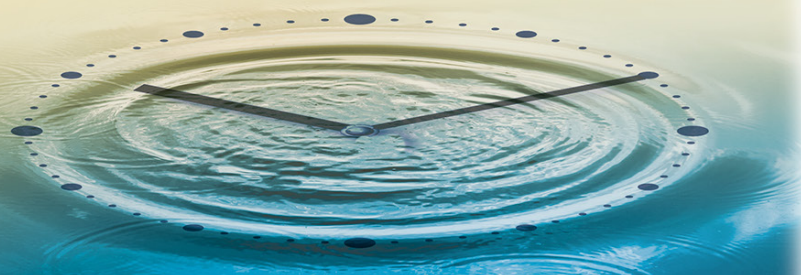


**EXCLUSIVE
EARLY EXCERPT**

Laura Vanderkam

Bestselling author of
WHAT THE MOST SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE DO BEFORE BREAKFAST

Tranquility by Tuesday



**9 WAYS TO CALM THE CHAOS
AND MAKE TIME FOR
WHAT MATTERS**



Laura Vanderkam is the author of several time management and productivity books, including *Juliet's School of Possibilities*, *Off the Clock*, *I Know How She Does It*, *What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast*, and *168 Hours*. Her work has appeared in publications including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Fast Company*, and *Fortune*. She is the host of the podcast *Before Breakfast* and the co-host, with Sarah Hart-Unger, of the podcast *Best of Both Worlds*. She lives outside Philadelphia with her husband and five children, and blogs at LauraVanderkam.com.

9 Practical Rules for Achieving Tranquility

... even when life is complicated, challenging, and occasionally chaotic.

Give yourself a bedtime

Go to sleep at about the same time every night unless you have a good reason not to.



Plan on Fridays



Think through your weeks holistically, before you're in them.

Move by 3 PM

Do some form of physical activity for ten minutes in the first half of every day.



Three times a week is a habit



Things don't have to happen daily to become part of your identity, and "often" can be more doable than "always."

Create a back-up slot



Make a resilient schedule where your priorities still happen when life doesn't go as planned.

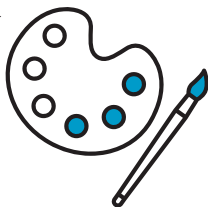
One big adventure, one little adventure



Each week, do at least two things that will be worth remembering.

Take one night for you

Commit to an activity you love that is separate from work and household responsibilities.



Batch the little things



Keep most of your schedule clear from unimportant tasks.

Effortful before effortless

Do active leisure activities before passive ones whenever time opens up.



From *Tranquility by Tuesday* by Laura Vanderkam

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PART 1

Calm the Chaos

Foundational habits for taking
control of your time

*P*icture yourself on a normal Tuesday. Work and family demands are as incessant as always. Yet you feel excited as you wake up. You are well rested. You have the energy to do what you need to do, and when your energy levels inevitably dip through the day, you have a plan to recharge. You survey the day's schedule and see that while it is full, there will be hours devoted to those important-but-not-urgent matters that add joy to your life. You know what needs to happen, and you have a plan to get those things done.

Wouldn't that feel nice?

That is the promise of the first three Tranquility by Tuesday rules. These rules are, on their surface, about general well-being. We want to approach our full lives with energy and optimism. We boost capacity and mood by getting enough sleep and physical activity. Having a general sense of what we need and want to do with our time, and a plan to make these things come to fruition, keeps us from feeling overwhelmed. And so we need to give ourselves a bedtime, plan on Fridays, and move each day by 3 p.m. These foundational habits will, almost immediately, make each day's hours feel better.

But all these rules have a deeper purpose as well. They nudge us to think about time strategically. When we give ourselves a bedtime, we give shape to the day. We start to make more active, mindful choices about what a given day can and cannot contain. When we plan on Fridays, we start to think about our future selves, and how we can make steady progress toward our long-term goals. When we commit to move by 3 p.m., we start to look at even busy days critically, seeing where the space might be, and knowing that we have the power to increase our capacity to do difficult things.

