

Sorry I'm late

A short book about running late as a habit, and the optimism about time that causes it

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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. You're late. Not always, and rarely by much. Five minutes to the meeting, ten to the dentist, twenty to dinner at a friend's house. You arrive a little out of breath, say sorry, mean it, and do the same thing on Thursday. You've been told you're bad with time, and you've come to believe it. You may also, privately, think that punctual people are making rather a fuss.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that running late makes sense from the inside. You don't like waiting, you don't like wasting time, and you like getting one more thing done. Those are reasonable tastes, and the habit is what they've turned into. The second is that the habit rests on a mistake about time that almost everyone makes and that you make more often than most. Your idea of how long things take is a best case, not an average, and experience doesn't correct it, because memory shortens the past and every late arrival gets filed as an exception. The third is practical. You stop aiming at the place and start aiming at your own front door, and you set the time you leave from your own record and not from your hope. Chapters 16 to 19 cover how.

This book doesn't say that being on time is a moral quality, or that punctual people are better people. It says that lateness costs you more than you've counted, that most of the cost falls on people you like, and that the cure is a change of arithmetic, not of character.

Three cautions.

If you've had trouble organising your time all your life, along with losing things, being easily distracted and finding it hard to finish tasks, and these things are affecting your work or relationships, they may be signs of ADHD. The NHS advises seeing a GP in that case. This book may still help with the particular habit of leaving late, but it isn't a treatment for a condition, and it doesn't pretend to be.

If you've recently become late to everything, having been reliable before, and you've also lost interest in things, sleep badly, or feel low most of the day, treat that as a change in your health and not in your timekeeping. Talk to a GP.

And if you're late because you're carrying more than one person can carry, with small children, an elderly parent, two jobs, or all three, you don't have this habit. You have a load problem. Chapter 20 says a little about it, but the answer there is help, and not a better estimate of how long the walk takes.

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.

Tuesday, twenty to nine

It's twenty to nine on a Tuesday morning. There's a team meeting at nine, in the building across the park. You've walked there many times and it takes fifteen minutes, so you have five minutes in hand. You use them to answer an email that came in overnight. It's a short reply, but the person has asked two questions, and the second one needs a figure from a spreadsheet.

At ten to nine you press send and stand up. Your keys aren't in your coat. They're in yesterday's coat, which is upstairs. You get them, come down, and remember the notebook. At four minutes to nine you're on the pavement, walking faster than is comfortable. The park path is wet and you take the longer way round. You go up the stairs two at a time and arrive at eight minutes past, warm in the face, and say, "Sorry, sorry," as you find the last chair, which is the one by the door. Someone is halfway through the first item. You nod as if you've followed it.

You're not a chaotic person. You do good work. But this is the third Tuesday in a row, and last Thursday you arrived at Dan and Ellie's at five to eight for half past seven, and the lasagne had been in the oven for a while.

I'll use a few terms throughout. **The estimate** is how long you believe something will take, such as the walk, the shower, or the email. **The last thing** is whatever you decide to do in the minutes before you leave. **The dash** is the fast, flustered final stretch, from the moment you realise you're late until you arrive. **The door** is the point at which you're outside with your keys, your coat, and

whatever you need, and it's the target this book will ask you to aim at instead of the place you're going. **The cushion** is time added to an estimate to cover the things that go wrong. And **the apology** is the sentence you say on arrival, which by now you can say without thinking.

The habit has some regular features. This list is my own observation and not a research finding.

You're late by small amounts. Five, ten, twenty minutes. Rarely an hour. This is what lets you feel it doesn't matter.

You're late in one direction only. You almost never arrive early by the same amount. If your estimates were merely inaccurate, you'd be early as often as you're late. You aren't, and chapter 3 says why.

You're late to nearly everything, but not to the things that can't be repeated. You've never missed a flight, or an exam, or the start of an interview. Keep that in mind, because it shows the ability exists.

You always have a reason. The keys, the email, the wet path. The reason is true, and it's different each time, and there's always one.

And you apologise, often and sincerely, and nobody believes you'll be on time next week, including you.

Try one thing before reading on, and don't change anything yet. For the next week, whenever you're about to leave for something with a fixed start, write down the time you think you'll arrive. Then write down the time you actually arrive. Keep the list. It's the raw material for chapter 16, and you may find it more surprising than anything I say.

Why running late seems sensible

I don't want to begin by telling you that lateness is disrespectful. You've heard that, and it makes you defensive, and it also misses the point. There are good reasons why you run late, and they deserve stating before anything is said against them.

You don't like wasting time. Arriving early means sitting in a corridor or a car park doing nothing, and you have plenty to do. Leaving with a big margin feels like throwing away twenty minutes to save five.

You like finishing things. The email that came in overnight is now answered rather than hanging over the meeting. The last thing is usually a real thing, and doing it feels like efficiency.

Your estimates feel honest. You aren't lying to yourself when you say the walk takes fifteen minutes. You've timed it, more or less, and on a good day it does.

Being early feels slightly foolish. You're the person standing outside the restaurant at twenty-five past, looking at your phone, wondering whether to go in. There's something in many of us that would rather be the one who arrives when things have started.

You've also noticed that nothing much happens. You arrive eight minutes late and the meeting is still going. Dinner is still served. Your friends are still your friends. The world seems to tolerate it, and so you conclude that the fuss punctual people make is a fuss about nothing.

And there may be a small pleasure in the dash. The fast walk, the stairs, the sense of just making it. Some people find their days a bit flat without it.

I think the habit is trying to meet four needs, and this list is mine. You want to use your time fully. You want things finished. You want to avoid the dead time of waiting. And you want to be someone who doesn't fuss.

All four are reasonable. My argument is that the habit serves them badly. You don't use your time fully, because the dash and the apology and the first ten flustered minutes of everything are a worse use of time than the wait would have been. You don't finish the last thing well, because you do it with one eye on the clock. You avoid ten minutes of waiting and pay for it with a day that runs behind from the start. And you come across, in the end, as someone who fusses a great deal, but on arrival rather than before it.

"It only takes fifteen minutes"

Start with the estimate, because everything else rests on it. The walk to the meeting takes fifteen minutes. That's what you'd say if asked, and you'd say it with confidence.

