

# You were tired at ten

A short book about staying up late when you're exhausted,  
because the evening feels like the only time that's yours

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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. You can read it in two or three evenings, and I'd be pleased if you stopped each time when you got tired.

It's about one habit. You've been tired since about ten o'clock. You know you have to be up at half past six. Nothing is keeping you up, and there's no deadline or crying baby. And you stay where you are until midnight or later, because this is the first moment all day that nobody has wanted anything from you. Going to bed feels like handing the last of the day back.

I'm not going to lecture you about sleep. You already know you should get more of it, and knowing hasn't helped. I'm also not going to tell you that wanting time to yourself is self-indulgent. I think it's a real need, and much of this book is about taking it more seriously than you do now.

What I'll argue is this. The need for time of your own is sound. Taking it out of your sleep is a poor way of meeting it, because it gives you that time in the worst condition it could possibly come in and charges you for it the next day. There are better places to find it, and chapter 11 goes looking for them.

Three cautions before we start.

This book is for people who could sleep if they went to bed. If you go to bed and lie awake for a long time, or wake in the night and can't get back to sleep, that's insomnia, which is a different problem. Spending longer in bed isn't how insomnia is usually treated, so please don't take this book's advice as aimed at you.

Some people stay up late precisely because they've learned that bed means lying awake. If that's you, a GP is the place to start, and chapter 14 says more.

The second caution is about tiredness that sleep doesn't fix. Suppose you get a decent number of hours and still feel very tired every day. That's worth a GP appointment, especially if someone has told you that you snore loudly or seem to stop breathing in your sleep. There are medical causes of tiredness that no change of bedtime will touch.

The third is about circumstances. If you work nights or rotating shifts, or you have a baby who wakes, or you care for someone through the night, then your sleep is short for reasons outside you. This book is about the hours that were yours to sleep in and that you spent on the sofa. It has nothing to say against people whose hours were taken.

If you take medication for sleep, mood or anything else, nothing here is a reason to stop it or change the dose.

The middle chapters each take one belief that keeps people up. "It's the only time that's mine." "I'm fine on six hours." "I'll catch up at the weekend." Each is partly true, and I'll try to give it its due before I argue with it. The notes at the back give the studies I've relied on and their limits. The rest is my own reasoning, and I'll say so where it matters.

## Ten o'clock

Here's an example, and you can change the details to fit. You get in from work at half past six. There's dinner to make and eat and clear away. There are children to bath and read to and put back to bed twice. Then there's a load of washing, tomorrow's packed lunches, and a form for the school that's due in the morning. At a quarter past nine you sit down for the first time since lunch.

At ten you yawn, and your eyes are heavy. If you went up now you'd be asleep in ten minutes and you'd get eight hours. You know all this.

You stay. You're not watching anything special. It's an episode of something, then another, with your phone in your hand through most of it. At some point you notice it's twenty to one. You go up, annoyed with yourself, and the alarm goes at half past six. You get through the next day on coffee and a short temper, and by nine that evening you're looking forward to the only good part of the day, which starts when everyone else has gone to bed.

If you don't have children, the evening will look different and the pattern may not. The demands might come from a job that follows you home, or from a parent who needs a call every night, or from a partner. Some people live alone and have the pattern anyway, because the day belonged to work and the evening is the only part that doesn't.

People have started calling this revenge bedtime procrastination. The idea is that you're taking revenge on a day that left you nothing. I think the name gets something right. The staying up has a note of defiance in it that ordinary dawdling doesn't. It feels like a small refusal.

I want to split two things that the habit glues together.

The first is the need. You need some time in the day when nobody is asking you for anything and you decide what happens. I'll call that your own time. It's as real a need as food, and people who get none of it for long stretches become worn and resentful. Nothing in this book argues against it.

The second is the method. At the moment, you get your own time by staying up past the point where you're tired. I'll call that point the tired point, and in the examples it's ten o'clock. The stretch between the tired point and lights out I'll call the late stretch. The method is to buy your own time with sleep, at the end of the day, after everything else has been paid.

The argument of this book is that the need is sound and the method is bad. The method delivers your own time at the hour when you're least able to use it. The next day pays for it, which makes the next day harder, which makes the next evening's need bigger. And it lets the real problem, a day with no room in it for you, carry on untouched.

I should say what this book doesn't claim. It doesn't claim you should never stay up late. A late night chosen for a good reason is one of life's pleasures, and chapter 13 keeps a place for it. There's

no moral difference between early nights and late ones, and the book doesn't claim one. It doesn't claim that sleep will fix your life either. If your days are overfull, they'll still be overfull when you're rested. You'll just be better placed to do something about it.

Before the next chapter, I'd like you to collect a little information, without changing anything. For one week, write down two times each morning. The first is when you first noticed you were tired the evening before. The second is when you turned out the light. A scrap of paper by the bed will do. We'll use the numbers later.

## What the late stretch pays

If staying up did nothing for you, you wouldn't do it. So before arguing with it I want to list what it pays, as fairly as I can. I count six payments.

The first is time with no demands in it. Nobody needs feeding or answering, and nobody needs you to find their shoes. For some people this is the only such time in the whole day, and the relief of it is physical.

The second is control. All day, other people decided what you did and when. In the late stretch you decide. Researchers who study how people recover from work treat this as one of the basic ingredients of recovery. They put it alongside relaxing and switching off from the job. It isn't a luxury.

The third is the refusal I mentioned. Staying up is a way of saying that the day doesn't get all of you. It's a small act, and it's often the only one available.