In other words, we become the master craftsmen of our schedules. First, we survey our days, then we shape our weeks, then we narrow in on our hours. As we become more familiar with the material, we grow more skillful. The foundation is laid to make something beautiful. And that makes us excited, on any given Tuesday, to get out of bed.

RULE 1

Give Yourself a Bedtime

Going to bed earlier is how grown-ups sleep in.

Somewhere, on the blurry edge of memory, I picture a scene. I am in my little brother's childhood room. He and I are creating elaborate plot lines for our Playmobil figures. By day, they run a school, a hotel, a tap dancing ensemble. Then fictional evening descends. We put the children to bed. The adults? We announce, with knowing smiles, that they are going to *stay up all night*.

I laugh at this now, this idea that staying up all night would be a privilege of adulthood. Come actual adulthood, I feel like I spend much of my energy some days convincing the younger people in my house to go to bed so I can go to bed. There is always something else that has to happen. The toddler wants to be

rocked again. Someone else's homework must go in the backpack. Someone has forgotten to tell me something very important, some story that takes meandering minutes to come to its conclusion.

I love sleep. I'd like to think sleep loves me back. But sleep and I have had to work hard to maintain our relationship during these years with babies and—my own particular middle-aged dilemma—early-rising little kids and night-owl teenagers. I have become an acute observer of sleep's quirks. Some fantastical dream suddenly introduces the plot twist of a crying child—and then, in a few minutes, the dream itself has disappeared and I am in my room with an actual sleepless kid. During the infant phases when I was waking and falling back asleep multiple times per day, I learned to recognize when, exactly, sleep was starting to visit. My mind would drift somewhere related to my life and then, as a familiar weight settled, I would see some scene that could not really be happening. I dreamed lucidly at times, particularly during the naps my poorly sleeping babies necessitated. I was aware, but thinking things I normally would not.

I know the bleary resignation of facing down a day without enough sleep. I know the particular despair of doing it multiple nights in a row. And yet I have seen a curious paradox with this—one that affects a great many people during the busy years of raising a family and building a career, and that has important ramifications for how we can best manage our schedules.

I track my time on weekly spreadsheets. All of my time. Since April of 2015, I have recorded how I have spent every half

hour of my life. There's no reason for anyone who doesn't study time professionally to do more than a few weeks of this, but the upside of my long-running data gathering is that I know exactly how much I sleep and when I sleep. My data set contains thousands of days. These recorded years include the babyhoods of my two youngest children, including all those middle-of-the-night wake-ups and miserably early weekend mornings.

There have been rough stretches. Yet, one way or another, I hit my sleep set point: 7.3–7.4 hours/day averaged over any given eight weeks or so. That's squarely in the range (seven to nine hours a day) that sleep literature suggests most adults need.

The most rigorous time-diary studies have found that most people do get enough sleep from a quantitative perspective. The American Time Use Survey, which has thousands of people talk through how they spent the previous 4 a.m. to 4 a.m. day, usually covering all 365 days of the year, found that in 2020, the average person slept 9.01 hours in a twenty-four-hour period (up from 8.84 hours in 2019). In 2019, employed parents with kids under age six averaged 8.32 hours (8.26 for men; 8.39 for women). No one ever believes me when I mention this statistic, but my own time-diary studies of people with jobs and kids, which have had people record how they spent the previous day, hour by hour, have found averages that are fairly close to eight hours too. For instance, when I had women who held intense professional jobs, and who had children at home, track their time for a week for my book *I Know How She Does It*, I found that they averaged 7.7 hours of sleep per day.

This raises the obvious question: Why, exactly, do we feel so tired?

Because there is no doubt that many of us do. It is an important question, because sleep is foundational for all other good habits. Fatigue makes it harder to think strategically about the future, or to make good choices with time. Being adequately rested boosts performance on cognitively difficult tasks. We are less distracted. It is simply easier to be productive when you've gotten enough sleep.