Fifteen minutes is what the walk takes on a day when the keys are in the right coat, the path is dry, you don't meet anyone, the lift is waiting, and nobody stops you on the stairs. It's the time from pavement to pavement, on a good day, at a brisk pace. It isn't the time from sitting at your desk to sitting in the meeting room. That includes finding things, putting on a coat, locking the door, the stairs at both ends, and the corridor. And it isn't an average. It's a best case.

Roger Buehler, Dale Griffin and Michael Ross gave this pattern a name in 1994. They called it the planning fallacy, and it's the tendency people have to underestimate how long their own tasks will take. In their studies, people predicted when they'd finish academic and everyday projects, and were too optimistic across the board. When the researchers asked people to think aloud while making their predictions, almost all of the thinking was about the plan. People described how the task would go, step by step, and the steps went well. Very little of the thinking drew on how long similar tasks had taken in the past.

That's the mechanism, and I think it fits the walk exactly. When you say fifteen minutes, you're running a short film of the walk in your head, and the film shows the walk going well. Films of walks

don't include hunting for keys. They don't include the wet path. The film is a plan, and the plan is a best case, and you read the number off the plan.

There's a further finding that explains why the plan doesn't correct itself. A later study by Ian Newby-Clark and colleagues asked people to imagine pessimistic versions of how their task might go, as well as optimistic ones. Imagining things going wrong didn't change people's predictions. And when asked, people consistently rated the pessimistic versions as less plausible than the optimistic ones. From inside your own head, the version where you find your keys and the lift is waiting feels like what will happen, and the version where three small things go wrong feels like bad luck, even though three small things go wrong most days.

So the estimate has a built-in lean. It's not that you're bad at judging time. It's that the method you're using, which is imagining the trip, can only produce a good-day number. Your arrival times then lean the same way, late and never early, because the truth is scattered around the average and you've been aiming at the best case.

Think of an estimate as having two halves. There's the part you can picture, and there's the part you can't, which is made of the things that will go slightly wrong. The picture gives you fifteen minutes. The other half is real, and it's invisible, and you can only get at it another way. Chapter 16 will show you how.

"I've done it a hundred times"

Here's the puzzle. If the estimate is wrong, and you've walked that route a hundred times, why haven't you learned? You have a hundred data points and you still say fifteen minutes.

Buehler, Griffin and Ross looked at this too. When their participants were asked why they'd missed past predictions, they put the blame on outside causes that were specific to the occasion and unlikely to come round again. The essay was late because of a bout of flu, or a computer problem, or a friend visiting. Each explanation was true. And each one let the person set that occasion aside as a special case, so that when they made the next prediction, the past had nothing to teach them. Their studies also found that when people were told to connect their predictions with their past experience of similar tasks, the optimism went away. The information was there. It just wasn't being consulted.

You do the same. Last Tuesday you were late because of the keys. The Tuesday before, because of the phone call from your mother. The one before that, because of the wet path. Each one was a one-off, and so the walk still takes fifteen minutes, and the one-offs, which happen every week, live in a separate file that the estimate never looks at.

Memory adds a second problem, and it's a surprising one. Michael Roy, Nicholas Christenfeld and Craig McKenzie reviewed the evidence in 2005 and argued that people don't only ignore the past when predicting. They misremember it. When people are asked how long something took last time, they tend to give a figure that's

shorter than it really was. So even on the occasions when you do consult memory, memory hands you a shortened version. You remember the walk as fifteen minutes because that's roughly how long it felt, and the ten minutes of finding keys and coats didn't feel like part of the walk, so they aren't in the memory of it.

Put the two together and you get a person who's been late to the same meeting many times and still expects to be on time. Experience can't fix the estimate on its own, because the lessons are filed as exceptions and the durations are stored short.

There's an odd detail in the 1994 studies that I find useful. When people predicted how long someone else's task would take, they weren't optimistic. If anything they were pessimistic, and they made more use of past experience. So you can already estimate accurately. You do it for other people. If a colleague said the walk across the park took fifteen minutes and they had to leave at quarter to, you'd probably say, "Leave at twenty to, you know what you're like." The knowledge is there. It's only your own trips that get the best-case treatment.

"I'll just do one more thing"

The estimate is one half of the habit. The last thing is the other, and I think it does more damage.

At twenty to nine you had five minutes in hand. Rather than leave, you answered an email. This felt sensible. Five minutes is enough for a short reply, and leaving early would have wasted them. So the last thing has a slot, the slot is exactly the size of the spare time, and the last thing then takes longer than the slot.

It nearly always does, and I don't think that's bad luck. The last thing is chosen because it looks small, and small tasks are the ones whose steps you haven't pictured. The email had two questions, and the second one needed a figure, and the figure was in a spreadsheet. None of that was in the picture when you sat down. Buehler's finding applies here in miniature. You estimated the email from the plan, the plan was a best case, and the real email had a spreadsheet in it.

Something else happens once you're doing it. When your attention is taken up by a task, time seems to pass more quickly than it does. Richard Block, Peter Hancock and Dan Zakay pooled a hundred and seventeen experiments on this in 2010. When people knew they'd have to judge how long something took, and their attention was loaded with a demanding task, their estimates of the time passing came out short. The harder you're concentrating, the less time you think has gone by. So you sit down to spend five minutes

on the email, and when you look up, feeling as though five minutes have passed, it's ten to nine. The clock was in front of you the whole time. You weren't looking at it, because the email was.

I'd add my own reading of why the last thing is so attractive. It converts spare time, which feels like nothing, into a finished job, which feels like something. It also puts off leaving, which for many people is a small unpleasantness, a matter of coats and keys and the cold. And it has a run of successes behind it. On the days when the email really was two lines, you sent it, left, and were on time, and it felt like skill.

There's one piece of research on lateness in particular that bears on this. Jeffrey Conte and Rick Jacobs studied a hundred and eighty-one train operators and measured something called polychronicity, which is how much a person prefers to be doing two or more things at once. The people who scored higher on it were more often late for work. The association was modest, but it's the kind of thing you'd expect if the last thing is part of what makes people late. Someone who likes to have several things on the go doesn't like to stop one to leave.

So the last thing isn't a small extra on top of a sound plan. It's a task with a best-case estimate, done in a window that was already too small, under conditions that make time feel slower than it is. Chapter 17 will ask you to give it up in the final stretch before leaving, and I know that's the hardest thing in this book.

