

Go to bed cross if you have to

A short book about refusing to sleep until the argument is settled, at the hour you argue worst

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit, and it belongs to two people. Something starts at ten. The dishwasher, the plan for Saturday, a tone. By eleven it's about everything, and by midnight neither of you can remember what it was about, and at one in the morning you're still on the sofa, because you were told never to go to bed on an argument, and you never have, and nothing has ever been settled at one in the morning that stayed settled at eight.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the habit makes sense from the inside. The old rule sounds like wisdom, leaving a row unfinished feels like abandoning it, and you can't imagine sleeping with it unsettled. The second is that the late hour is the worst hour of the day to settle anything, and there's research on why. Mood falls through the waking day. One night's lost sleep makes people more impulsive with anything negative. The same three points go round at one in the morning without moving, because the part of you that could move them has gone to bed already. And sleep doesn't let a row fester. It works on it, and the morning version is smaller and more accurate than the one you'd have settled at one. The third is practical. After ten, you don't settle arguments. Either of you can call a truce, you name a time tomorrow, and you go to bed cross if you have to. Chapters 20 to 23 cover how.

This book doesn't ask you to avoid conflict, to swallow things, or to pretend the row doesn't matter. The row matters. That's why it deserves the two of you at eight in the morning rather than the two

of you at one.

Two cautions.

If the late arguments come with contempt, threats, or fear, or one of you isn't free to leave the room, that isn't a habit and this isn't the book. The National Domestic Abuse Helpline is free and open day and night on 0808 2000 247.

And if the rows are the surface of a low mood in either of you, low most of the day for a fortnight, that's a GP conversation, and the rows will be easier to have once it's had.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

Ten past eleven

It starts at ten past ten, over the dishwasher. One of you stacked it and the other one restacked it, and there was a remark, and a remark back. By half past ten it's about how you never listen, and by eleven it's about their mother, and by half past eleven it's about the thing from March, and at ten past midnight one of you says "let's just go to bed" and the other one says "no, we're sorting this", because you don't go to bed on an argument, that's the rule, that's what your parents said, and the arguments you've left overnight have always been worse for it. Or you think they have.

At one in the morning you're both on the sofa. Nothing has been settled. The same three things have been said eleven times each, with less accuracy and more heat on each round, and something got said at half past twelve that neither of you meant and both of you will remember. Eventually one of you cries or one of you gives in, and you go up, and lie there, and the alarm is at half past six, and the next day you're both wrecked and short with each other and the children, and the dishwasher is still stacked wrong.

These are invented, but I'd guess yours is close. Some words. **The old rule** is never go to bed on an argument. **The settlement** is the resolution the old rule demands before sleep. **The late hour** is after ten, and **the late brain** is the state the two of you are in by then, tired, reactive, and running the same track. **The circuit** is the same three points going round. **The truce** is the agreed stop, which either of you can call. **The resume time** is the named slot tomorrow. **The morning version** is what the row looks like at eight. **Cross** is the plain word for the state this book says you can

go to bed in. **A note** is the one line you write before you do. And **the same bed** is where this book says to sleep, and chapter 13 is about why.

Before you go on, do one thing. For a month, keep a list. Every argument that starts after nine in the evening. What time it started, what time it ended, whether anything was settled, and one word for the next day. Don't change anything. Most couples who do this find that the settled column says no all the way down, the end times are after midnight, and the next-day column has the same word in it that the arguments were about.

Why staying up seems right

Before I argue with the old rule, I want to be fair to it, because it was said to you by people who loved each other and it isn't stupid.

The old rule. Never go to bed on an argument. It's been said in kitchens for a century, and the people who said it usually stayed married, and it feels like the accumulated wisdom of couples who knew something.

Leaving it feels like abandoning it. Getting up mid-row and going upstairs feels like walking out. The argument is a thing the two of you are in together, and one of you leaving it is one of you leaving.

It'll fester. Unfinished things grow. A row left overnight is a row that's had eight hours to set, and the morning will be worse.

The morning's busy. Alarm, children, work. There's no time at eight for a conversation like this. The night is the only time you've got.

You can't sleep anyway. Lying there furious, next to someone furious, isn't sleep. You may as well be downstairs finishing it.

It shows you care. A person who goes to bed in the middle of a row is a person for whom the row doesn't matter. Staying up is the proof that it does.

And resolution is the goal. The whole point of an argument is to get to the other side of it, and the other side is where you're trying to get, and you're nearly there, at half past twelve, if they'd just admit

the thing.

There are needs under all of this. To be at peace with the person you share a bed with. Not to leave things broken. To show the row matters. To sleep. Those are good needs and the method later in the book meets every one of them better than the sofa at one does. What I'll show is that the old rule assumes a settlement is available at midnight, and that it isn't, because the two people trying to reach it aren't the two people who could.

"Never go to bed on an argument"

Start with the old rule itself, because it's the belief the whole night rests on, and it's worth asking what it's assuming.

It assumes that a settlement is available. That if the two of you keep at it, you'll get there. And it assumes that the getting there is as possible at midnight as at any other hour, so that the only variable is persistence. Both assumptions are wrong, and the second one is measurable.

Scott Golder and Michael Macy, in 2011, analysed millions of public messages posted through the day by people in dozens of countries, and traced how the emotional tone of the messages moved with the clock. They found the same pattern everywhere. People wake in a good mood, and the mood deteriorates as the day goes on, with a small lift in the evening and then a decline toward the night. The pattern held across cultures and was consistent, the researchers said, with the effects of sleep and the body clock. It's social media data, which has limits, and it's about mood in general rather than arguments. But the shape is the thing. The late hour is the low point of the waking day for most people, most days, and the low point is where the old rule sends you to do the hardest thing a couple does.

Now add what chapter 6 will say about sleep loss and reactivity, and what chapter 11 will say about the circuit, and the old rule looks different. It isn't advice to persist. It's advice to hold the most

delicate conversation of the week at the one hour when both of you are least able to hold it, and to keep holding it as that ability drains further, and to treat the draining as a reason to keep going.

