Own Mirror Test

1. Make the questions specific. Don't ask, "Was I a great mom today?" Rather, try something like, "Did I move closer to my goal to be a more patient mom?"
2. At the same time, try to think long term. Don't change the questions every day or even

every week.

3. Try to smile at yourself when you ask the questions. Remember, the goal is to encourage, not to criticize.

4. Use the test as a guide for the next day, maybe even an inspiration-not as a way to pile on more responsibilities or add to your "to do" list.