"I can't stand waiting around"

We've come to what I think is the belief underneath the others. If you leave enough time to be sure of arriving on time, then most days you'll arrive early, and you'll have to wait. Waiting is dead time. You'd rather spend it doing something.

I want to grant the first part. If you plan to be on time on the bad days, you'll be early on the good days. There's no way round that, and anyone who tells you that you can be exactly on time every day is selling something. The question is what the early minutes are worth, and what the late ones cost, and I think the habit has priced both wrongly.

Consider what you're comparing. On one side is ten minutes in a corridor before a meeting, or in the car outside a friend's house, or on a bench outside the dentist. On the other side is the dash, the apology, the chair by the door, and the first ten minutes of the meeting spent catching up on what you missed. You've treated the first as pure waste and the second as roughly free. Look at them again. The ten early minutes are yours. You can read, think, look at the trees, or send the email, which is now a thing you're doing while early rather than a thing that makes you late. The ten late minutes belong to nobody. You aren't working, because you're walking fast. You aren't in the meeting, because you haven't arrived. And the people who are in the meeting are now partly waiting for you.

There's also the matter of what an appointment is. When you agree to be somewhere at nine, you've made a small promise. Being early is the price of keeping it reliably, because time is uncertain and the only way to be sure of not being late is to aim early. Someone who refuses to pay that price isn't avoiding waste. They're passing the wait to the other person. On Thursday, Dan and Ellie waited twenty-five minutes for you. You didn't wait at all. The waiting happened. It just happened to them.

Some of the dislike of waiting is about what it seems to say. Being early can feel like being the keen one, the one with nothing better to do. I'd suggest that this is a picture from school, and that most adults don't see it that way at all. From the outside, the person who's there at five to nine with a coffee looks calm and ready. The person who arrives at eight minutes past looks harassed.

If you can accept that early minutes aren't waste, the whole habit becomes easier to give up, because the reason for cutting it fine disappears. Chapter 18 is about what to do with those minutes, and it may turn out that you come to like them. But I don't need you to like them. I only need you to see that they cost less than the alternative.

"I'm quicker when I'm pushed"

Some people will say that they need the pressure. If they leave with time to spare they dawdle, and if they leave late they move. The dash gets them out of the door. Without it, nothing would.

There's something in this. A deadline concentrates the mind, and the fast walk is a fast walk. But look at what the pressure does to the estimate, because that's where it does its damage.

Buehler, Griffin and Heather MacDonald tested what happens to time predictions when people have a reason to want the task done quickly. In one study they looked at people filing their tax returns. Those who were expecting a refund, and so had a reason to want the return in early, predicted they'd finish sooner than the others did. They were also more wrong. Their predictions were more optimistic and their actual filing times weren't correspondingly earlier. In a laboratory version, an incentive for finishing early made people's predictions more optimistic, made them attend more to their plans, and made them attend less to how long similar things had taken before.

So wanting to be quick makes you believe you'll be quick. It doesn't make you quick. The person who leaves at ten to nine because they're sure they can do the walk in ten minutes has been made more confident by the pressure and not more able. Torleif Halkjelsvik and Magne Jørgensen, reviewing the whole field of time prediction in 2012, list incentives for speed among the things that push estimates in the optimistic direction.

I'd add what the dash does to the thing you arrive at, and this is my own reasoning. You get to the meeting with your heart going, slightly damp, holding the wrong notebook. It takes several minutes to settle. You've missed the first item and you'll never fully catch up. At Dan and Ellie's, you arrive apologising and stay apologetic for the first half hour, and you spend the evening a little behind everyone else. The pressure got you there. It didn't get you there in any state to be useful.

And the belief that you need pressure is worth testing on the cases where you don't use it. You made the flight last summer. You were at the airport two hours early like everyone else. Nobody pushed you. You looked at the time the gate closed, worked backwards, and left when the arithmetic said. It wasn't pressure that did that. It was treating the time as fixed.

If you genuinely find that a spare twenty minutes turns into forty minutes of dawdling, the answer is in chapter 17, and it's to leave when the alarm says and dawdle at the other end. The dawdling can happen anywhere. It's only harmful when it happens between you and the door.

"It's only five minutes"

The habit lives on small numbers. Five minutes late to a meeting, eight to the dentist, twenty to dinner. Each one seems too small to be worth anyone's concern, and when someone shows concern, you're inclined to think they're being difficult.

Let me try to show you the five minutes from the other side. What follows is my own reasoning.

Take the meeting. There are eight people in the room at nine. If you arrive at eight minutes past, you've been late by eight minutes. But the room has been carrying your absence for eight minutes multiplied by eight people. Either they started without you, and now have to go back over the first item, or they waited, and seven people lost eight minutes each. Neither is your eight minutes. Both are more.

Take the dentist. Appointments are booked back to back. Eight minutes late means the person after you starts late, and the one after them. You don't see this, because you're gone by then.

Take dinner. Dan and Ellie said half past seven. They put the lasagne in at seven, expecting it to rest and be served at eight. At ten to eight they're checking their phones, wondering whether to text, and whether the other guests would like a drink while they wait. At five to eight you arrive and say sorry, and the evening starts, and it's fine, but the first half hour of their evening was spent managing your absence.

Then there's what happens over time. Nobody minds once. After a few months, people start doing something you don't see. They plan around you. They tell you seven when they mean half past. They start without you as a matter of course. They stop asking you to pick things up on the way. Your colleague books the meeting for five past, and doesn't say why. None of this is said to your face. It's simply a set of small adjustments that other people make to your word, because your word about time has turned out to be worth less than theirs.

That, I think, is the real cost of the five minutes, and it isn't the minutes. It's that a person who is always a little late is a person whose arrival can't be relied on, and reliability is most of what people mean when they say someone is easy to deal with. You may be warm, funny and good at your job, and still be the one everyone has to work around.

There's a test of whether the five minutes matter. Notice what happens when someone is five minutes late for you. If you're honest, you notice. You look at your phone, and you feel the beginning of a small grievance, and you're pleased when they arrive, and you forgive them at once. That's exactly what happens to them.

"I'll be down in a minute"

The habit doesn't only operate on appointments. It runs all day, in the small promises about time you make to the people you live with, and I think this is where it does its quietest damage. Everything in this chapter is my own observation.