Where did it come from? I don't know, and I'd guess it came from a time when a row left overnight really might be left for a month, because people didn't talk about feelings much and the night was the only time the talking happened. That's not your house. You'll be at the kitchen table at eight, and chapter 21 is about making sure you are, and once that's true the old rule has lost the one thing that justified it, which is that tonight is the only chance.

Never go to bed on an argument was said by people who meant never leave things unmended. That part is right. What they got wrong is the hour.

"If we stop now, it'll fester"

The fear that keeps you on the sofa is of what the row will be in the morning if you leave it. Bigger. Set. Harder. A night's growth on it.

Matthew Walker and Els van der Helm, in a 2009 review, drew together research on what sleep does to emotion. Their model, built from a wide range of studies, is that sleep isn't a pause in emotional life but a stage of it. During sleep, and particularly during the dreaming phase, the brain reprocesses the emotional experiences of the day, and the effect of that reprocessing is to bring the next day's emotional reactivity back into range. What was raw in the evening is, after a night's sleep, still remembered but less charged. They called the paper "Overnight therapy?", with the question mark, and I'd keep the question mark. It's a model, and the notes say so. But the direction is the opposite of festering. Sleep is where the row gets worked on, by a process that runs whether or not you've settled anything, and the morning version is the product.

Bread left to prove overnight is a fair comparison for two sentences. It's changed by morning, and the change is the point, and nobody stands over it at one a.m. to stop it rising.

Now compare the two mornings. In one, you settled it at one, in the sense that one of you gave in and you went up, and you wake having slept five hours with a settlement you can't quite remember agreeing to and a sentence from half past twelve still in the room. In the other, you called a truce at half past ten, went to bed cross, slept seven hours, and wake with the row processed, smaller, and a

time at eight to finish it with the two of you who are actually capable of finishing it. The festering belief predicts the second morning is worse. In my observation, and this is observation and not the review's finding, it's the first that's worse, because it has the night's damage in it and the second doesn't.

What festers is a row that's left with no time to come back to, and that's chapter 17. A row left overnight with a resume time isn't left. It's parked, and parked things don't grow. They wait.

"I can't sleep until it's sorted"

You'd say the old rule isn't a choice. You couldn't sleep anyway, lying there with it unsettled. The only route to sleep is through the settlement.

Look at what's stopping the sleep. It isn't the row being unsettled. It's the row being live. Two people at eleven, still talking, still escalating, are two people whose bodies are wide awake, and the awokeness is the argument's, and it doesn't stop because a settlement has been reached at one, because by then both of you have been at full stretch for three hours and the body doesn't stand down on command. Marie Vandekerckhove and Raymond Cluydts, in a 2010 review, described the two-way relationship. Emotional stress during the day affects sleep that night, and lost sleep makes people more sensitive to emotional and stressful events the next day. A row at one in the morning is the first half of that loop feeding the second, and the second feeding tomorrow night's row.

What lets you sleep isn't the settlement. It's the truce. A truce is a stop that both of you have agreed, with a time attached, and it does something a settlement at one can't, which is let the body stand down while the argument is still open. You know you'll be back at the table at eight. The row isn't finished but it isn't live, and a not-live row is a thing you can lie next to, cross, and sleep.

An earlier book in this series is about the mind at three in the morning, and its argument is that the night is where problems circle and don't get solved, and that a note and a time in the morning is what lets the circling stop. The same is true of a shared

problem. The note says what the row is about. The time says when you'll return to it. Between the two, the thing is held, and holding is what sleep needs.

So "I can't sleep until it's sorted" is true if sorted means live, and false if sorted means held. Chapters 20 to 22 are about holding it, and most couples who try a truce with a time attached are surprised by how quickly they sleep, because what was keeping them up was never the disagreement. It was the fact that nobody had stopped.

"We're both adults, we can talk it through"

You're reasonable people. You've resolved hard things before. Two adults who love each other can sit down and talk something through at any hour, and the idea that you can't do it at midnight is patronising.

Clare Anderson and Charlotte Platten, in 2011, kept people awake for one night and then tested how they responded to negative stimuli. After one night without sleep, people were more impulsive with negative things. They failed more often to hold back a response, and when they responded wrongly, they did it faster. The researchers noted that sleep loss had already been shown to intensify the brain's response to negative things, and their study showed what that looks like in behaviour. Less holding back, quicker mistakes, specifically toward the negative.

William Killgore, in a 2010 review, went through what sleep loss does to thinking more broadly, and found that while some kinds of reasoning hold up fairly well, the parts that depend on the front of the brain, and the more flexible and creative parts of thinking, are the ones that degrade. An earlier paper by Seung-Schik Yoo, Matthew Walker and colleagues, in 2007, had a title that said it plainly, a disconnect between the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala without sleep, which in ordinary words is the brakes coming off the part of you that reacts. I've read only the title of that one and the notes say so.

Now, you haven't been awake all night at eleven. But you've been awake since half past six, you're in Golder and Macy's low hour, and the row has been running for an hour, and every one of those findings is about the direction things move as sleep is lost, not about a threshold you're safely under. The adults on the sofa at one are not the adults at the kitchen table at eight. They have the same values and the same love and less of the equipment that lets them use either. The flexible thinking that finds the third option is the first thing to go. The holding back that stops the sentence about their mother is the second.

An earlier book in this series is about anger and its rule is nothing said or decided in the first twenty minutes. This book is that rule at the scale of an hour. Not because you're not adults. Because adults at one in the morning are running on less, and the argument doesn't know that and doesn't care.

"It's the only time we're alone"

Here's the practical case for the late hour. The children are down. The phones are off. The evening is the one stretch of the day the two of you have, and if the row can't happen then, when?

The late hour is the only slot and it's the worst one, and both of those are true, and the answer is to make another slot rather than to use the bad one. Chapter 21 is about the resume time, and the short version is that ten minutes at eight, before the children are properly up or after they've gone, is worth more than three hours at midnight, because the ten minutes have the two of you in them and the three hours have the late brain.