The fourth is that tomorrow is kept waiting. While you're still up, it's still today. Bed is the door to the alarm, the commute and the inbox. Chapter 8 is about this one.

The fifth is quiet. A house at half past eleven is a different place from the same house at seven. The phone doesn't ring, and the street is still. Some people love that for its own sake.

The sixth is the least noble. Going to bed takes effort, and staying put takes none. There are teeth to brush and doors to lock and stairs to climb. Meanwhile the next episode starts by itself. Chapter 9 is about that.

Those are real, and the first two matter a great deal. Now the costs. You know the main one, so I'll try to be specific about the rest.

The first is tomorrow. You'll be tired, and chapter 5 argues that you'll be more impaired than you feel. You'll be shorter with the people you live with. Small problems will look bigger.

The second is that the late stretch itself is poor. You're spending your own time in the most worn-out hour of your day. Chapter 4 asks what you actually do in it.

The third is a loop. A tired day is a harder day. Tasks take longer, so the chores run later into the evening. You have less patience, so the day's demands feel heavier. By nine you're more worn than you would have been, and the need for your own time is stronger. So you stay up later, and the habit makes more of the hunger it feeds on.

The fourth is the weekend. Saturday morning goes on sleeping in, and Saturday morning was the best own time you had. Chapter 6 is about that trade.

The fifth is how you feel about it. Most people in this pattern go to bed cross with themselves, and that's the last feeling of the day.

The sixth is the one I think matters most, and it's the least visible. As long as the late stretch is there, the day doesn't have to change. You can go on giving the whole of every day to other people, because there's always midnight. The habit acts as a pressure valve, and the valve lets an unworkable arrangement keep working.

Here's a question to keep for the rest of the book. When you're on the sofa past the tired point, ask, "Is this what I wanted my own time to be?" You don't have to get up. Just answer it honestly.

## **"It's the only time that's mine"**

This is the belief at the centre of the habit, and the first thing to say about it is that it may be true. Look at the day in chapter 1. From half past six in the morning until a quarter past nine at night, every hour belonged to an employer, a child or the household. If that person's own time doesn't come after nine, it doesn't come.

You're also far from alone. A team of Dutch psychologists surveyed a representative sample of 2,431 adults about going to bed later than they intended. They defined it carefully, as going to bed later than you meant to when nothing outside you is stopping you. They reported that a large share of the population does this regularly, and that a large share feels short of sleep. The same group later interviewed seventeen people who did it often, to find out why. One of the three main patterns they found was deliberate. Those people knew they were delaying, and they did it because they felt they deserved some time for themselves after the day they'd had.

I think they're right that they deserve it. The word I'd question is "only".

Look at what that time is like. At midnight you're more tired than at any other point in the day. Your attention is poor and your mood is flat. The part of you that chooses well is worn down. You can't concentrate on a book, so you don't pick one up. You haven't the energy for the hobby in the spare room. There's nobody awake to talk to. It's a bit like saving your best bottle of wine for a night when you've got a heavy cold. You do get to drink it, and you can barely taste it.

Then look at who pays. The hour between midnight and one isn't free. It comes out of tomorrow, and tomorrow's you gets no say. That's the person who has to be patient with a toddler at seven and sharp in a meeting at ten. If anyone else treated them that way, you'd be angry on their behalf.

So this is how I'd restate the belief. You have too little time of your own. That's a real problem, and it deserves a real solution. The late stretch is what you've been using in place of a solution, and it gives you the appearance of your own time without much of the substance.

There's an objection that I take seriously. "There isn't any other time. I've looked." For some readers that's close to true, and chapter 11 doesn't pretend otherwise. For now I'd ask you to notice something. The day's timetable was drawn up on the assumption that you come last. Everything else was given its place first, and you got whatever was left. Your own time ended up at midnight because every other hour had already been handed out by the time you came to it.

The practical upshot for now is small. Stop calling the late stretch your own time, even in your head. Call it what it is, which is staying up. Keep the phrase "my own time" for something better, which we'll get to.

## "At least I enjoy it"

This chapter is mostly one question. What do you do in the late stretch?

I don't mean what you'd like to do with time of your own. Most people can answer that easily. They'd read, or draw, or play the guitar they haven't touched since March, or have a long bath, or ring a friend, or sit in the garden. I mean what happens between ten o'clock and lights out on an ordinary Tuesday.

For most people in this pattern the answer is some mix of television they're half watching and a phone they're half reading. There's often food they didn't much want. None of it was chosen, exactly. It was what needed the least effort from someone with no effort left.

The Dutch interviews found this too. The second of their three patterns they called mindless. Those people didn't decide to stay up. They lost track of the time, absorbed in whatever they were doing, and looked up to find it was one o'clock. Deliberate and mindless aren't separate groups of people. A common evening begins as the first and ends as the second. You decide at ten that you deserve another half hour. Then nobody decides anything else for the next two hours.

There's some research on how well this kind of evening works as recovery. A survey of 471 people looked at television and video games after a draining day. The more depleted people were, the more likely they were to see their own viewing or gaming as

procrastination. They felt guilty about it. The guilt went with getting less recovery from it. The authors pointed out the irony. The people who most needed the recovery were getting the least of it. It was a survey, so it can't prove which caused which. But it matches something you may recognise. The late stretch is often spent with a background hum of "I should be in bed", and it's hard to enjoy anything much through that.