"I'll be down in a minute." "Five minutes and I'm ready." "I'll be home by six." "Dinner's at seven." "I'll just finish this and then we'll go." Each of these is an estimate, delivered as a promise, to someone who's waiting on it. And each is made the same way as the fifteen-minute walk. You picture the thing going well, you read the number off the picture, and you say it out loud.

The person on the other end is your partner in the car with the engine running, or a child by the door in a coat, or a friend who's arranged their evening around your six o'clock. They take the number seriously, because you said it. Then it passes, and they're waiting, and they've no idea whether it's now one more minute or twenty, because you don't know either. If they ask, they get the number again, "Two minutes," in a tone that suggests they're the one being unreasonable.

Over time they learn to translate. Five minutes means fifteen. "Home by six" means half past. "I'll just finish this" means start something else. This translation is a kind of intelligence about you that they've had to develop, and it isn't a fond one. It means that when you say a time, they don't hear a time. They hear a mood. That's a strange thing to have taught someone who loves you.

Children learn the translation early and are less polite about it. "You always say a minute." They're right, and they've learned something about promises from it, which is that the ones about time don't count. I'd rather they learned the opposite, and the only way to teach it is to say a number you can keep.

The remedy is the same as for the walk, only smaller. Say the real number. If it's going to be ten minutes, say ten, and let them decide what to do with the information. "Ten minutes" lets a partner make a cup of tea. "A minute" leaves them standing in the hall. If you don't know, say that. "I don't know how long this'll take. Go on without me and I'll come when it's done." That sounds worse and is much better, because it can be relied on.

And notice how often the small promise comes with the last thing attached. "I'll just finish this" is the last thing in its purest form, and it has the same best-case estimate inside it as every other last thing. The people at home have been living with the last thing for years. They're the ones who know most about the habit, and the ones who'd notice first if it changed.

"But I always apologise"

You do apologise. You mean it. You're not one of those people who swans in as though nothing happened. So it can feel as though the account is settled each time.

Consider what an apology is for. When you say sorry, you're saying that you did something you shouldn't have, that you know it, and that you'll try not to do it again. The third part is what gives it value. A sorry that comes with a change is worth a good deal. A sorry that comes without one is a formality, and people learn quickly to hear it as one.

What follows is my reasoning and not a study. If you apologise for the same thing every week, the apology stops carrying information. The people who hear it know you're sorry and know it makes no difference. After a while it can even grate, because it asks them to do something, which is to say "Don't worry about it," and they're now saying that for the fortieth time about something they do, a little, worry about. You've moved a small cost onto them with the lateness and then a second small cost with the apology.

There's a worse version. The apology comes with a story. The keys, the phone call, the wet path. The story is meant to show that it wasn't your fault. The person hearing it has heard a different story each time, and has quietly noticed that the outcome is always the same. From outside, a person with a new reason every week looks like a person who doesn't intend to change, whatever they say.

So I'd ask you to be careful with the word sorry. Use it once, briefly, and without a story. "Sorry I'm late" is enough, and then the subject should change. And keep it in reserve for the times when you've done what this book asks and are late anyway. Then it will mean something, because it'll be rare.

The better apology is the one you make before the fact. A message at quarter to nine that says "Running ten minutes late, start without me" costs you nothing and gives the other person the thing they most want, which is information. They can start. They can order. They can put the lasagne in later. That message is worth more than any sorry on arrival. Chapter 20 says more about it.

But the best form of the apology is the one you never have to make. Nobody who arrives at five to nine has to say anything.

"I'm just not a punctual person"

By now you may be thinking that this is all true and doesn't apply, because you're simply not made for punctuality. Some people are, and they're a bit dull about it. You're not, and you've stopped fighting it.

I'd examine that from two directions.

The first is the evidence on personality. Conte and Jacobs, in the study of train operators mentioned in chapter 5, measured the standard personality traits, including conscientiousness. They expected conscientiousness to go with less lateness. It went with less absence. It wasn't related to lateness at all in their sample. What was related to lateness was the preference for doing several things at once. One study of one workforce isn't the last word, but it points away from the idea that punctuality is a fixed trait of character, and towards the idea that it's about how you handle the minutes before you leave.

The second is the evidence of your own life. You catch flights. You've never missed an exam. You were on time for your interview, and probably for your wedding. When the start time can't be moved and the cost of missing it is serious, you're punctual, and you manage it without any special agony. The equipment is all there. What you've been doing is deciding, without quite noticing that you're deciding, which appointments count as fixed. The flight counts. The Tuesday meeting doesn't. Dan and Ellie don't.

I don't think that's a matter of temperament. I think it's a judgement about which things you can afford to be late for, made long ago and never reviewed. The habit isn't an inability to be on time. It's a policy of being on time only when the price of lateness is high enough. The rest of this book is an argument that the price is higher than you've reckoned, so that more things belong in the fixed category.

It's also worth knowing that ideas about what counts as late vary from place to place. Robert Levine and Ara Norenzayan measured the pace of life in cities in thirty-one countries, by timing walking speed, the speed of a simple transaction at a post office, and the accuracy of public clocks. The pace differed a great deal from country to country. Levine's earlier work had also used a questionnaire, mostly in the United States, asking people what they considered late and how they felt about being late. If punctuality were built into people, it wouldn't vary so much with where they happen to live. It's learned, which means it can be learned later.

None of this means you'll become someone who loves being early. It means that "not a punctual person" isn't a description of you. It's a description of a policy, and policies can be changed.

"Everyone's late these days"

Another defence is that the world has moved on. With phones, being late is nothing. You send a text, the other person has a coffee, no harm done. Only the old and the rigid still care about five minutes.

There's something in this. A text does reduce the damage. A friend who knows you're ten minutes away can order a drink and relax. And some social settings really have loosened. A party that says eight means any time after half past, and everyone knows it.

But the phone has also done something less helpful. It's made lateness cheap at the moment of leaving, and so it's made leaving late easier. "I'll text if I'm running behind" has become part of the plan, which means that running behind has become part of the plan. I'd suggest that the text is a good way to limit the damage of a late day and a poor reason to have one.

The phone also lets everyone see what's happening in a group, and this produces a spiral that I'm sure you've been part of. Six people are meeting at seven. One texts at ten to say they're running late. The others, reading that, ease off. Why hurry if it's not starting at seven anyway? By quarter past, four of the six are late, and each is late partly because the others were. The first text lowered the start time for everyone, and nobody chose the new time. An arrangement made for seven now begins at twenty-five past, and a group that could have been reliable to each other has instead become one where nobody quite believes the stated time. Whoever arrived at seven is the one who feels foolish.