I've studied thousands of time logs over the years in an attempt to reconcile how people can, when their time is tracked, seem to be sleeping enough, and yet still claim, in many polls, to sleep low amounts on a "typical" night, or to talk of sleep, as sociologist Arlie Hochschild once wrote, "the way a hungry person talks about food."

I have come away convinced that the culprit is *disorderly sleep*. A reasonable average hides that people are often undershooting and then overshooting in a way that leads to fatigue on some days and an inability to maintain good routines on the others. This reality is obvious enough for people with babies, or those who do shift work, but is surprisingly widespread. For instance, in one of my time-diary studies, I found that 22 percent of people slept at least 90 minutes more, or less, on Tuesday than they did on Wednesday. That is a big gap.

Asked about a typical night, someone might report sleeping from midnight to 6 a.m. A time log shows that this did, indeed,

happen twice in the past week. But two other nights, this person crashed on the couch in front of the TV at 10 p.m., or fell asleep for an hour while putting a child to bed, or hit snooze three times on Thursday, with weekends looking completely different. The mental picture is six hours. The average might be 7.5, but each day is undershooting or overshooting in a way that wreaks havoc on someone's ability to function. If people are always undershooting or overshooting, that would explain why the National Sleep Foundation's annual Sleep in America poll found that, in 2020, people reported feeling sleepy, on average, three days per week. Overshot days don't feel particularly great either, when people sleep through their alarms, or however else their bodies force them to substitute sleep for other activities. Far better to hit the ideal each day.

We can't always control when we sleep. But given how important sleep is for flourishing, when it is possible to steer clear of that drop-tower carnival ride of skimping and then catching up, life can feel more calm. Since most adults need to wake at set times for work or family responsibilities, the only variable that can move is the time we go to sleep the night before.

In other words, despite what I fantasized about with my Playmobil characters, even adults need a bedtime. They need to go to bed on time, at a set time. And so that is **Tranquility by Tuesday Rule 1: Give yourself a bedtime.**

If you would like to experience the additional energy and optimism that comes from being well rested, choose a time that you would like to go to sleep more nights than not. Then, commit

to getting in bed by that time unless you have a compelling reason not to.

How to put yourself to bed

Figuring out and implementing a bedtime is a simple, four-step process.

1. Decide when you plan to wake up most weekdays

Be honest. While it might be fun to fantasize about waking up at 4 a.m. to run ten miles and meditate for thirty minutes before making yourself a kale smoothie, if you have not done any of those things in the past week, you are not going to start now. What wake-up time makes the most sense for your life as it actually is? If you tend to be woken by your young children, track your time for a few weeks to establish a bell curve of when they are up for good. You can set a waking time at the point where most of the wake-ups occur after that.

2. Decide how much sleep you need

Let's be honest here too. Most working-age adults need between seven and nine hours per day, with the majority of

those landing between seven and eight. Few people need less than six and a half hours per day, aside from a handful of genetic short sleepers who sleep short hours on weekends and vacations too. If you aren't sure, aim for seven and a half hours and see how it goes. If you're still crashing on weekends, you need more. If you wake up consistently before your alarm clock, you might need less.

3. Calculate what time you need to be in bed in order to get this amount of sleep

This is a math problem. If you need to wake up at 6 a.m. on most weekday mornings, and you need seven and a half hours of sleep, then count back seven and a half hours. This gives you a 10:30 p.m. bedtime. If you need to wake up at 8 a.m., then you can go to bed at 12:30 a.m. Giving yourself a bedtime doesn't mean you have to go to bed at the same time you did when you were ten years old. If you are a night owl who doesn't have to be up before 10 a.m., feel free to choose a bedtime that reflects that.

The important thing is to be consistent. If your life allows leeway on weekends, then you can shift by an hour or so, but any more will make Monday morning more painful than necessary. And if you've got young children who don't understand the concept of weekends, then you're best off sticking with the same bedtime nightly, and building your evenings with this bedtime in mind.