You might reply that some of those late hours have been lovely. I'm sure they have. A film you chose and stayed awake for can be a good evening. So can a long talk with your partner that ran on. This book isn't about those. It's about the default, the late stretch that happens because it's Tuesday and you sat down.

So here's a way to find out how much you enjoy it. Tomorrow morning, before you look at anything else, write down what you did between the tired point and lights out. Then give it a mark out of ten for how good it was. I don't mean how badly you needed it. I mean how good it was. Do that for the same week you're noting your times.

I don't know what your marks will be. If they're mostly eights, this book has less to offer you than I thought. My guess is that there'll be a lot of fours. If so, it's worth putting those fours next to what they cost, which is the subject of the next two chapters.

## **"I'm fine on six hours"**

Most people who stay up late have made a private calculation. Eight hours would be nice, and six is enough. They've been doing it for years, they hold down a job, and they haven't crashed the car. So the two hours taken from sleep look like a good deal, since they seem to cost nothing.

There's something in this. People do differ in how much sleep they need. The usual figure for adults is seven to nine hours, and that's an average with a range round it. One bad night does little harm, and the body copes with short runs of poor sleep better than the scare stories suggest.

The trouble is with the evidence you're using, which is how you feel. An experiment at the University of Pennsylvania tested that evidence directly. Forty-eight healthy adults lived in a laboratory. Some were allowed eight hours in bed a night for two weeks. Some got six hours, and some got four. Every day they did tests of attention and thinking, and rated how sleepy they felt.

The six-hour and four-hour groups got worse on every test, and they kept getting worse day after day for the whole fortnight. By the end, the six-hour group was performing about as badly as people who'd been kept awake for up to two nights running.

The sleepiness ratings are the part that matters here. They rose in the first few days and then flattened out. The people on six hours felt a bit sleepy and thought that was the extent of it. Their performance went on falling and their sense of being impaired

didn't follow it. The researchers concluded that people were largely unaware of how far they'd slipped. They suggested this is why so many people believe cutting sleep is harmless.

That's the difficulty with "I'm fine". The judgement is being made by the instrument that's affected. You've also been on short sleep for so long that you've nothing recent to compare with. What feels like your normal self may be your six-hour self, and you may not have met the other one since your last long holiday.

The costs aren't only about concentration. A large review pooled 154 experiments in which people's sleep was cut short or broken up, covering more than 5,700 participants. Across all kinds of sleep loss, people felt less positive emotion and more anxiety. Notice what that does to this book's subject. After a short night, the day is greyer and more worrying than it would have been. That's the day you'll want to take revenge on in the evening.

I should be fair about the limits. The Pennsylvania experiment had 48 people, all healthy and aged between 21 and 38, in a laboratory. Six hours was their time in bed, so they slept a little less than that. You aren't in a laboratory, and you may need less sleep than they did. There are said to be a few people who do well on six hours for life. I don't know if you're one. There's a simple test, though, and it's in the title of this book. People who need only six hours aren't tired at ten. If your eyes are closing on the sofa, your body has told you what it needs tonight, whatever the average is.

One more check is available. Look at what you do with alarm-free mornings. If you sleep two or three hours longer every Saturday, the six hours wasn't enough.

## **"I'll catch up at the weekend"**

This is the accounting that keeps the week going. You run short from Monday to Friday and pay it back with a long lie-in on Saturday and Sunday. It feels as though the books balance.

Part of it is true. After a short week you do sleep longer at the weekend if nothing wakes you, and you do feel better for it. The body takes back some of what it's owed.

A study at the University of Colorado looked at how well that works. Healthy young adults were split into three groups and lived under controlled conditions. One group had plenty of time to sleep. One was limited to five hours a night for nine nights. The third had five short nights, then a weekend of sleeping as much as they liked, then two more short nights. It was a small study, with 14 people in each of the two short-sleep groups, and its main interest was metabolism and not mood.

Two results bear on this chapter. The first is how little extra sleep the weekend group got. Over the whole weekend they averaged only about an hour more than their normal amount. They'd lost many hours across the week and got a fraction of them back. The second is that their body clocks shifted later over the weekend. So when the short nights started again, they were trying to sleep at a time their bodies now treated as evening. The weekend group ate more after dinner and gained weight much as the no-weekend group did, and their sensitivity to insulin fell. The authors concluded that weekend catch-up sleep didn't prevent the metabolic effects of repeated short sleep.

I don't want to make too much of one small study of young adults. The lesson I'd take is a modest one. The weekend pays back less than it seems to, and the lie-in makes Sunday night harder. Most people know that last part from experience. You sleep until ten on Sunday, you aren't tired at eleven that night, and Monday starts short.

There's a second argument that I find more persuasive than the biology, and it's about what the lie-in costs you. Think about Saturday morning as it would be if you were rested. You'd be awake at half past seven with a clear head, and if you have children they might still be occupied. The day's demands haven't begun. That's two hours of your own time in the best condition it ever comes in, when you could read or go for a walk or make something and enjoy it fully.

The weekly deal, then, looks like this. From Monday to Thursday you take five or six poor hours late at night, when you can't do much with them. On Saturday and Sunday you pay them back with four or five of your best hours, asleep. You're borrowing bad hours and repaying in good ones.

Here's the reasonable objection. "But the lie-in is one of the pleasures of my week." If you're rested and you stay in bed with tea and the paper because you like it, that's your own time, well spent. That isn't what I'm describing. I mean the lie-in you can't help, where you surface at half past ten feeling as if you've been hit.