It's true that some settings don't mind. That's fine, and this book isn't about them. It's about the settings that do. Work, appointments, anything involving food that goes in an oven, anything involving a child waiting to be collected, anything where one person is waiting for you alone. In those, the other person's tolerance is real, but it isn't free. They tolerate it because they like you, and because saying something would seem petty. They're spending goodwill on you every week. It's a good deal of goodwill to spend on something that costs you ten minutes to fix.

So I'd separate the two questions. Does everyone tolerate it? Mostly, yes. Does that mean it costs nothing? No. It means the cost is being paid quietly by other people, which is a thing you'd probably rather not be responsible for.

"Something always comes up"

This is the most sincere objection, and it's the one I'd most like to take apart. You leave in time. Then the phone rings, or the child can't find a shoe, or the printer jams, or there's an accident on the ring road. It isn't that you cut it fine. It's that life intervenes.

I believe you about each of them. Now look at the list. The phone, the shoe, the printer, the traffic. Did any of them come up for the first time this month? Or have they come up, in one form or another, most weeks for years? The individual event is unpredictable. The fact that there'll be one isn't. It's the most reliable thing about your mornings.

Justin Kruger and Matt Evans published a study in 2004 whose title says the finding. "If you don't want to be late, enumerate."

Unpacking a task, which means listing the separate things it involves before estimating it, reduces the planning fallacy. I couldn't get hold of the paper's summary, and the notes say so, but the point is one that follows from Buehler's work. When you estimate a trip as a whole, you picture it going well and produce a small number. When you list its parts, the parts bring their own small delays into view, and the number goes up towards the truth. "Leave for the meeting" is one item. "Find keys, find notebook, coat, lock door, stairs, park, wet path if raining, stairs, corridor" is nine, and each of them has taken time before.

There's a general idea behind this, and Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky set it out in 1979. You can look at a task from the inside, imagining how it will go, or from the outside, asking how

things like it usually go. The inside view gives you fifteen minutes. The outside view asks how long your trips to that building have taken over the past year, and answers twenty-two. The outside view isn't interested in why last Tuesday was slow. It only counts.

So "something always comes up" is an accurate report, and it's the strongest argument there is for a cushion. If you know there'll be something, you don't need to know what it is. You add ten minutes for it. On the mornings when nothing comes up, you're ten minutes early, which chapter 6 argued is a small price and chapter 18 will argue is barely a price at all.

One caution. The cushion needs to be sized to the ordinary bad day, not the extraordinary one. A motorway closure or a child being sick isn't what the cushion is for. Those are the rare occasions on which you'll be late and can say so without embarrassment, because you'd done everything reasonable. Chapter 20 covers them. The cushion is for keys and shoes and the wet path, and those you can count on.

"I'll make it up on the way"

There's a belief that the dash is a genuine tool. If you leave five minutes late, you can walk faster, drive a bit harder, take the stairs, and arrive on time. The lost minutes can be recovered in motion.

Sometimes, by a minute or two. Consider what's actually in your control between the door and the place. On foot, a brisk walk against a normal one might save a minute in fifteen. Running would save more and get you there in no state to sit down. In a car, most of the journey time is lights, junctions and the cars in front. Your speed on the stretches in between is a small part of the total, and pushing it saves less than you feel it does, because what you feel is the effort and not the minutes. I'd put the whole recoverable amount at a few minutes on most trips, which is less than the last thing cost you.

The costs of recovering it are real. Driving faster because you're late is the ordinary reason people drive faster, and it's a reason that puts other people in the road at risk to save you the embarrassment of being late for a meeting. I'd ask you to treat the two as not comparable, and to make a flat rule that you never drive differently because you're late. Once you have that rule, the dash by car loses its only real lever, and you'll find you leave earlier because there's nothing left to try.

On foot, the dash costs you your arrival. You get there hot, out of breath and slightly cross, and the first minutes of whatever you've come to are spent recovering. There's a version of on time that's

worse than five minutes late, and it's arriving exactly on the hour in a state where you can't do anything for a while.

And there's the phone call from the car or the pavement, in which you're both late and distracted, apologising to someone while trying to cross a road. It's a poor way to have a conversation and a poor way to cross a road.

I think the belief that time can be made up on the way is one of the things that lets the last thing happen. If you believe you can recover five minutes in motion, you'll spend them before you leave. If you know you can't, you won't. So this chapter is really about the door. Nothing much can be done after it. Everything can be done before it.

What running late costs

You may think of the habit as costing the odd apology. I think it costs a great deal more, and most of this chapter is my own reckoning. I'll say where a study comes in.

The first ten minutes of everything. Every meeting, every appointment, every evening begins for you in a flustered catch-up. Over a year that's a large number of beginnings spent badly, and beginnings are when people form their view of how the thing is going to go.

The work you do in the dash. The last email, sent with one eye on the clock, with the figure checked less carefully than it should have been. Whatever the last thing was, it was done at your worst.

The apology tax. Each late arrival costs you a sorry, and each sorry costs a small amount of standing. Chapter 10 argued that after enough of them the sorry means nothing, and you've paid for nothing.

The discount on your word. People tell you earlier times than they mean. They start without you. They don't ask you to bring things. They book around you. They don't tell you they're doing it, and you've probably noticed some of it and put it down to their being difficult.

Other people's time. The eight people in the meeting, the patient after you at the dentist, the friends with the lasagne, the child at the school gate who's watched the other parents arrive. You never see this cost. It's paid where you aren't.

The one person who waits alone. Somewhere in your life there's a person who waits for you more than anyone else. A partner, a friend, a parent, a child. They've adjusted, and they'd never say. But if you added up the minutes they've spent waiting for you over the years, it would be a long time to have kept someone you love standing about.

Your own view of yourself. You've come to think of yourself as bad with time, and a person who thinks that stops trying. The description, as chapter 11 said, isn't true. But you've believed it for long enough that it's started to do harm.

Money. Missed trains, the taxi that replaced the bus, the cancelled appointment fee, the parking ticket from the space you had no time to check. Small, and adding up.

The body. The dash puts you in a hurried, keyed-up state several times a week. I've no study to cite on what that costs over years, and I won't invent one. I'd only say that it doesn't feel like nothing, and you know that.