An earlier book in this series is about staying up late for time of your own, and its point is that the need for that time is real and the hour it's taken from is the problem. The same applies to time as a couple. You need it. Taking it out of sleep, at the low point of the day, in the form of an argument, is the worst way to have it. Most couples who look honestly at their week can find ten minutes in it that isn't midnight. Saturday morning before anyone's up. The walk after Sunday lunch. The ten minutes after the children are down and before the television goes on, at half past eight, when the low hour hasn't quite arrived. Those are slots, and they're slots for the conversation the row was trying to be.

There's a thing worth noticing about the late slot. It's the only one because it's the one that's left when nothing else has been arranged, and things that happen in the leftover slot happen badly. An argument that's had to wait until eleven to happen is an

argument that's been building since the dishwasher, and building is not the same as thinking. If the two of you had a standing ten minutes on a Sunday, a fair amount of what becomes a row at eleven would have been a sentence at ten past twelve on Sunday, and the dishwasher would have been the dishwasher.

"We used to talk till three and it was fine"

Early on, you talked all night. Two in the morning on a kitchen floor, working something out, and it was one of the best conversations you've ever had, and you're still together partly because of it. So the late hour can't be the problem. You've done your best work in it.

Two things were different, and both of them matter.

The first is what the conversation was. At twenty-four, on the kitchen floor, you weren't settling a row about a dishwasher. You were finding out about each other, and finding out is a thing the late hour is kind to. Nobody was defending a position. Nobody had a thing from March. The late brain from chapter 6, with its brakes loosened, is bad at holding back a sharp sentence and quite good at saying a true thing you'd have been shy of at noon, and at twenty-four the true things were the point. Now the true thing at half past twelve is about their mother, and the brakes are what you needed.

The second is what the morning was. At twenty-four the morning was a lecture you could skip and a coffee at eleven. Now the alarm is at half past six and there are two children and a job, and the night's cost lands on all of them, and chapter 3's low hour is lower for a person who's been up since half past six carrying a house than it was for a student who woke at ten.

So the memory is real and it isn't a counterexample. It's evidence of what the late hour is good for, which is talking, and what it isn't good for, which is settling. You can still talk till three if you want to,

on holiday, with nothing to settle and nothing at half past six. What you can't do is settle a row then, and you couldn't at twenty-four either, and the reason you don't remember failing to is that at twenty-four there was nothing to settle.

If the late conversations are what you miss, and a lot of couples with young children miss them badly, chapter 7's slot is for those too. Not for the row. For the talking. A Saturday morning with coffee and nothing to fix is the kitchen floor at two in the morning with the good bits kept and the alarm taken out.

"Going to bed cross means we've failed"

The old rule has a second layer, and it's about what going to bed cross says about the marriage. Couples who are all right don't need to. The fact that you'd have to means something's wrong.

Look at what the settlement at one in the morning actually is, in the cases where you've reached it. One of you gave in. Or one of you cried and the other stopped. Or you both said fine and went up. Those aren't settlements. They're endings, produced by exhaustion, and they've told you nothing about the dishwasher or the thing from March, and they've left the two of you with a memory of the night rather than of a resolution. If that's what not failing looks like, it's a low bar, and it's the bar the old rule sets.

A truce isn't failure. It's two adults recognising that the hour is wrong for the conversation and agreeing to have it at a better one. That's a more competent act than anything that happens at one in the morning, and it's the act of a couple who can manage their disagreements rather than be managed by them. The couple who can say "we're both too tired for this, eight o'clock" and go up cross and be at the table at eight are doing something harder and better than the couple who stay on the sofa till one because a rule told them to.

Cross is a state. It isn't a verdict on the marriage. Two people who love each other can be cross with each other on a Tuesday night, and sleep, and be less cross at eight, and sort the thing, and that's what a marriage with disagreements in it looks like from inside. The old rule has made cross into a thing that has to be resolved

before sleep, and resolved-before-sleep has become the test of whether you're all right, and the test is producing the sofa at one, which is the thing that's actually not all right.

You haven't failed if you go to bed cross. You've declined to fail at one in the morning so that you can succeed at eight.

"They'll think I don't care if I sleep"

The fear under the old rule, for a lot of people, is about the other person. If you say "let's stop", they'll hear "I don't care enough to finish this". The staying up is the proof that it matters.

Consider what caring looks like at eleven. It looks like a person who's tired, saying the same thing for the fourth time, with more edge, to a person who's stopped hearing it. It looks like the sentence about their mother at half past twelve, which came from the late brain and not from care. Staying up doesn't show that the row matters. It shows that the old rule matters, and the row is the thing that suffers for it.

There's a sentence that says what you mean, and it's the one chapter 20 is built round. "I care about this too much to do it tired." That's the truth. The row matters enough that it deserves the version of you that can think, and that version isn't available at eleven, and saying so is the opposite of not caring. It's taking the thing seriously enough to protect it from the hour.

The other person may not hear it that way the first time. If the old rule has run in your house for years, "let's stop" has always meant "I'm done", and it'll take a few weeks of resume times kept before it means what you mean. That's chapter 17. The way to make the sentence believable is to be at the table at eight, and to be there every time, and after a month of that, "eight o'clock" said at half past ten is heard as a promise and not as an exit.

And notice what the other person is actually asking for at eleven. Not the settlement. To be heard. A truce called properly, with "I've heard what you're saying and I want to answer it properly, and I can't at this hour", gives them that, and the settlement at one never did, because by one nobody was hearing anything.

"We have to finish what we started"

There's a sense that the argument is a thing with a shape, a beginning and an end, and that stopping halfway is leaving something incomplete. You've started, so you finish.

Look at what the argument is doing at midnight. It isn't progressing toward an end. It's going round. The same three points, the dishwasher, the listening, the mother, said by each of you in turn, in slightly different words, with slightly more heat, for two hours. If you wrote down what was said at eleven and what was said at half past twelve, the content would be the same and the tone would be worse. That's not an argument approaching its end. It's the circuit, and a circuit doesn't have an end. It has laps.

The reason it circuits is chapter 6. The part of you that could take the three points and find the fourth, the one that moves things, the "actually, I think what's really bothering me is", is the part that degrades first when you're tired. What's left is the part that can restate, and restating is what a circuit is made of. You can feel this from inside if you look for it. The sense, at half past twelve, that you're saying something you've already said, and that it isn't landing, and that the only thing to do is say it again louder.