The practical point for now is one of bookkeeping. When you weigh up the late stretch, include the weekend mornings in its price.

## **"I'm not tired any more"**

Something odd often happens in the late stretch. At ten you could barely keep your eyes open. By half past eleven you feel reasonably awake. It seems as if the tiredness was a passing dip, and that going to bed at ten would have been a mistake, because you've clearly got more in you.

I don't doubt the feeling. The question is what produces it. I'd suggest two things, and neither is a sign that you've had enough rest.

The first is what you're looking at. A research team in Boston had people read in the hours before bed. On some evenings they read on a device that gives off light, and on others they read a printed book. The same people did both. On the screen evenings, people felt less sleepy at bedtime. They produced less melatonin, which is the hormone that signals night to the body. They took longer to fall asleep, and their body clocks shifted later. The next morning they were less alert. They were reading both times, so the difference points to the light.

Think about what that means for the second wind. It appeared while you were looking at a bright screen, and by the study's measures it left you less alert the next morning. It was a laboratory study, and the size of the effect in ordinary homes is still argued over. The direction is what matters here. The light was covering the tiredness up, and the tiredness was still there when the alarm went.

The second is the material. A good drama is built to hold your attention, and the episode ends on a hook to keep you there. A phone feed offers something new every few seconds. An interested mind is an alert mind. Again, that's your sleepiness being overridden for a while. It will be back at seven in the morning.

There are two other common causes, and they belong to the loop from chapter 2. One is the doze. You nod off in front of the television at nine, wake at half past with a stiff neck, and find you're no longer sleepy. The standard account of sleep says that pressure to sleep builds through the waking day and is released by sleeping. Even a short sleep lets some of it go. So the doze hasn't shown that you weren't tired. It has spent some of your tiredness early, on a sofa, in a position that did your neck no good. If you catch yourself going under at nine, that's the tired point arriving early, and the useful response is to go up.

The other is caffeine. A tired day runs on coffee, and the last cup tends to creep later into the afternoon. One study gave people a large dose of caffeine, about what several cups of coffee contain. They took it at bedtime, three hours before, or six hours before, and their sleep was measured at home. All three timings disturbed sleep compared with a dummy pill, including the dose taken six hours ahead. So a strong coffee at four can still be at work at ten. The short night leads to the late coffee, and the late coffee helps produce the second wind. If you drink coffee after lunch, it's worth a fortnight's experiment to stop at noon and see whether ten o'clock feels different.

So I'd treat the two readings differently. At ten, in a quiet moment, your body reported that it was tired. At half past eleven, under bright light and halfway through a plot, it reported that it wasn't. I'd trust the ten o'clock reading.

There's a related finding about what happens upstairs. Two researchers surveyed 338 young adults and separated two times that usually get treated as one. The first was when people went to bed, and the second was when they tried to go to sleep. The average gap was 39 minutes, much of it spent on screens. People with a gap of more than an hour were about nine times as likely to be poor sleepers as people who went to sleep straight away. So for many people, going to bed only moves the late stretch upstairs. When I say bedtime in this book, I mean lights out.

Now the honest exception. Some people really aren't sleepy at ten, or at eleven either. Body clocks differ, and a minority of people are built to sleep from one till nine. A German diary study of 108 employees found that these evening types reported more delayed bedtimes on work nights. The pattern was what body-clock science would predict, and it wasn't explained by poor self-control. If that's you, your problem isn't the one in this book. Your sleep is set to a different timetable from your job. This book's title gives the test once more. It's about people who were tired at ten. Chapter 12 comes back to night people.

## **"If I go to bed, it's tomorrow"**

This belief is rarely said aloud, but I think it keeps a lot of people on the sofa. Going to bed ends today. The next thing you'll know is the alarm, and then the whole business starts again. While you're still up, that hasn't happened yet. The late stretch is the furthest point from the next set of demands, and leaving it feels like walking towards them.

It makes emotional sense. If tomorrow holds a difficult meeting, or just another day like today, then wanting to put it off is natural. People linger on the last evening of a holiday for the same reason.

But look at what the delay achieves. Tomorrow starts at half past six whatever you do tonight. Staying up doesn't push it back by a minute. You can change only one thing from the sofa, which is the state you'll be in when it arrives. If you go up at ten, you meet the meeting with eight hours behind you. Go up at one, and you meet the same meeting with five and a half. It's like trying to delay a train by arriving late at the station. The train keeps its timetable, and you start the journey out of breath.

There's also a cruel detail from the review in chapter 5. Sleep loss reliably raised anxiety. So the dread you feel about tomorrow is partly made by the short nights you've had already. A short night also turns the dial up for the night after. The more you put tomorrow off, the more frightening tomorrow gets, and the more you want to put it off.

This is an interpretation of mine and I can't cite a study of it. The pieces are well supported, though. Sleep loss worsens mood and anxiety. Putting off bed is linked to the wish to avoid what comes next. I think the loop follows from those two.

Someone might say, "My tomorrows really are that bad." If so, I'm sorry, and I'd take it seriously. Some jobs are making people ill, and some home situations can't be borne for long. That deserves attention in daylight, with a clear head, and possibly with help. A friend, a union rep, a GP or a counsellor could all be the right person. It's too large a problem to be handled by losing sleep over it, and chronic tiredness makes every way out look harder than it is. Decisions about leaving a job or changing a life get made on good sleep or not at all.