In return for all that, you've been spared the ten minutes of waiting that chapter 6 was about, and you've had the last thing done, badly. That's the trade, laid out. I'd take the other side of it.

Finding out how long things take

The first practical step is to replace the estimate with a record. The estimate comes from a picture and leans towards the best case. The record comes from the clock and doesn't lean anywhere. Chapters 3 and 4 gave the research. This chapter is the method, and the method is mine.

If you did the exercise in chapter 1, you have a week of predicted and actual arrival times. Look at them. I'd expect two things. The actual times will be later than the predicted ones nearly every time, and rarely earlier. And the gap will be roughly the same size across quite different trips, because the gap isn't about the trip. It's about the method you used to estimate it.

Now time things properly for two weeks. Don't try to be quicker. The point is to find out what's true, and if you speed up to look good, you'll get a record that's as optimistic as the estimate. Time the trips you make often, and time them from door to seat. Not pavement to pavement. From the moment you decide to leave until you're sitting where you're meant to be. Write both times down. Do the same for the things you do before leaving, if you can bear to. How long is a shower, really, including drying your hair? How long is getting a child into a coat and shoes? How long is finding things?

At the end of two weeks you'll have, for each regular trip, a handful of real durations. Take the longer ones, not the average. If the walk has taken fourteen, sixteen, twenty-one, seventeen and twenty-

three minutes, the number you want is somewhere around twenty-one. That's the trip on an ordinary bad day, and ordinary bad days are, by your own account in chapter 13, ordinary.

This will feel pessimistic. Newby-Clark's study found that people rate the version where things go wrong as less plausible than the version where they go right, and you'll feel that pull. Twenty-one minutes for a fifteen-minute walk will seem absurd. The record says otherwise, and the record was there. This is the outside view from chapter 13, applied to your own life, and it's the only method I know that produces a number you can actually leave by.

For trips you haven't timed, unpack them. List what the trip involves from where you're sitting, including the finding and the locking and the stairs, and put a minute or two against each part. Then add the cushion, which for most trips I'd set at ten minutes, and for trips involving traffic, public transport or children at something more like twenty. You'll find your own figures. What matters is that they come from counting, not from picturing.

Once you have the number, use it without argument. The moment you catch yourself thinking "It won't take that long today," you're back in the picture, and the picture is what got you here.

Leaving time

The second step is to move the target. You've been aiming at the place, which means aiming at nine o'clock in a building twenty minutes away. From now on you aim at the door, which means aiming at a time when you're standing outside your house with everything you need. Everything in this chapter is my own method, built on the research earlier in the book.

Work back from the start to the door. The meeting is at nine. Door to seat takes twenty-one minutes on an ordinary bad day. So the door is twenty to nine, and that's the time that matters. Nine o'clock is now somebody else's problem, because if you're through the door at twenty to, the rest looks after itself.

Set an alarm for the door, not the destination. Most people set reminders for the event. Set one for the door time, and one ten minutes before it, and call the second one "get ready". When the first goes, you start putting things in the bag. When the second goes, you leave. You don't finish the sentence. You don't send the email. You leave.

Get things ready before the ready alarm. Keys, bag, notebook and coat, in one place by the door, before you sit down to do anything else. The hunt for keys is the single commonest cause of the last-minute delay in my observation, and it can be removed entirely by putting them in the same bowl every time you come in. This is dull advice and it works.

Ban the last thing in the final ten minutes. Between the "get ready" alarm and the door, you do nothing that has a beginning, a middle and an end. No email, no phone call, no quick look at the news. Chapter 5 explained why. The last thing is estimated as a best case, and time under concentration feels shorter than it is. You can't beat those two effects by being careful. You can only beat them by not starting.

If you have spare time, spend it on the other side of the door. If you're ready at half past eight and the door is twenty to nine, leave at half past and have ten minutes there instead of here. Spare time here turns into the last thing. Spare time there turns into chapter 18.

Decide where and when, out loud or on paper. Sander Koole and Mascha van't Spijker gave people a task to finish within a set period and asked half of them to state where and when they'd do it. Those people finished more often, and the gap between what they'd predicted and what they did shrank, which the researchers traced to their being interrupted less. The plan they were predicting from was a plan that actually got carried out. A leaving plan works the same way. "I leave at twenty to nine from the front door with the bag that's already packed" is a plan. "I need to be at the meeting at nine" is a wish.

Treat the door time as fixed. This is the whole change, and it's the thing you already do for flights. The flight leaves at eleven whether or not you've finished the email. From now on the door leaves at twenty to nine on the same terms.

Some of this will feel rigid. It is a bit rigid, on purpose, for a few weeks. The habit has years of practice and the new arrangement has none. Once the door time is a reflex, most of the scaffolding can come down. You'll keep the bowl for the keys, though. Everyone keeps the bowl.

What to do with the spare minutes

If you do what chapters 16 and 17 ask, you'll arrive early, often, by five or ten minutes. Chapter 6 argued that this isn't waste. This chapter is about what those minutes are, and it's all my own view.

They're the only unclaimed time in your day. Everything else you do is spoken for. The early minutes at the other end of a trip are a small piece of time in which nothing is expected of you, because you're not late and you're not yet in the thing. You can use them or not, and either is allowed.

If you want to use them, bring the thing. The book, the podcast, the letter you've been meaning to write, the email that used to be the last thing. It's now done in a corridor at ten to nine, with a full ten minutes, and it's done properly because you're not watching the clock. This is the same email you were sending at twenty to nine last Tuesday. The only difference is which side of the door you sent it from.

If you don't want to use them, don't. Sit on the bench outside the dentist. Look at the street. I'd guess that many people haven't had ten minutes of nothing in a long time, and that they'd find it stranger and better than they expect.

At a friend's house, the early minutes are for walking round the block. It's a rule of hospitality that you don't arrive before the time, and it's also a pleasant walk. You arrive at half past seven exactly,

unhurried, with the wine, and Dan says, "Blimey, look who it is," and that's the whole of the joke, and it's a better joke than the one about the lasagne.

At work, the early minutes are when the useful things get said. The two minutes before a meeting, when the person you needed to catch is pouring a coffee, are worth more than the meeting to a good many people. You've been missing them for years, because you've been on the stairs.

