Understanding the four stages of sleep

The sleep cycle is composed of four separate sleep stages

Stage 1
This is the stage when we first transition into sleep. Our eyelids get heavy and our minds feel a little foggy. Stage 1 lasts 5-10 minutes as our brains produce slower alpha waves that help us relax and drift off. Since we are still aware of our surroundings, it's common to wake up and be jerked away from sleep at this stage.

Stage 2
Now we've entered our deep sleep stage. The brain takes a rest while our bodies perform all sorts of restorative work, from repairing muscles to generating new cell growth.

Stage 3
Stage 2 is mid-level sleep. While we aren't aware, we can be easily awoken. During stage 2, the body temperature drops, the heart rate slows, and the brain creates rapid activity known as sleep spindles. These sleep spindles are believed to aid memory.

REM Sleep
This is the stage when we experience dreams. Characterized by random eye movements and vivid dreams, REM sleep is unique to mammals and birds. The brain is most active during the REM phase, and we dream as we process emotions.

Fun fact:
The body becomes immobilized during REM, so that we don't act out our dreams.

If you feel anxious about being able to fall back to sleep, you've likely activated your body's sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight response). Show yourself some self-compassion and engage in a calming activity like mindful cleaning.

Whether it's a warm bath with a book, listening to sleepcasts from Headspace, nature sounds, sleep music, or meditating, engaging in a gentle and joyful activity before bed helps create a smoother transition between wakefulness and sleep.

Science suggests that practicing gratitude before bed, if your sleep quality isn't serving you, try adding a gratitude practice to your bedtime routine. You can use these 
Gratitude Journaling Prompts to give you a nudge.

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