For more ordinary dread, the Sunday night kind, I can offer one small thing. Before you go up, write down the first thing you'll do when you get to work, in one line. Dread feeds on tomorrow being a shapeless lump. One line gives it a first step, and the first step is often smaller than the lump suggested.

## **"I can't face getting ready for bed"**

This is the least dignified reason for staying up, and perhaps the most common. You're on the sofa, warm and heavy. Between you and sleep there's a list of chores. The lights need turning off, the doors want locking, and the dishwasher has to go on. After that there are the stairs, your teeth and your face, clothes to come off, and an alarm to set. It's ten minutes of chores at the moment in the day when you have the least energy for chores. Staying put needs nothing at all. The television will even start the next episode for you without being asked.

So there's a small irony. You're too tired to go to bed.

Researchers have tried to pin this down, and I'll report the muddle honestly. One study asked 218 people how many temptations they'd had to resist during the day and how late they'd gone to bed against their intention. The people who'd resisted more went to bed later, which suggests that a draining day leaves less in the tank for getting yourself upstairs. But the German diary study I mentioned in chapter 7 measured people's reserves of self-control on the evening itself and found the opposite. On evenings when people felt more drained, they put off bed less. So the evidence on willpower and bedtime is mixed, and I wouldn't build anything on it.

What I'd build on is simpler and doesn't need a theory. An action gets done more often when it's easy and less often when it's hard. At the moment, staying up is as easy as an action can be, and going

to bed is a ten-minute obstacle course. You don't need more willpower at ten o'clock. You need going to bed to be less work at ten o'clock.

That can be arranged, because almost none of those chores has to be done at bedtime. They're done then out of custom. Try moving them. At nine, or whenever the children are down, do the closing-up jobs. Lock up, set the dishwasher going, put out tomorrow's clothes, brush your teeth, get into whatever you sleep in. Then sit down. When the tired point comes, going to bed is a matter of turning off one lamp and walking upstairs. You've taken the obstacle course out of the weakest moment of your day and put it somewhere you can manage it.

You may object that sitting on the sofa in pyjamas at nine with your teeth brushed will feel like being a child. It might, for a few evenings. It also does something useful. It tells your body that the day is closing, some time before you need it to believe that. And it removes the snack and the glass of wine that tend to happen at eleven, because you've brushed your teeth.

The other half of this is the ending. The easiest moment to stop watching is before you start. Decide when you sit down what you're watching and how much of it. Turn off the setting that plays the next episode without asking. It's in the account settings of every service, and it takes a minute to find. Left on, it turns stopping into a thing you have to do and carrying on into a thing that just happens.

## **"It's the only time we get together"**

For people who live with a partner, the late stretch often isn't solitary. It's the two of you on the sofa after the house has gone quiet. All day you've passed each other with bags and children and lists. This is the only time you sit in the same room with nothing to do. Going to bed at ten can feel like giving up on the relationship in favour of sleep.

I take this one seriously, because time together is a real need too, and couples who get none drift. If the choice really were between a rested marriage with no contact and a tired one with some, I wouldn't be sure which to pick.

Look at what the time together consists of, though, the same way chapter 4 looked at time alone. For many couples it's the same programme watched from two ends of a sofa, each with a phone, both too tired to talk. That has some value. Being in a room with someone you love isn't nothing. But it's thin, and both of you are paying full price for it the next day. Two tired people are also shorter with each other. Some of the distance that the late evenings are meant to repair is caused by them.

There's a second pattern that's worth naming. One of you would go to bed at ten and stays up to keep the other company. Or one goes up and lies awake half listening for the other. Bedtimes in a couple are rarely independent. If one person is reading this book and the other isn't, the late stretch may be more the other person's habit than yours.

So this chapter's suggestion is a conversation, held at a sensible hour. It has two parts. The first is to say plainly what each of you wants from the evening. You may find that you both want more sleep and that each has been staying up for the other. The second is to move your time together earlier and make it better, as chapter 11 does for time alone. Half an hour at half past eight with the television off and the phones in another room is more contact than two hours of parallel scrolling. Eating together after the children are down, now and then, does more still. So does going up at the same time and talking for ten minutes in the dark.

You might say that your partner is a night owl and won't change. That may be so, and you can't go to bed for them. You can decide what you do. Going up at your own tired point, without resentment and without a lecture, is allowed. It helps to agree on it beforehand so it isn't read as a rejection. "I'm going to start going up when I'm tired. It isn't about you. Can we have the first half hour after the kids are down instead?" Many partners will be relieved.

The chosen late nights in chapter 13 fit well here. A Friday when you both stay up on purpose, with a film and something nice to eat, is a better evening together than five accidental midnights.

## **"There's nowhere else to put it"**

This is the chapter the rest of the book depends on. If the late stretch is a poor way to get your own time, the fair question is where else it's supposed to come from. If I can't answer, everything else I've said is just telling a tired person to go to bed.

I'll start with what I can't do. I can't add hours to your day. If you're a single parent with two jobs, or you care for someone who needs you from waking until sleep, your shortage is real, and no rearrangement will fully close it. What I can do is point at places where time of your own sometimes turns out to be hiding. Not all will apply to you. I'd be surprised if none did.

The first place is the early evening, and it needs a change of order more than a change of amount. At the moment, your own time comes after everything else is done. The trouble is that household jobs don't have an end. There's always another load of washing or another surface to wipe. If you wait for the jobs to be finished, you'll wait until you're too tired to do anything but sit.