4. Set an alarm for fifteen to thirty minutes before the official bedtime so you can ease into bed

This last step is key. If you don't start winding down until your actual bedtime, you will go to bed later than you intend to. So start the process at least fifteen minutes before. If you want to read for more than a few minutes, or have some couple time, set your bedtime alarm earlier. Turn off the lights when the moment arrives. Try this for a week and see how it goes. Since most adults can't really "sleep in," at least during the week, then going to bed on time is the best way to recreate this sense of on-vacation-with-no-kids luxury.

Participant perspectives: Identifying obstacles

After introducing the "Give yourself a bedtime" rule, I asked the Tranquility by Tuesday project participants to go through the four-step process of figuring out their own bedtimes.

They set desired wake-up times between an eye-opening 3:30 a.m. and 8:30 a.m. They reported needing between six to nine hours of sleep, with a mean of 7.71 hours. They needed, on average, thirty minutes to wind down. For someone with a desired wake-up time of 6 a.m., needing 7.75 hours of sleep, this suggests a 10:15 p.m. bedtime, with the bedtime alarm going off around 9:45 p.m. to allow for thirty minutes of winding down.

For someone with a desired wake-up time of 7 a.m., needing seven hours of sleep and an hour before that to read and relax, this suggests a midnight bedtime, with the bedtime alarm going off around 11 p.m.

People were relatively open-minded about trying this rule, even if they had struggled with consistent sleep in the past. Just a handful of respondents flagged this rule as not being right for them. That said, those who were game to try it could identify numerous challenges to implementing this seemingly simple practice.

Some, like me, had babies or toddlers. A little voice yelling “Dada!” or “Mama!” from a crib at 10:30 p.m. will definitely derail a 10:30 p.m. bedtime.

A number of people mentioned work as a challenge. Sometimes this was a side gig, such as translating papers after the kids went to bed, or answering questions from Etsy customers long into the night. More often, though, it was a quick email check at 10 p.m. that turned into an hour-long back-and-forth conversation.

Some people with older children mentioned the difficulty of getting them into bed on time, which then delayed parental bedtimes.

Some people scurried around getting the household ready for the next day—packing lunches and bags and setting out outfits or cleaning the kitchen. This practice is common, but it’s also a Catch-22, because staying up too late to make the next morning go smoothly almost guarantees that the next morning will be dreadful.

A number of people mentioned the difficulty of mustering the energy to begin the bedtime process; one person wrote of being “too tired to get ready (stupid as that sounds).” But silly as it seems, the struggle is real; some research has suggested that we become less disciplined as the day goes on. Turning off the TV and going upstairs to brush teeth takes energy at a time when most people are depleted. It is easier to push the decision later, and then crash on the couch.

Some people’s partners observed different hours, which meant that a personally realistic bedtime would shift a family’s rhythms. This is never easy to do.

The most poignant problem, though, had nothing to do with work, or housework, or family members; rather, it had to do with their absence. People noted that going to bed means deciding that the day is over. You are making that decision when the house is quiet, the chores are done, and you can finally spend your time as you wish. As one respondent put it, “That’s the only truly free time I have.” Who wants to cut that short?

This realization came up again and again. One respondent put off sleep because she was “feeling like I didn’t have enough leisure time yet.” Another reported that “Dad gets distracted with video games or other projects.” Couple time and screen time often merged together. “My partner and I usually watch one episode of a TV show on the couch while eating dinner at the end of the day . . . and then just kind of stay on the couch,” one person wrote. It wasn’t exactly a gourmet meal by candlelight, but for an average Tuesday, it felt pleasant enough.