There's a change in how you're seen, too. The person who's already there when you arrive looks in charge of their day. Nobody knows they had to leave at twenty to nine to do it. They only see someone calm, with a coffee, who's read the agenda. You can be that person for the price of one change in arithmetic.

And, once you've had a few weeks of it, notice how you feel walking in. Not out of breath. Not saying sorry. Not looking for the chair by the door. Just arriving, like everyone else. It's a small thing, and I think it's the thing the habit has been costing you most.

The decision

This chapter asks you to decide something. It comes late because at the beginning it would have sounded like the advice you've always been given, which is to leave earlier. By now you've seen why that advice never worked, which is that your idea of earlier was still built on a best case, and why it's right anyway. Your estimates are pictures, and pictures show things going well. Experience hasn't corrected them, because the past gets filed as a set of exceptions and stored short. The last thing always takes longer than its slot. Waiting is cheaper than the dash. And the cost of being a little late falls mostly on people you like, in ways they'll never mention.

Here's the rule I'd suggest. Put it in your own words if you like.

I aim to be at the door on time, not at the place, and I set that time from my record, not my hope.

It has five parts, and each answers a chapter.

I use the record. For regular trips I use the timed figure from an ordinary bad day, and for new ones I unpack the trip and add a cushion. When the estimate in my head says fifteen and the record says twenty-one, the record wins.

I aim at the door. I work back from the start time to the door time and I set the alarm for that. The start time stops being my target.

I don't start anything in the final ten minutes. Things are ready by the door before I do anything else. The last thing waits until the other side of the door.

I treat the door time as fixed. The same way I treat a flight.

I don't make it up on the way. I never drive differently because I'm late. If I'm going to be late, I say so before I arrive, with a time, and I say sorry once and briefly when I get there.

It helps to plan for the moments when the habit will try to restart. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran pooled ninety-four tests of plans in the form "when X happens, I'll do Y" and found that they make people more likely to follow through. A plan like this works because you've decided what to do before the moment comes. Three are worth writing down.

When the "get ready" alarm goes and I'm in the middle of something, I'll stop mid-sentence, put it down and pick up the bag.

When I catch the thought "there's time to do one more thing," I'll take that as the sign to leave now.

When I notice I'm going to be late, I'll send a message with a time before I do anything else, and then travel at the normal speed.

I'll be honest about what to expect, and this is my expectation and not a finding. For the first few weeks the record will feel pessimistic and the door time will feel absurdly early. You'll arrive early more often than you'd like, and some of those early minutes will be dull. You'll slip, and do the last thing, and be late, and that will be annoying because you'll know exactly why. Some people will notice you're on time and make a remark, and it'll be friendly, and you'll mind it slightly.

Against that, you should be on time to most things within a fortnight, because the arithmetic works from the first day you use it. The dash should mostly disappear from your week. You'll start to see the two minutes before things, and the people in them. The apology will become rare, and so it will mean something again. And somewhere around the second month, someone who's waited for you for years will notice that they haven't had to, and won't say anything, and you'll know.

Children, traffic and the friend who's later than you

When you have small children to get out of the house. The record is still the method, and the record will be long. Getting two children into coats and shoes and a car can take a quarter of an hour that feels like five minutes, and every part of it can go wrong. Time it over two weeks like anything else, take the bad-day figure, and add a bigger cushion than you would for yourself. Get the children ready before you get yourself ready, because a child in a coat can wait and a child without shoes can't. And accept that with very small children you'll sometimes be late anyway, and that everyone with small children knows it, and that a message with a time is all that's needed.

When you're carrying too much. If the reason you're late is that you have more to do between six and nine than can be done between six and nine, the door time won't fix it. What's needed is for something to leave the morning, or for someone to take part of it. That's a conversation with a partner, an employer or a family, and it's a bigger one than this book. But have it, because the alternative is to be late for years and to think it's your timekeeping.

When the traffic really is unpredictable. Some journeys vary by half an hour from day to day, and a cushion that covers the worst day means an hour wasted on the best. I'd set the cushion at the ordinary bad day and accept that the extraordinary ones will make you late. Then say so, early, with a time. Being late once a month because of a closed road is not this habit. Being late every week because of "traffic" that's the same every week is.

When you're going to be late anyway. It'll happen. The moment you know, before you do anything else, send a message with a time. "Running fifteen minutes late, start without me." Then travel normally. When you arrive, one short sorry, no story, and get on with it. The story is for you, not them, and they've heard it before.

When the other person is later than you. You'll notice it more, now that you're on time, and you may feel the small grievance that chapter 8 described. Say nothing the first few times. If it goes on, say once, plainly and without heat, that you've been waiting and you'd rather they told you a real time. You're now in a position to ask for that, which you weren't before.

When the host says "come any time." Some do mean it. If the invitation gives a range, arrive inside the range, near the start. If it gives a time, arrive at the time, and if you're early, walk round the block.

When work meetings overrun and make you late for the next one. That's not your estimate. That's the meeting. Say at the start that you have to leave at a certain time, and leave then. People rarely mind, and you'll be surprised how often the meeting finishes when its most reliable member stands up.

When you find early time unbearable. Some people feel a real anxiety at being early, a sense of being exposed or of having got it wrong. If that's you, start with two or three minutes early rather than ten, and bring something to do. The feeling fades with practice, in my observation.

When lateness comes with a lifetime of losing things and not finishing. The first caution in this book said that lifelong trouble organising time, along with being easily distracted, losing things and finding it hard to finish tasks, can be a sign of ADHD, and that the NHS advises a GP if it's affecting work or relationships. The methods here can still help with the door. They aren't the whole answer if that's the situation, and a GP can say what else is.

When you've recently become late to everything. A change in reliability that comes with low mood, poor sleep or a loss of interest in things is a change in your health. See a GP.

When you slip. You'll do the last thing, and you'll be late, and you'll know why. That's useful. It's information about which part of the method you skipped. Don't decide that the method doesn't work or that you're back where you started. Look at which alarm you ignored, and set it again for tomorrow.

Tuesday again

It's twenty to nine on a Tuesday morning, some months on. There's a team meeting at nine, in the building across the park. The record says door to seat is twenty-one minutes, so the door is twenty to, and the alarm went at half past. You're on the pavement.

The email that came in overnight is still in your inbox. You'll answer it at ten to nine, in the corridor, with a coffee, and you'll have time to open the spreadsheet and check the figure properly. The keys were in the bowl. The notebook was in the bag last night.