So turn the order round. Your own time gets a fixed start, and the jobs fit round it. Say the children are down by eight. From eight until a quarter to nine is yours. You're less tired then than you'll be at any later point, so it's the best hour the evening has. You read, or draw, or sit in the garden, or have the bath. At a quarter to nine you do what jobs still matter, and then the closing-up from chapter 9. Some jobs won't get done. The next paragraph is about those.

The second place is the jobs themselves. Tired people tend to keep house to a standard set by someone more rested, often a parent or a younger self. Ask of each evening job whether it could be done less often, done worse, done by someone else, or left undone.

Packed lunches can be the same four days running. The ironing pile, in many households, can be abolished by folding things. A kitchen can be left untidy overnight, and nothing happens. I'd suggest a closing time for chores, the way a shop has one. After nine, say, the kitchen is shut, and whatever isn't done waits until tomorrow.

The third place is other people. If you share a home with another adult, the evenings may be split less evenly than either of you has noticed. One arrangement that works for some couples is an evening off each. On Tuesday one of you is off duty from half past seven. The other handles the bedtimes, the jobs, and whoever comes downstairs wanting water, and on Thursday you swap. One guaranteed evening a week can take a lot of pressure off the other six, because the need isn't building without limit. If you're parenting alone, the same idea might run through a grandparent, a friend with children, or a swap with another single parent. I know that's easier to write than to arrange.

The fourth place is the working day. Many people eat lunch at a desk while answering email, then grieve at night for the time they never had. A lunch break taken away from the desk, alone, with a book or a walk, is your own time in daylight. So is a commute, if you stop using it to clear the inbox. These are small. But the late stretch is partly driven by the feeling that nothing in the day was yours, and even twenty minutes that was can weaken that feeling.

The fifth place is the morning, and I offer it carefully. Once you're sleeping enough, some people find that waking half an hour before the household gives them the quiet they were looking for at midnight, in better condition. The house is as still at six as at twelve. This only works if bedtime moves too. Getting up earlier while still going to bed at one is the same mistake at the other end of the night.

The sixth place is the word no. Some of what fills your evenings was agreed to and didn't have to be. Committees, favours and extra shifts all count here, and so does the WhatsApp group you administer. One fewer of those is an evening back.

Here's an objection I'd expect. "If I take an hour at eight, I'll feel guilty the whole time, with the kitchen like that." You may, at first. I'd point out that you already take two hours, at a time when you feel guilty for being up. The guilt is there either way. At eight o'clock it buys you an hour you can use.

Notice what's changed in the question. It started as "how do I make myself go to bed?" It's become "where in my day do I come in?" I think that's the more useful question, and the late nights were a way of never quite asking it.

## **"I'm a night person"**

Some readers will have been waiting since chapter 1 to say this. The night isn't just leftover time for them. It's when they feel most like themselves. They like the dark and the quiet, and they like being the only one awake. They'll say they've been like this since they were fifteen.

There are two different claims folded together here, and both deserve respect.

The first is biological. People's body clocks do differ, as chapter 7 said, and it's partly inherited. A true evening type isn't sleepy at ten and doesn't sleep well if forced to bed then. For that person, staying up isn't procrastination. If that's you, and your work starts late enough for a full night's sleep, you don't have a problem and you don't need this book. If your work starts early, you do have a problem, but it's a mismatch between your clock and your job. Light in the morning, a steady getting-up time and, where you can get it, a later start are the usual remedies. It's also something a GP or a sleep clinic can help with if it's severe.

A night person in that sense isn't tired at ten, though. If you're fighting to stay awake on the sofa, tonight at least, your clock says bedtime. It's possible to be an evening type who's also so short of sleep that the tired point has crept earlier. It's also possible to have been a night person at twenty-two and not be one at forty. Body clocks tend to move earlier with age.

The second claim is about what the night is like, and I've no argument with it. The late hours have a quality that no other part of the day has. Nobody expects anything of a person at midnight. There are people who've written books and built model railways and worked out their lives in those hours.

So I'm not asking you to give them up. I'm suggesting that you choose them. There's a difference between a late night you planned and one that happened to you. On a planned one, you've decided on Friday that you'll stay up with a film or a project, because there's no alarm on Saturday. You enjoy it with a clear conscience. On the other kind, it's Tuesday, you were tired at ten, and you're still there at one because nobody made a decision.

One or two chosen late nights a week can sit inside a life of enough sleep. The cost is small because it isn't repeated every night, and the pleasure is greater because you aren't fighting sleep or guilt. The method in the next chapter has a place for them.

## The decision

Everything so far has been about seeing the habit clearly. This chapter is about what to do, and it starts with a rule.

**My own time comes first in the evening, and the evening ends when I'm tired.**

The rule has two halves, and the order matters. The first half meets the need, and the second ends the method. If you only do the second half, you'll go to bed at ten feeling robbed, and within a week you'll be back on the sofa at midnight. I'd expect that, and it would be a reasonable response to having something taken away with nothing put in its place. So start with the first half, and don't move your bedtime until your own time has somewhere else to be.

Here's the method I'd suggest. It has six parts. Each rests on an earlier chapter. The combination is mine and hasn't been tested as a package.

**Give your own time a start.** Pick a time in the first half of the evening when your own time begins, and treat it as you'd treat an appointment with someone else. Eight o'clock, in the examples. Decide beforehand what you'll do with it, because a tired person with no plan ends up on the phone. It doesn't need to be improving. It needs to be something you'd give more than a four.