During the busy years of building a career and raising a family, late-night hours are prime “me time.” Indeed, this span of a few hours is often the longest stretch of leisure time that people get. We don’t want to end this pleasant, autonomous time by going to sleep. This is doubly true if we haven’t seen our partners much during the day and want some time with them. Sometimes the inner rebel emerges—the one who resents childhood’s rules dictating lights-out time, and whose Playmobil figures subsequently kept doing their thing into the wee hours. *You can’t make me*, the voice goes. *I don’t want to go to bed.*

Since no one can stretch a day past its twenty-four-hour limit, sleep can seem like a zero-sum game. As one respondent described this realization, “Spending more time asleep means spending less time doing anything else. So I had to accept that some other things would not get done. Or, spend time doing them but accept I would get less sleep.”

If those other things feel compelling enough, we might decide, as Jerry Seinfeld once joked, that a lack of sleep is “Morning Guy’s problem.”

How to minimize the resentment

I have certainly willed the minutes to move slower once the kids are in bed. It is so tempting to stretch this space out. And yet I know that with early wake-ups pending, a late night will mean a

far-less-tranquil morning. Even in the years of life when I haven't had a toddler, going to bed on time means I can wake well rested and able to run (something I won't do at 10 p.m.) or write when I am able to think straight (again, harder to do as the night goes on). Late-night "me time" feels good, but play your cards right and morning "me time" can open up more choices. One respondent who confessed to desiring alone time after the kids went to bed figured out that "If I just go to bed earlier I can wake up early (before kids) and get my quiet alone time, and I usually do something higher quality in the morning like read a professional development book over coffee rather than rewatch three episodes of *Friends* at night!"

This expansion of options means that giving yourself a bedtime is less of a zero-sum game than it first appears. I'd also argue that if you cut sleep short by an hour, but then spend two hours on a task instead of one because you are tired and distracted and prone to making mistakes, then you haven't come out ahead. And if you, like many people who are not chronic insomniacs, have a very strong sleep set point—that is, a quantity of sleep your body will force you to average over a few weeks—then **skimping on sleep one night doesn't buy you more time. It just means you crash and make it up somewhere else.** This may not have desirable effects. In the long run, you might be happier watching fewer hours of late-night Netflix if it means you don't sleep through that group bike ride on Saturday mornings.

It is possible to minimize bedtime resentment in a few ways:

1. Make space for leisure at other points in your schedule.

Many of the other *Tranquility by Tuesday* rules are designed to do just that. Late-night puttering feels less critical when you know you'll be playing in your softball league on Tuesday nights, when you plan on trying a new lunch spot with a work friend on Friday, and when you're regularly finding forty-five extra minutes to read during the day.

2. Remember that you are still in charge.

A bedtime isn't legally binding. It simply nudges a conscious decision. My bedtime is 11 p.m. It probably should be 10:30 p.m., but 11 p.m. feels more reasonable given that I also have teenage children whose phones must be confiscated. Since 11 p.m. is my bedtime, I have come to view 10:30 p.m. as my moment of truth. I evaluate what I am doing to see if I will be getting in bed by 11 p.m. I don't have to. I am an adult! I can, in fact, stay up all night if I want to! If I'm reading a good book, or having a really good conversation with my husband, I can go to bed later.

You can decide not to observe your bedtime on any given night. Maybe you consciously choose to work late one night so you can bill extra time and thus buy yourself a reasonable life the

rest of the week. Maybe you choose to get up early two mornings a week to exercise, and on the others, you sleep until the last possible minute. You can adjust as you want.

But in any case, once the clock strikes 10:30 p.m., if I don't have a good reason to stay up late, then I might as well drift toward bed, knowing that Morning Guy will be far happier with me.

Participant perspectives: Creatively overcoming challenges

Tranquility by Tuesday participants had wise ideas for coping with their bedtime challenges.

A few people who chafed at strict rules modified this strategy by giving themselves a bedtime *window*. Rather than give themselves an official bedtime, they decided that this rule meant they would turn out the lights sometime between, say, 10:30 p.m. and 11:15 p.m. This worked particularly well for people who also had a window during which they could wake up in the morning. They might have planned to get up at 6 a.m. to work out, but if lights out was 11:15 p.m. instead of 10:30 p.m., they'd move the alarm to 6:45 a.m. and do something shorter, or choose a different time for exercise. A real rebel might give himself a fake bedtime—say, 10 p.m.—and enjoy blowing through it every single night, knowing that the real bedtime (e.g., 11 p.m.) was still on track to happen. In life, it's good to know yourself.