Finishing is a feeling, and the late brain can't produce it. Finished means both of you understand something you didn't before, and understanding is the thing the hour has taken away. What the late brain can produce is an ending, by exhaustion, which feels nothing

like finished and is why the row is back next week. The circuit runs until one of you can't, and then it stops, and stopping isn't finishing.

At eight, with sleep behind you, the three points are still there and so is the fourth, and the fourth is what finishes it. "I think I was cross about the dishwasher because I felt like I'd done everything else that day too." That sentence is available at eight and not at midnight, and it's the one that ends the argument, and the argument was waiting for it the whole time.

So "we have to finish what we started" is right about finishing and wrong about when. You'll finish. You'll finish at eight, in ten minutes, with the fourth point, and the two hours of circuit you'd have done tonight would have made the finishing harder and not easier.

"It's not really about the dishwasher"

You know the dishwasher isn't the point. Something underneath is, and getting to it takes time, and the sofa at midnight is where the two of you finally get past the surface to the real thing. Stopping at half past ten leaves you on the surface.

I agree that it isn't about the dishwasher. The question is whether midnight is where the real thing gets found, and I don't think it is. Look at what happens on the sofa. The dishwasher becomes the listening, and the listening becomes the mother, and the mother becomes the thing from March. That feels like going deeper. It's going wider. Each new subject arrives because the late brain can't hold the last one, and by one in the morning you've got five subjects and no depth on any of them, and the real thing, the one under the dishwasher, has been buried under four other rows.

The real thing is the fourth point from chapter 11, the "I think I was cross because I felt like I'd done everything else that day too", and it's a quiet sentence. It needs the flexible, self-observing part of thinking that Killgore's review said goes first when sleep is short. It's a sentence people say at eight, over coffee, after the reprocessing in chapter 4 has had a night with it. At midnight the same person says "and another thing", because that's the sentence the late brain has.

There's a test you can run on your own list from chapter 1. For each row, what was it about at the start, and what was it about at the end? If the end is a different and larger subject than the start, the row didn't go deep. It drifted, and drifting is what the circuit does

when it runs out of the first subject. A row that finds the real thing gets narrower, not wider. It ends on one sentence that both of you recognise, and that ending is available at eight and almost never at one.

The note from chapter 21 does some of this work for you. Writing "dishwasher, and feeling like I do everything" at half past ten, before bed, is often the moment the real thing gets named, because writing one line forces a subject, and the subject is usually nearer the truth than anything said in the two hours the sofa would have taken. You'll wake to the real thing on the side by the kettle. Midnight would have given you the mother.

"I can't sleep next to someone who's angry with me"

The truce is accepted in principle and then the question arrives. Where do you sleep? Lying in the same bed as a person who's furious with you feels impossible, and one of you ends up on the sofa, and now the truce is a separation.

The same bed. That's this book's position, and I'll say why, and chapter 24 covers the households where it isn't the right answer.

A truce called by two people is a truce on both sides. You're both cross. You've both agreed to stop. Neither of you has won or lost. Lying in the same bed cross is the physical form of that agreement, and it says, without anyone speaking, that cross is a state the two of you can be in together, which is true, and which the old rule has spent years denying. The sofa says something else. It says the argument has become a division, and the division is the thing you'd been trying to avoid by staying up.

There's a practical point too. A person on the sofa is a person alone with the row, and alone with the row at one in the morning is the earlier book's three o'clock mind, running the circuit on its own without even the other person to interrupt it. The same bed, with the other person breathing beside you, is a smaller room for the row to grow in, and it grows less.

What lying cross next to someone teaches, over a month, is that it's survivable. The first night it feels intolerable, and you lie rigid, and you sleep anyway, because you're tired and the row isn't live. The

third night it's uncomfortable. By the second week it's a thing you've done and know how to do, and the knowledge changes what a row is. A row is no longer a thing that has to be resolved before you can be in the same room. It's a disagreement that two people who share a bed are having, and will finish in the morning, and that's a different and better thing for a row to be.

Say nothing much. "We're not finished and that's fine. Eight o'clock." Then lie down. If a hand finds a hand in the night, that's not the settlement and it doesn't mean the argument's over. It means you're still the two of you, cross, and that was always allowed.

"The morning's too busy"

The resume time is the hinge of the method, and the objection to it is that there is no morning. Alarm at half past six, children, lunches, the door at eight. Where's the ten minutes?

Two things. The first is what the morning is for, on the evidence. Brant Hasler and Wendy Troxel, in 2010, followed twenty-nine couples for a week with sleep monitors and daily reports of how they got on. The findings ran in both directions. For the men, a better night's sleep predicted less negative interaction with their partner the next day. For the women, less negative interaction during the day predicted better sleep that night, and their partner's better sleep too. It's a small study and I'd hold it loosely, and the gender findings are the study's and I'm not generalising them. But the direction is the thing. Sleep and how a couple gets on feed each other, day to night to day, and a row at one in the morning is a bad night that produces a bad day that produces a bad night. The morning after a truce, with sleep behind it, is the one place in that loop where the two of you are on the good side of it, and it's the reason the resume time works at all.

The second is the arithmetic. Ten minutes. Not the three hours the sofa took. Ten minutes at the kitchen table, with coffee, before the children are down or after they've gone, in which the two of you say the thing that was actually the matter and agree what to do about the dishwasher. Most rows that took three hours at midnight take ten minutes at eight, in my observation, because at eight the

fourth point from chapter 11 is available and the circuit isn't running. The morning isn't too busy for ten minutes. It's too busy for three hours, and three hours was never what the row needed.

Make it an appointment. An earlier book in this series, about raising difficult things, has a method it calls booking it, asking for a time, and the resume time is that. "Eight o'clock, kitchen table, before the school run." Named, agreed, kept. If eight genuinely can't work, the walk after drop-off, or the phone call at lunch, or half past eight tomorrow evening before the low hour arrives. What matters is that the time exists, that both of you know it, and that it's kept, because a resume time kept is what makes the next truce believable.