**Close the kitchen.** Set a time after which no more household jobs get done. Whatever is left waits for tomorrow. This is what stops the evening's work from expanding until bedtime.

**Get ready for bed early.** Do the closing-up jobs, and your teeth, about an hour before the tired point usually comes. Your notes from chapter 1 will tell you when that is. Then going to bed costs you one lamp and a flight of stairs.

**Decide the ending before you begin.** If you're going to watch something, decide what and how much before you sit down. Turn off automatic play. Say the ending aloud if someone's with you. "One episode, then I'm going up."

**Keep the phone out of the bedroom.** Buy a cheap alarm clock, and let the phone charge downstairs. Chapter 7 described how the late stretch moves upstairs, and this is the simplest way to stop it. If you need to be reachable at night, leave the ringer on and the door open.

**Choose your late nights.** Pick one or two nights a week, with no early alarm the next day, when you may stay up as long as you like. Put something good in them. The other nights, the evening ends at the tired point.

For the moment itself, there's one more tool. Two trials with university students tested a short mental exercise against going to bed late. In both, the students who did it cut the number of minutes by which they overran their bedtime, compared with students given other advice. The exercise has three steps. First, picture the best result of going to bed on time, as vividly as you can. Second, name the main obstacle inside you, such as "I feel I haven't had any time to myself". Third, make a plan in the form "when that obstacle comes up, then I will do this". The trials were short and the participants were students, so I wouldn't claim too

much. But the exercise costs nothing and takes five minutes. It also matches what this book has argued, which is that the obstacle has to be named and answered and can't just be overpowered.

Three plans are worth writing out now, in your own words.

When I notice I'm tired, then I turn off the lamp and go up, because I've already had my hour.

When the episode ends, then I turn the television off before I look at my phone.

When I think "I've had no time to myself today", then I write down where tomorrow's hour is going to be.

The third is for bad days. There will be evenings when the hour at eight didn't happen. The boiler broke, or a child was sick. The old logic will come back in force. You've had nothing, so you're owed the late stretch. I'd suggest that what you're owed is tomorrow's hour, protected harder. Tonight's midnight would only make tomorrow worse.

Here's what to expect. The first week, the hour at eight will feel wrong, because the kitchen's a mess. Going up at ten will feel like a loss for several nights, until the mornings start to show a difference. I can't promise how large the difference will be, or how soon. Give it two weeks, then look at your notes from chapter 4 and ask whether your own time is scoring higher than it did. That's the measure to use. If you do get more sleep as well, count it as the side effect.

## When the late nights come back

They will come back. The usual occasions are easy to list. There's a deadline week at work, or a holiday that moves every routine by two hours. There's an illness, yours or a child's, or a new series that everyone's talking about. A run of days when the hour at eight got eaten will do it too. Then one Tuesday you find yourself on the sofa at ten to one with your phone in your hand, as if the last two months hadn't happened.

That doesn't undo anything, and it doesn't mean you misunderstood the book or didn't want it enough. An old habit stays underneath a new one for a long time, and tired, pressured weeks are just when it resurfaces. What helps is a small response, made soon. Tomorrow evening, take the hour at eight, close the kitchen at nine, and go up when you're tired. There's no need to make up for the late night or to start counting again from one. I'd advise against counting nights at all. A streak makes one slip feel like a collapse, and then the collapse seems to license a week of them.

It's worth asking what brought it back. Often the answer is that your own time quietly vanished from the early evening, and the late stretch came back to fill the space. In that case the late night was useful information. The need hadn't gone anywhere, and it won't be argued out of existence. If the hour at eight has stopped working, find out why and move it, shrink it or defend it. Twenty minutes that really happen are worth more than an hour that usually doesn't.

Sometimes the answer is that the days have become too much, and no arrangement of the evening will fix that. If every day leaves you emptied out, then the problem is the load and not the bedtime. It might call for a hard conversation at work or at home, or for help with caring. It might mean dropping something you've been carrying for years. I can't tell you which from here. I can say that those decisions go better on enough sleep.

There are also times when the right response is a doctor. I raised some of these before chapter 1, and here's the fuller list. See a GP in any of these cases.

- You go to bed at a sensible time and lie awake for a long while, or wake in the night and can't get back to sleep. If this has gone on for months, or it's making daily life hard to cope with, or changing your habits hasn't helped, see a GP. The usual treatment is a form of cognitive behavioural therapy designed for insomnia. Sleeping pills are rarely prescribed now, and then only for short periods.
- You stay up because you dread lying in the dark with your thoughts. That's different from wanting time to yourself, and it often goes with anxiety or low mood, which are treatable.
- You sleep a reasonable number of hours and are still very tired every day, or you've been told that you snore loudly, gasp, or stop breathing in your sleep. Those can be signs of sleep apnoea, which needs testing.
- Your mood has been low for weeks, or you've lost interest in things, whether or not sleep improves.

- You've had thoughts of harming yourself. That needs urgent help the same day, from your GP, an emergency service or a crisis line.

Two smaller cautions. If tiredness is making you unsafe to drive, treat that as seriously as you would drink. And keep taking any prescribed medication as directed. If you think a medicine is affecting your sleep, raise it with whoever prescribed it before changing anything.

## Ten o'clock again

Go back to the evening in chapter 1, with a few things moved.

You get in at half past six, and the early part is as busy as ever. The children are down by eight. The kitchen isn't finished, and you walk past it. From eight until a quarter to nine you sit in the good chair with a novel you've been meaning to read for a year.