One person who found mustering the energy to get ready for bed difficult decided to move these getting-ready tasks into earlier, less-fraught spots of the evening: face-washing after dinner, pajamas when the kids were putting on theirs. It can be easier to observe a bedtime if all that's left to do is climb under the covers.

To be sure, this rule did not work for everyone. Shutting down work was hard for people who felt perpetually behind, which was a common woe for families coping with the hybrid and virtual pandemic school schedules that lingered into the months when I conducted my study. One respondent had the seemingly smart idea of sweeping for work issues each night at 9 p.m., which would give her time to resolve them before bedtime. Unfortunately, “This was taken as an indication that I was available to work then, rather than a proactive means to get ahead on problems,” she reported, and so she ended up with even more unscheduled late-night work.

The results

Despite these challenges, those who were able to adhere to a bedtime did report sleeping better. On my time-satisfaction scale, a quarter more people agreed that they were getting enough sleep from the beginning of the program to the end. Scores rose 13 percent on the question of whether people had enough energy

to handle their responsibilities (though other rules contributed to that increase as well).

In general, people planned to stick with this rule. In my follow-up interviews with respondents, people often mentioned some other rule as making a big splash in their lives, but that this one most changed their day-to-day experience. As one person put it, of all the rules, “Giving myself a bedtime was probably the least sexy but the most useful.”

In the reflection questions about this rule, people noted benefits beyond the obvious upsides of not having to drink four cups of coffee to stay awake in meetings (and then sleeping through their alarms the next morning).

“I thought [a bedtime] would make me feel more rested, and it has, but the real bonus is that it’s made me choose my evening time more mindfully,” one person said. “I know I have to go to bed at 11:30 p.m., so I was aware I was choosing what to do in the four hours after my toddler has gone to bed.”

Four hours is *a lot*. Even two hours—a more common experience for people with young kids—can feel luxurious.

To experience this luxury, though, you have to know how much time there is, and when these hours are. Figuring out a bedtime gives shape to this not-insignificant chunk of a schedule.

Indeed, it gives shape to the entire day, which is the bigger concept behind this rule.

Most of us understand that the day has a beginning. We are a bit fuzzier on the notion that *each day has an end*. And yes, the new parents and shift workers of the world don’t sleep continu-

ously overnight, but in general, each day has a given chunk of waking hours.

By defining this amount, we start to think of each day as containing a given quantity of temporal space. That time will be filled by something. I maintain that what we fill each day with is largely up to us, based on current choices and those made in the past. Days can contain a lot. I know I enjoy the puzzle—a form of *Tetris*, if you will—of figuring out how to move the pieces around to make much fit within the 16.6 waking hours I experience daily. Defining the day lets us see that the game board is large. It is also not infinite.

Holding these two competing thoughts in mind, people could make smarter decisions about their time.

Choosing a bedtime “made my evenings more purposeful,” one person wrote. “Instead of doing activities (cleaning, reading, relaxing, etc.) and then going to bed when I was ‘done,’ I had a set amount of time until bedtime and had to figure out what I wanted to do during that time.”

People reported enjoying their evenings more once they understood their shape. “It feels pleasantly cozy to have enough time to take care of my skin and floss my teeth, instead of just shoveling myself into bed,” one participant who decided to start her bedtime routine earlier reported. “It feels nice to have time allotted to read in bed, instead of regarding it as a guilty pleasure.”

This enjoyment extended even to couple time, which people worried that a bedtime would curtail. Instead of staying up late

working on a project, one person did the math and realized there wasn't going to be enough time before bedtime. So instead this person "got into bed early and spent some extra time winding down and relaxing with my spouse."