"Sleeping on it never solves anything"

Some readers will say they've tried this. Slept on it, woken up, and the row was still there. Sleep didn't solve it. So the old rule was right, and the only thing that solves a row is having it.

Sleep doesn't solve arguments. Rested people do. The claim was never that you'd wake up with the dishwasher sorted. It's that you'd wake up with the two people who can sort it, which is different from the two people on the sofa at one, and chapter 6 is about how.

Walker and van der Helm's model from chapter 4 is about what sleep does to the charge on an experience, not to its content. The row is still there in the morning. It's less raw. The thing from March is still a thing, but it's the size it is rather than the size it was at half past twelve, and a thing the right size is a thing two people can talk about in ten minutes.

There's a finding from an earlier book in this series that applies here. Eli Finkel and colleagues, in 2013, found that couples who spent twenty-one minutes over a year writing about their conflicts from the view of a neutral third party who wanted the best for both of them stopped showing the decline in marital quality that other couples showed, and the mechanism was reduced distress about conflict. The earlier book calls that view the third seat. What's worth noticing here is when the third seat is available. Not at one in the morning. The flexible perspective-taking that lets you see the row as a fond outsider would is exactly the kind of thinking Killgore's review said sleep loss degrades. At eight, after sleep, you can take the third seat. At midnight you can only take yours.

So "sleeping on it never solves anything" is true about the sleep and false about the morning. The morning has two rested people and a third seat in it. The night had two exhausted people and a circuit. If you've slept on rows before and found them unsolved in the morning, the missing piece was almost certainly chapter 17's, which is that nobody set a time to come back to it, and a row slept on with no time attached isn't slept on. It's dropped, and dropped things do come back, and that's not sleep's fault.

"It's always me who has to let it go"

Here's an objection that carries a history. In your house, the one who says "let's stop" is always the same person, and stopping has come to mean giving in, and this book is asking you to be that person again.

Andrew Christensen and Christopher Heavey, in 1990, described a pattern in couples' conflicts that they called demand and withdraw. One partner presses, with requests and complaints, and the other pulls back, with silence or defensiveness. They found that whoever wanted the change was the one who pressed, and whoever was being asked to change was the one who withdrew. An earlier book in this series uses this study and I'm using it here for one point. Withdrawing isn't a truce. Withdrawing is one person leaving the argument without agreement and without a time to return, and the other person is left pressing at nothing, and it settles nothing and it feels, to the presser, like being abandoned. If "let's stop" has meant that in your house, then the objection is right, and the fix isn't to stop stopping. It's to stop withdrawing and start calling truces.

The difference is two things. A truce is joint. Both of you agree to stop, or at least both of you know the stop is happening and why. And a truce has a time on it. "Eight o'clock" is what makes it a truce and not a withdrawal, because the presser knows the argument hasn't gone anywhere, it's been parked, and they'll be heard at eight. A withdrawal has no time. It's an exit. The silent treatment, the sleeping on the sofa without a word, the "fine" and the turned back, are withdrawals, and they're the thing the old rule was reacting against, and it was right to.

So if you're always the one who lets it go, the method changes what letting go is. You're not giving in. You're calling a truce, out loud, with a time, and the time is what makes it not giving in, because at eight the argument is yours as much as theirs and you'll have your say with a rested head. And if the other person is always the one who withdraws, the truce gives them a way to stop that isn't abandonment, and chapter 24 is about what to do if they won't take it.

"Last time we slept on it we never came back to it"

This is the objection with the most evidence behind it, and it's the one the method has to answer, because it's true. Rows slept on without a plan do get dropped. The morning comes, life starts, nobody wants to reopen it, and it goes into the pile, and the pile is what the next row is really about.

The whole difference is the resume time. A row slept on with no time attached is a row avoided, and avoidance is what the old rule was right to fear. A row slept on with "eight o'clock, kitchen table" attached is a row postponed, and postponing to a named time is a plan, and plans get kept. The two feel identical at eleven. They're opposites by eight.

Here's why the time matters so much. Without it, the morning has an exit built in. Nobody has to raise it, so nobody does, because raising it means being the one who reopened the row, and that's chapter 16's presser again, and nobody wants to be them at breakfast. With a time, raising it isn't reopening. It's keeping an appointment. "It's eight. Shall we?" That's not a provocation. It's the thing you agreed, and either of you can say it without it being an accusation, and that's what gets the two of you to the table.

There's a second half to this, and it's the note. Before bed, one line, on paper, with what the row was about. "Dishwasher, and me feeling like I do everything." Not the case for your side. The subject. In the morning the note is on the side by the kettle, and it

tells both of you what eight o'clock is for, and it stops the morning version from being a fresh argument about what the argument was.

If you've slept on rows and lost them, you've done half the method, and the half you did was the hard half. The truce was called, the night was slept, and then the morning had no appointment in it. Add the appointment and the rows stop going into the pile, because they get finished at eight, and the pile is what stops growing.

And keep the appointment the first few times as though it were a hospital one. It's the keeping, more than anything, that turns "let's stop" from a thing your partner dreads into a thing they can trust, and after a month of kept eight o'clocks, the truce at half past ten will be met with relief.

What the late argument costs you

I've argued the mechanism. This chapter is the bill, and it arrives at half past six.

The sleep. Five hours instead of seven, after three hours at full stretch. The NHS says adults need seven to nine, and a row that ends at one has taken the bottom of that and left you with the adrenaline as well.

The next day. Hasler and Troxel's couples with worse nights had worse days together, and the day after a sofa row is a day with two tired people in it being short with each other about nothing, which produces the next row. The loop from chapter 5, running.

The things said at one. Anderson and Platten's sleep-deprived participants failed to hold back responses to negative things and responded wrongly, faster. The sentence about their mother at half past twelve is that finding in a living room. It wasn't meant. It's remembered. And it'll be in the next row, as evidence.

The distress. Finkel's finding was that it's distress about conflict, not conflict itself, that erodes a marriage over time. A row at one in the morning is the most distressing form a row can take, and a couple who has one a fortnight is depositing distress at a rate the marriage will notice.