The park path is wet again. You take the longer way round at a normal pace. At the far side you pass the person who chairs the meeting, and they say, "Oh good, I wanted to ask you about the figures before we start," and you have the four minutes to talk about it.

You're in the room at seven minutes to nine. You choose a chair. Not the one by the door.

It wasn't always like this. In the first fortnight you set the alarms and then finished the sentence anyway, twice, and were late, and knew exactly why. In the third week you left on time, arrived twelve minutes early, and found the early minutes surprisingly long. Someone said, "You're early," in a tone you didn't love. Then you got used to it, and then you started bringing a book.

You've been late twice since. Once the road was closed. Once you did the last thing. On both occasions you sent a message at the moment you knew, with a time, and said sorry once on arrival, and

it was fine, because it was rare.

Last Thursday you were at Dan and Ellie's at half past seven, having walked round the block once. Dan opened the door and looked at his watch and said nothing, and Ellie said the lasagne had another twenty minutes to go and would you like a drink. It turned out that half past seven had always meant half past seven, and that the lasagne had always been timed for eight, and that for years you'd been arriving just before the food and calling it late.

You still don't like waiting much. You don't do a great deal of it. Most days the cushion gets used, one way or another, and on the days it doesn't you have ten minutes with nothing in them, which you've stopped minding.

If you've read this far and changed nothing yet, try one thing. Pick the next appointment you have. Time the trip from door to seat, honestly, and leave by that figure and not by the one in your head. Then see who's there when you arrive.

Notes

This book gives general information about an everyday habit. It isn't medical advice. The NHS guidance I mention is for England as I found it 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, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 18 and 21. The Tuesday meeting, Dan and Ellie, the lasagne, the keys in the other coat and everything else in the running example are invented.

Before you start. The signs of ADHD in adults and the advice to see a GP if they're affecting studies, work or relationships are from the NHS page "ADHD in adults". The page lists finding it hard to organise your time, being easily distracted or forgetful, finding it hard to finish tasks and losing things often among the inattentive signs, and says the symptoms usually start before the age of twelve.

Chapter 3. Buehler, Griffin and Ross, "Exploring the 'planning fallacy': why people underestimate their task completion times", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67, 1994, pages 366 to 381. The tasks were academic and everyday projects, not journeys. The summary reports that people focused on plan-based scenarios, that they underestimated their own completion times but not

other people's, and that the bias disappeared when people were told to connect their predictions with past experience. Newby-Clark, Ross, Buehler, Koehler and Griffin, "People focus on optimistic scenarios and disregard pessimistic scenarios while predicting task completion times", *Journal of Experimental Psychology, Applied*, 6, 2000, pages 171 to 182. Five experiments. The application to the walk across the park is mine.

Chapter 4. Buehler, Griffin and Ross as above, for the finding that people attributed past prediction failures to external, transient and specific factors, and that observers made more use of past experience. Roy, Christenfeld and McKenzie, "Underestimating the duration of future events: memory incorrectly used or memory bias?", *Psychological Bulletin* 131, 2005, pages 738 to 756. A review paper. The authors present memory bias as an additional explanation and not a replacement for the planning fallacy account, and say the two aren't mutually exclusive.

Chapter 5. Block, Hancock and Zakay, "How cognitive load affects duration judgments: a meta-analytic review", *Acta Psychologica* 134, 2010, pages 330 to 343. One hundred and seventeen experiments. The shortening effect is for prospective judgements, where people know in advance that they'll be asked about time. For retrospective judgements the effect runs the other way. I've applied the prospective finding to the last thing on the grounds that a person watching the clock before leaving is in something like a prospective condition. That's my reading. Conte and Jacobs, "Validity evidence linking polychronicity and Big Five personality dimensions to absence, lateness, and supervisory performance ratings", *Human Performance* 16, 2003, pages 107 to 129. One

hundred and eighty-one train operators. The correlation between polychronicity and lateness was 0.19, which is small. The explanation of why the last thing is attractive is mine.

Chapter 7. Buehler, Griffin and MacDonald, "The role of motivated reasoning in optimistic time predictions", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23, 1997, pages 238 to 247. Two studies, one of tax filers and one in a laboratory. Halkjelsvik and Jørgensen, "From origami to software development: a review of studies on judgment-based predictions of performance time", *Psychological Bulletin* 138, 2012, pages 238 to 271. The review notes that underestimation was more often reported in engineering and management studies than in psychology studies, which is a limit on how general the planning fallacy is. What I say about the state you arrive in is my own observation.

Chapter 11. Conte and Jacobs as above. Conscientiousness, extraversion and neuroticism were associated with absence and not with lateness in that sample. Levine and Norenzayan, "The pace of life in 31 countries", *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 30, 1999, pages 178 to 205. Levine and Bartlett, "Pace of life, punctuality, and coronary heart disease in six countries", *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 15, 1984, pages 233 to 255. The questionnaire on lateness in the 1984 paper was conducted mostly in the United States, and I've used only the fact that it asked about perceptions of what counts as late. The argument that punctuality is a policy rather than a trait is mine.

Chapter 13. Kruger and Evans, "If you don't want to be late, enumerate: unpacking reduces the planning fallacy", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 40, 2004, pages 586 to 598. I

couldn't obtain a summary of this paper and have relied on its title, as the chapter says. Kahneman and Tversky, "Intuitive prediction: biases and corrective procedures", TIMS Studies in Management Science 12, 1979, pages 313 to 327. Citation only. The inside and outside views are described from general knowledge of that work.

Chapter 16. The two-week record, timing from door to seat, taking the longer figures and the sizes of the cushions are my suggestions and haven't been tested as a method. Newby-Clark and colleagues as above.

Chapter 17. Koole and van't Spijker, "Overcoming the planning fallacy through willpower: effects of implementation intentions on actual and predicted task-completion times", European Journal of Social Psychology 30, 2000, pages 873 to 888. One experiment, with an assignment to complete within a set period. The rest of the chapter's guidance is mine, including the ban on the last thing and the bowl for the keys.

Chapter 19. 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 and its parts haven't been tested together, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 20. The NHS page on ADHD in adults, as above. The advice to see a GP about a recent change in reliability that comes with low mood is general, and the NHS pages on depression describe the symptoms. Everything else in the chapter is my own suggestion.