Not all couples can set common bedtimes, but for those who can, doing so can increase the chances of spending romantic time together, rather than both of you wilting away hours on the couch until you're too tired to do anything else.

Practicing discipline

Going to bed on time is simple. But it is life-changing—both for the mindset shift it represents about the shape of a day, and for the more obvious reason that being well rested makes even tough days feel doable. We have the willpower to choose joy, rather than simply struggling through the hours.

Choosing to be well rested when it is within our power to be so is about taking "Morning Guy"—or as I like to put it, "Future You"—into account. When facing a decision, you picture yourself on the other side of that decision. You then make a decision to be kind to Future You. You make this decision even if it takes a little effort in the moment. This is the essence of discipline. We think beyond our current impulses to consider the broader ramifications. Going to bed on time is a daily opportunity to practice this discipline. Other Tranquility by Tuesday rules provide the

opportunity to strengthen and stretch this muscle in new ways, with what I hope are good results, but this first rule builds the foundation.

And the payoff? For this rule, it is immediate. As people noted:

- ◆ “On the evening I went to bed on time and actually slept all night and woke up early enough to exercise and shower before starting my day, I had the best day of the week.”
- ◆ “Getting enough sleep helped me be my best self both at work and afterward. I have had enough energy to get to everything I have planned this week, and that makes me happy.”

Take the next step

CREATE A (BITE-SIZED) MORNING ROUTINE

One of the best reasons to set a bedtime is that it gives you more control over your mornings. Mornings are a great time for getting stuff done. For busy people with careers or young families or both, weekdays tend to feature two potential chunks of autonomous time: at night after the kids go to bed, and first thing in the morning, if you get up early enough. Both have their pleasures, but because many people find it challenging to exercise or do mentally demanding creative work at night, if your aspirations include these activities, mornings might be a better bet.

Mornings also tend to be more regimented than other times of day. Many people wake up and get ready at roughly the same time each day, even if they haven't yet learned the wisdom of giving themselves a bedtime. This means that any good habit

built into the regular run-of-show has a high chance of happening.

Plus, there's something very satisfying about achieving a big win before breakfast. Whatever the rest of the day brings, you know you've already done that.

So I am a big fan of morning routines. But don't worry. I'm not asking anyone to commit to a two-hour routine involving a personal trainer and green juice. Indeed, "keeping your routine short and easy to accomplish, especially in the beginning, will greatly increase the chances of you sticking with it," says Benjamin Spall, who ran the popular newsletter *My Morning Routine* for many years. You can always increase the length of the routine over time, but usually, fifteen to thirty minutes is all you need, according to Spall.

So let's start with fifteen minutes. What would you like to do during your mornings, just about every day? Perhaps you are already exercising a few mornings a week, which is wonderful. What other small actions could you add to those mornings, and also do on other mornings, that would have a big payoff over time? I maintain that the focus should be pleasure. What would make you excited to get out of bed, or at least excited to sit down at your desk?

Make a list of two to three bite-sized morning activities that you would genuinely enjoy, and that would positively impact your career, your relationships, or yourself. For instance, you could:

- ◆ Respond to a creative writing prompt
- ◆ Read a few pages in a sacred text
- ◆ Have a cup of coffee outside, weather permitting (or in front of a window if not)

- ◆ Take a photo of something beautiful
- ◆ Do twenty push-ups and twenty sit-ups
- ◆ Do a ten-minute strength-training video
- ◆ Meditate with a five-minute program on an app
- ◆ Pray a memorized set of prayers
- ◆ Pray for a specific person (a new person each day)
- ◆ Send an email reaching out to a new or old connection
- ◆ Write another 250 words in your memoir
- ◆ Practice for ten minutes with a foreign-language app
- ◆ Read a story in a physical newspaper (or a daily news digest)
- ◆ Read one article in a professional journal
- ◆ Listen to a short podcast or ten minutes of an audiobook
- ◆ Listen to a new piece of music
- ◆ Record a quick video for social media
- ◆ Stretch or do some yoga poses
- ◆ Take several deep breaths and pay attention to your breathing
- ◆ Read a story with a young child
- ◆ Read a chapter in a book with an older child
- ◆ Take care of a few plants
- ◆ Have a cup of tea with your spouse
- ◆ Check in with a friend, relative, or accountability partner
- ◆ Walk to a nearby coffee shop and back home
- ◆ Look at your calendar and reflect on the day's priorities