The children who hear. Walls are thin and children sleep lightly. A child who's heard the sofa at midnight has learned what a row is and how long it lasts and that grown-ups don't stop, and will bring

that to their own sofa in twenty years. A child who's heard "eight o'clock" and a door closing has learned something else.

The rows that were never about the dishwasher. The circuit at midnight pulls in everything, the mother, the thing from March, because the late brain can't hold one subject. So the dishwasher row becomes the everything row, and the everything row can't be settled because it's about everything, and a couple who only argues at midnight only ever has the everything row, and never gets to have the ten-minute one about the dishwasher, which is the one that would have fixed the dishwasher.

And the old rule itself, which has cost you a night a fortnight for years in exchange for the feeling of not having gone to bed on an argument, which is a feeling and not a result.

What it does to the argument

There's a cost that lands on the row itself, and it's worth separating out, because a couple who argues badly at midnight can come to believe they argue badly, and they don't. They argue at midnight.

The late argument is a worse argument than the same argument would be at any other hour, and worse in specific ways. It escalates, because Anderson and Platten's finding is that tired people hold back less with negative things, and the sentence that would have been thought and not said at eight is said at half past twelve. It circuits, because chapter 11's fourth point isn't available and the three that are get restated. It pulls in everything, because the late brain can't hold one subject and the thing from March is nearer the surface than it would be at breakfast. And it's misremembered, because what each of you takes upstairs at one is the worst sentence of the night rather than its substance, and the misremembering is what the next row opens with.

The morning argument is about the thing. The dishwasher, and what the dishwasher was standing for. It has the fourth point in it. It's had a night's reprocessing, in Walker and van der Helm's sense, so the charge is lower and the content is clearer. It's ten minutes long, because ten minutes is how long a row about a dishwasher takes when the two people having it can think. And it ends, in the sense of finished rather than exhausted, because finished is available at eight.

Same couple. Same dishwasher. Same disagreement. Two arguments, and the hour is the only difference, and the hour is the thing the old rule fixed at the worst possible place.

People who move their rows to the morning say the same thing, in my observation, which is that they'd thought they were bad at arguing and it turned out they'd been arguing at one in the morning. They weren't bad at it. Nobody's good at it at one. The argument you'd have at eight is the one that shows you what the two of you are actually like when you disagree, and for most couples it's a relief to find out.

Call the truce

The next three chapters are the method. This one is the sentence that stops the sofa, and it has to be agreed before the night it's needed, because at eleven nobody's agreeing to anything.

Agree it on a good day. Not during a row. On a Sunday, with tea, the two of you decide that after ten o'clock, either of you can call a truce, and a truce means the row stops and a time gets named. Say it out loud to each other and mean it. This is the part of the method that's done once and makes the rest possible.

The sentence. "I care about this too much to do it tired. Eight o'clock." Or your own version, as long as it has three things in it. That the row matters. That the hour is wrong. And a time. Practise it on the Sunday. It'll feel absurd and it'll be there at eleven when nothing else is.

Either of you can call it. This is what makes it a truce and not a withdrawal. It isn't the property of the one who wants to stop. It's a joint rule that either of you can invoke, and when it's invoked, the other one honours it, because that was the agreement on the Sunday.

No last word. The truce is called and the row stops there. Not after one more point. Not after "and another thing". The person who calls it doesn't get to call it and then say the thing they wanted to say. The person who receives it doesn't get to answer. The row stops mid-sentence if that's where it is, and the sentence goes on the note for the morning.

It isn't a win. Calling a truce isn't winning, and neither is receiving one. Nothing has been conceded and nothing has been settled. The score, if either of you keeps one, is unchanged. That needs saying on the Sunday too.

Expect it to be refused at first. If the old rule has run for years, the first truce will be met with "no, we're sorting this". The answer is the sentence again, and then standing up. It's not a negotiation. It's the rule the two of you made, invoked, and the person refusing it will be the person keeping the appointment at eight, and that's when they'll see what it's for.

Set the resume time

The truce stops the row. The resume time is what makes stopping safe, and it's the part that couples who've tried sleeping on it have usually missed.

Name a time. Not "tomorrow". A time. "Eight, at the table, before the school run." "Half past eight tomorrow evening, before the television." "On the walk after drop-off." Named, specific, and before the low hour arrives again.

Ten minutes. Say the length too. Ten minutes is enough for a row about a dishwasher when the two of you can think, and knowing it's ten minutes makes the appointment keepable. If it needs more, you'll both know by the end of the ten, and you can book more, at another good hour.

The kitchen table. Or wherever the two of you talk best. Not the bedroom, not the sofa the row was on. Somewhere with daylight and a table and coffee, where the morning version can be had as the morning version.

The note. Before bed, one line, on paper, on the side by the kettle. What the row was about, in the words of the person who called the truce. "Dishwasher, and feeling like I do everything." The note is for both of you. It tells eight o'clock what it's for and stops the morning from starting with an argument about what the argument was.

Keep it as though it were a hospital appointment. The first few resume times are the ones that decide whether the truce is ever believed again. Be at the table at eight. Have the ten minutes. If the

row has shrunk overnight to nothing, which happens, say so, and have the coffee anyway, because the being there is what's being learned.

Either of you opens it. "It's eight. Shall we?" Not a provocation, an appointment. The presser from chapter 16 doesn't have to be the one who raises it, because raising it isn't raising it. It's keeping it.

An earlier book in this series is about raising difficult things and calls this booking it. The resume time is booking it for a row that's already started, and it works for the same reason. A conversation with a time on it is a conversation that happens, and one without is one that goes into the pile.

Sleep cross

The truce is called and the time is set. Now the two of you go upstairs, cross, and this chapter is about how.

The same bed. Chapter 13 is the argument. Unless there's a reason from chapter 24, you sleep where you sleep, together, cross, and the crossness is a state the two of you are in and not a division.

Phones down. The phone in bed after a row is the row continued, alone, in the worst possible medium. The message you'd send at half past eleven is the sentence from half past twelve with a timestamp. Phones downstairs, or face down, and the row on the note and nowhere else.

The twenty minutes. An earlier book in this series, about anger, has a rule that nothing is said or decided in the first twenty minutes after the heat rises, and the same twenty minutes apply here, upstairs. The body takes a while to stand down after a row. Lie there. Don't fill the twenty minutes with the circuit. Breathe out slowly, a few times. It's not a technique. It's what a body does when it's allowed to.

The sentence. If anything is said, it's this. "We're not finished and that's fine. Eight o'clock." Said once, by either of you. It's not an apology and it's not a concession. It's the truce, restated, in the dark, and it's what lets the other person stop bracing.

Let the drift. Your mind will go to the row. Let it. It's the reprocessing from chapter 4 starting, and it does its work better if it isn't being fought. If it circuits, remember there's a note by the

kettle and a time in the morning, and that the note has the subject on it and the morning has the two of you in it, and let the circuit run down.

If sleep won't come. Then it won't for a while, and that's the body still standing down, and it's fine. Lying cross and awake next to someone is not a failure of the method. It's the first night of a method that gets easier, and by the third or fourth truce you'll be asleep within the half hour, because the row isn't live and the body has learned that it isn't.

The morning. Wake, and before anything else, remember it's eight. Not to rehearse. Just to know the appointment's there and you're going to it. The rest is chapter 21.

The decision

You've got the argument and the method. What's left is to decide, and the two of you decide it together, on a Sunday, in one sentence.

After ten, we don't settle arguments. Either of us can call a truce, we name a time tomorrow, and we go to bed cross if we have to.

Three parts.

The first is the truce. Agreed in advance. Callable by either. The sentence with the three things in it. No last word.

The second is the resume time. Named, with a length, at a table, with a note by the kettle. Kept like a hospital appointment.

The third is the night. Same bed, phones down, twenty minutes to stand down, "we're not finished and that's fine", and sleep.

There's a form of planning that helps with rules like this, and it's been tested many times. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran reviewed ninety-four studies of it in 2006. You decide in advance what you'll do and when, in the form "when this happens, I'll do that", and people who plan that way follow through much more often than people who only hold the intention. So write three, together.

When a disagreement is still going at half past ten, one of us will say "I care about this too much to do it tired, eight o'clock", and both of us will stop.

When we've called a truce, the person who called it will write one line about what it was about and leave it by the kettle.

When it's the resume time, whoever's there first will say "shall we?" and we'll have ten minutes at the table.

What to expect. This is my expectation and not a finding. The first truce will be resisted, and the person resisting will be the one who most needed it, and they'll be at the table at eight surprised at how small the row has got. The first night cross will be a bad night's sleep for both of you, and still a better one than the sofa. The first resume time will be awkward and short and will end with one of you saying "I don't even know why I was so cross", which is the reprocessing from chapter 4 speaking. By the third truce, the sentence will come out on its own at half past ten, from whichever of you notices the circuit first, and the other will say "fine, eight", and go up, and both of you will sleep. By a month, the rows after ten will have got shorter, not because you've stopped disagreeing but because both of you know the hour's wrong and the morning's coming, and a fair number of the rows will turn out, at eight, to have been about being tired, which is the one row the morning always wins.

Big things, repeat rows, the partner who won't stop, separate rooms, children who hear, and when it's more than rowing

The rule holds every night. Some things need their own paragraph.

Big things. Some rows are about money, or a move, or a child, or whether to stay together. The truce still holds, and matters more. A big thing decided at one in the morning is a big thing decided by the late brain, and the earlier book in this series on raising difficult things is about giving a big thing a proper time and a proper shape. The resume time for a big thing may be Saturday morning with two hours, not ten minutes at eight, and that's fine. What it isn't is midnight.

Repeat rows. If the same row comes back every fortnight, the ten minutes at eight isn't reaching it, and the note will show you that, because it'll say the same thing each time. That's a row that needs a longer conversation at a chosen hour, and possibly a third person, and Relate is the best-known UK provider of couples counselling. Going isn't an admission of anything except that the dishwasher row has been going on for a year.

The partner who won't stop. If one of you calls the truce and the other refuses it, repeatedly, and the Sunday agreement isn't honoured, the truce becomes a withdrawal by default, and chapter 16 says what that costs. The answer is the Sunday conversation again, on a good day, about the rule itself. If the rule can't be agreed, the pattern is bigger than this book, and a counsellor is the

right third seat. And if the refusal comes with any of the things in the last paragraph of this chapter, it isn't a refusal. It's the thing the preface named.

Separate rooms. Some couples sleep apart for reasons that have nothing to do with rows, snoring, shifts, a baby, and for them the same bed isn't available. The truce and the resume time still work. What matters is that the separate rooms aren't the row's doing. If a row puts one of you on the sofa, that's a withdrawal and chapter 13 applies. If you always sleep apart, sleep apart, and keep the appointment.

Children who hear. They do, and chapter 18 is about what they learn. The truce teaches them something else, which is that adults can be cross and stop and sort it in the morning, and a child who hears "eight o'clock" and a door closing has heard a lesson about disagreement that most children never get. If a child asks, in the morning, "were you arguing?", the answer is yes, and we've sorted it, and that's the whole lesson in one sentence.

When it's more than rowing. If the late rows come with contempt, names, threats, things thrown, or one of you frightened of the other, or unable to leave the room or the house, that isn't a habit and this isn't the book. The National Domestic Abuse Helpline is on 0808 2000 247, free, at any hour. Please ring it rather than apply a method to something a method can't hold.

Low mood. If the rows are the surface of a low mood in one of you, most of the day for a fortnight, that's a GP conversation, and the rows will be easier once it's had. And if either of you is sleeping

badly whether or not there's been a row, the NHS insomnia pages say when to see a GP.

When you stayed up till two again

It'll happen. A row with something real in it, a night when neither of you called it, the old rule back in the room because it's been there for years, and it'll be two in the morning and nothing settled and the alarm at half past six.

One night isn't the marriage. The list from chapter 1 shows a month with three truces in it and one sofa, and last year it was all sofa. What happened is that the old rule is old and the truce is new, and on a night with something real in it, the old rule got there first.