- ◆ Write down an intention for the day
- ◆ Write a note of praise to an employee or colleague
- ◆ Eat a real breakfast

I'm sure you could add many more ideas to this list. In my case, I aim to do three things. I write at least a hundred words in my "free writing file," I do some strength training, and I read a little bit of something big. During 2021, for instance, I read a chapter of *War and Peace* each day. Tolstoy's chapters in his famous epic turn out to be only four to five pages long . . . he just wrote 361 of them. During 2022, I read a few pages of Shakespeare daily, with the goal of making it through his collected works in a year.

In fifteen minutes, you could probably tackle a few bite-sized items. If you like, you could rotate through five or six, choosing three to do each day. Feel free to experiment. There is no right way to do a morning routine. **A morning routine exists to serve you.**

I'd also add that during the busy years, especially with really young children, it might help to view your morning routine as more of a morning "checklist" than as something that has to happen at an exact time. A routine that must happen from 6 a.m. to 6:20 a.m. daily can get derailed by a baby who chooses to wake some morning at 5:55 a.m., or by an early work meeting that requires leaving the house at 6:30 a.m. one morning instead of 7 a.m. By being flexible about the time, you increase the chances of success. Many mornings I do my rituals right after our nanny starts work at 8 a.m. But if I'm needed for the last round of kid shuttling, I'll do them later. On weekends, it might happen well into the afternoon (sometimes "morning" can just be a state of

mind). If I'm up before the baby, I might read a chapter on my phone in bed and send myself an email with my free-writing efforts. The kettlebell swings just happen at some other point.

And yes, life can change a routine. Benjamin Spall's morning routine had involved a short meditation, followed by push-ups and sit-ups, followed by working on a writing project. Then, a week or so before I interviewed him, he adopted a six-month-old puppy, and overnight that routine turned into puppy care, including an hour-long walk to drain her energy.

So it goes. People move. People start different jobs. People try working from home. People have new babies. Those babies grow up and start schools that send their buses at comically early hours. In general, when I read about someone's morning routine, I suspect it is a snapshot in time, more than an immovable ideal. But even as the morning routine may change, the concept can still be helpful. Small steps add up over time. Day by day I get a little stronger. I absorb someone else's words that still ring true to the human condition after hundreds of years. I write a little myself and try things out—just for me, just figuring what works, without the pressure to share any of it.

And beyond that? Well, there's always coffee, in my favorite mug, and the light through my office window. There's something about the way it looks in the tranquil early hours that makes me feel that today, like every morning, will be another chance to get it right. And if I went to bed at my bedtime the night before? That makes the morning even better. It's worth giving it a shot.

Your Turn

GIVE YOURSELF A BEDTIME

Planning questions:

1. What time would you like to wake up most mornings?
2. About how many hours of sleep do you need on an average night?
3. What time do you generally need to be in bed in order to get this amount of sleep? This is your bedtime.
4. About how much time, in minutes, do you need before your bedtime to relax and get ready for bed?
5. Count back from your bedtime, and set an alarm, or some other recurring nudge for this time. What is this time?

6. What might keep you from going to bed at your bedtime?
7. How do you plan to address these challenges?

Implementation questions
(After trying Rule 1 for a week):

1. How did observing a bedtime affect you this week?
2. What challenges did you face in implementing this week's strategy?
3. How did you deal with these challenges?
4. If you were not able to observe a bedtime, what prevented you from doing so?
5. If you needed to modify the rule, how did you do so?
6. How likely are you to continue using this rule in your life?

To make time for what matters, you need a resilient schedule, not a perfect schedule.

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