Call the truce late. It works at two as well as at half past ten. "We're not finished and that's fine. Eight o'clock." Then up, same bed, note by the kettle. Two in the morning isn't too late to stop. It's just later than you'd have liked, and the resume time is still the resume time.

Work out which belief got through. Was it "it'll fester", because the row felt bigger than usual? Then chapter 4, and notice at eight whether it did. Was it "they'll think I don't care", because the other person looked hurt when you reached for the sentence? Then chapter 10, and the sentence with the caring in it. Was it that nobody had the sentence ready because the Sunday agreement had faded? Then the Sunday conversation again, this weekend.

No streaks. Don't count nights without a sofa. Count resume times kept, and let one two o'clock be one line in a list that's mostly eight o'clocks. And notice, at eight, that the morning after a two o'clock is worse than the morning after a truce, which is the whole argument of the book, arriving as evidence.

Eight o'clock

It starts at ten past ten, over the dishwasher, some months on. One of you stacked it and the other restacked it, and there was a remark, and a remark back, and by half past ten it was heading for the listening and the mother. And one of you, the one who noticed the circuit first, said "I care about this too much to do it tired. Eight o'clock." And the other said "fine, eight", because that's what you agreed on a Sunday in the spring, and you'd both kept enough eight o'clocks by now to know what it meant.

The note by the kettle said "dishwasher, and feeling like nobody notices what I do". You went up together, cross, and lay in the same bed, and the twenty minutes were twenty minutes, and one of you said "we're not finished and that's fine", and the other one said "I know", and at some point a foot found a foot, which wasn't the settlement, and you both slept.

At eight, with coffee, one of you said "shall we?", and the other one read the note and said "yes, that's it, isn't it, that's what it was", and the ten minutes were about the dishwasher and about the week, and the fourth point arrived, which was that one of you had done everything that week and felt invisible, and the other one hadn't seen it and said so, and the dishwasher got a new rule that neither of you cares about, and it was done by ten past eight, and the children came down.

None of this is a transformation. There was a two in the morning in July, over something real, and you called the truce late and kept the eight, and it was the worst morning of the month and the best

argument of the year. You still disagree about the dishwasher. You disagree about it at eight, in ten minutes, with the fourth point, and you sleep in the same bed the night before, cross, and wake up the two of you.

If you take one thing from this book, take this. This Sunday, with tea, agree with the person you live with that after ten either of you can say "eight o'clock" and both of you will stop. That's the whole method. Everything else is detail.

Notes

This book gives general information about an everyday habit. It isn't relationship counselling or medical advice, and it's no substitute for a counsellor or a GP who knows you both. The services I mention are for the UK as I found them in September 2026.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction or correction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 2, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 apart from Killgore, 13, 17, 20, 21, 22, 25 and 26. The dishwasher, the sofa at one, the alarm at half past six and the kitchen table at eight are invented.

Before you start. The helpline number is from the NHS pages on getting help for domestic abuse, and the two-week guide for low mood from the NHS pages on depression, both as verified for earlier books in this series.

Chapter 3. Golder and Macy, "Diurnal and seasonal mood vary with work, sleep, and daylength across diverse cultures", *Science* 333, 2011, pages 1878 to 1881. Social media data, which has limits the chapter names. What the old rule assumes is my reading.

Chapter 4. Walker and van der Helm, "Overnight therapy? The role of sleep in emotional brain processing", *Psychological Bulletin* 135, 2009, pages 731 to 748. A model built from a review, and the chapter keeps the question mark. The comparison of the two mornings is my observation.

Chapter 5. Vandekerckhove and Cluydts, "The emotional brain and sleep: an intimate relationship", *Sleep Medicine Reviews* 14, 2010, pages 219 to 226. Kahn, Sheppes and Sadeh, "Sleep and emotions: bidirectional links and underlying mechanisms", *International Journal of Psychophysiology* 89, 2013, pages 218 to 228. Both reviews. The earlier book on the night mind is *Nothing gets solved at three in the morning*. The claim that the truce is what lets you sleep is mine.

Chapter 6. Anderson and Platten, "Sleep deprivation lowers inhibition and enhances impulsivity to negative stimuli", *Behavioural Brain Research* 217, 2011, pages 463 to 466. A laboratory study after one full night without sleep, which the chapter extends to a late evening with the caution stated. Killgore, "Effects of sleep deprivation on cognition", *Progress in Brain Research* 185, 2010, pages 105 to 129. Yoo, Gujar, Hu, Jolesz and Walker, "The human emotional brain without sleep: a prefrontal amygdala disconnect", *Current Biology* 17, 2007, pages R877 to R878, for which no summary was available and only the title is used. The earlier book on anger is *Still true in twenty minutes*.

Chapter 7. The earlier book on staying up late is *You were tired at ten*.

Chapter 14. Hasler and Troxel, "Couples' nighttime sleep efficiency and concordance: evidence for bidirectional associations with daytime relationship functioning", *Psychosomatic Medicine* 72, 2010, pages 794 to 801. Twenty-nine couples for seven days, which the chapter says is small, and the gender-specific findings are reported as the study reports them. The earlier book on raising difficult things is *Say it this week*.

Chapter 15. Walker and van der Helm as above. Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton and Gross, "A brief intervention to promote conflict reappraisal preserves marital quality over time", *Psychological Science* 24, 2013, pages 1595 to 1601, as verified for the earlier book *You don't have to win this one*, which calls the neutral view the third seat. Killgore as above.

Chapter 16. Christensen and Heavey, "Gender and social structure in the demand/withdraw pattern of marital conflict", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59, 1990, pages 73 to 81, as verified for the earlier book *You don't have to win this one*. The distinction between a truce and a withdrawal is mine.

Chapter 18. Hasler and Troxel, Anderson and Platten, and Finkel and colleagues as above. The NHS insomnia page for seven to nine hours, as verified for an earlier book. The rest is mine.

Chapter 19. Anderson and Platten, and Walker and van der Helm, as above. The comparison of the two arguments is mine.

Chapter 23. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to

119. The rule hasn't been tested as a package, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 24. The helpline and the NHS pages as above. Relate is named as the best-known UK provider of couples counselling, and no claim is made about its effectiveness. The earlier book on raising difficult things as above.