Someone comes down once for water. At a quarter to nine you do the lunches, leave the washing for tomorrow, lock up and brush your teeth. You watch one episode of something with your partner, having said beforehand that it's one.

At ten you yawn, and your eyes are heavy. There's a brief pull to stay, which is the old habit, and it has less behind it than it used to. You've already had your hour, so the day did have something of yours in it. You turn off the lamp and go up. The phone is charging in the kitchen. You're asleep by twenty past.

None of this is dramatic, and I don't want to oversell it. Your days will still be full. Some evenings the hour won't happen, and some nights you'll stay up anyway. The studies I've leaned on are mostly small, and the method is untested as a whole. Sleep won't solve an overloaded life.

What I'm confident of is the narrow claim I started with. You do need time of your own, and you should have it. Midnight is the worst place to get it. You have it there in the poorest condition, and

you pay for it out of tomorrow. It also lets the rest of the day go on leaving you out. Your own time can go somewhere better, even if that place is smaller than you'd like.

If you do one thing after closing this book, do the first half of the rule before the second. Tomorrow, find where your hour is going to be, and take it before you're tired. Then, when ten o'clock comes and you notice you're tired, go to bed.

## Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical advice, and it's no substitute for a doctor who knows your situation.

I've kept sources out of the chapters so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes the split between the need and the method in chapter 1, the list of payments and costs in chapter 2, all of chapter 8 apart from the point about anxiety, all of chapter 10, and the six places to look in chapter 11.

A general caution applies. Research on putting off bedtime is recent. Most of it relies on people's own reports of when they meant to go to bed and when they did. Much of it comes from one group of researchers in the Netherlands. The sleep experiments are better established, but were mostly done on small groups of healthy young adults in laboratories.

**Chapter 2.** Control over leisure time as one of four recovery experiences is from Sonnentag and Fritz, "The Recovery Experience Questionnaire: development and validation of a measure for assessing recuperation and unwinding from work", *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 12, 2007, pages 204 to 221. The other three are detachment from work, relaxation and mastery.

**Chapter 3.** Kroese, Evers, Adriaanse and de Ridder, "Bedtime procrastination: a self-regulation perspective on sleep insufficiency in the general population", *Journal of Health*

Psychology 21, 2016, pages 853 to 862. The same group introduced the idea in Kroese, De Ridder, Evers and Adriaanse, "Bedtime procrastination: introducing a new area of procrastination", *Frontiers in Psychology* 5, 2014, article 611. The interviews are Nauts, Kamphorst, Stut, De Ridder and Anderson, "The explanations people give for going to bed late: a qualitative study of the varieties of bedtime procrastination", *Behavioral Sleep Medicine* 17, 2019, pages 753 to 762. Seventeen people is a small number, chosen because they often went to bed late, and none had a diagnosed sleep disorder or worked shifts. The third pattern they found was people who delayed bed because they believed they had to be very tired before they could fall asleep. The authors suggest some of those people may have undiagnosed insomnia, which is the reason for the first caution at the front of this book.

**Chapter 4.** Reinecke, Hartmann and Eden, "The guilty couch potato: the role of ego depletion in reducing recovery through media use", *Journal of Communication* 64, 2014, pages 569 to 589. The idea of ego depletion that the study draws on has been disputed since, and I've relied only on the link the survey found between guilt and poorer recovery.

**Chapter 5.** The figure of seven to nine hours is from the NHS page on insomnia. Van Dongen, Maislin, Mullington and Dinges, "The cumulative cost of additional wakefulness: dose-response effects on neurobehavioral functions and sleep physiology from chronic sleep restriction and total sleep deprivation", *Sleep* 26, 2003, pages 117 to 126. Palmer, Bower, Cho, Clementi, Lau, Oosterhoff and Alfano, "Sleep loss and emotion: a systematic review and meta-analysis of over 50 years of experimental research", *Psychological*

Bulletin 150, 2024, pages 440 to 463. The findings on positive emotion and anxiety held across all kinds of sleep loss. The findings on negative emotion and on symptoms of depression were mixed.

**Chapter 6.** Depner, Melanson, Eckel, Snell-Bergeon, Perreault, Bergman, Higgins, Guerin, Stothard, Morton and Wright, "Ad libitum weekend recovery sleep fails to prevent metabolic dysregulation during a repeating pattern of insufficient sleep and weekend recovery sleep", *Current Biology* 29, 2019, pages 957 to 967. The extra weekend sleep came to about 1.1 hours in total above the participants' normal amount. Women slept less extra than men. The argument about trading poor hours for good ones is mine.

**Chapter 7.** Chang, Aeschbach, Duffy and Czeisler, "Evening use of light-emitting eReaders negatively affects sleep, circadian timing, and next-morning alertness", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, 2015, pages 1232 to 1237. Exelmans and Van den Bulck, "Bedtime, shuteye time and electronic media: sleep displacement is a two-step process", *Journal of Sleep Research* 26, 2017, pages 364 to 370. The participants were aged 18 to 25 and recruited by convenience, and the figures for poor sleep were 3.3, 6.1 and 9.3 times for gaps of up to half an hour, up to an hour and over an hour. Kühnel, Syrek and Dreher, "Why don't you go to bed on time? A daily diary study on the relationships between chronotype, self-control resources and the phenomenon of bedtime procrastination", *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, 2018, article 77. That an engaging programme overrides sleepiness is my own suggestion. The idea that pressure to sleep builds while you're

awake and falls while you sleep is from Borbély, "A two process model of sleep regulation", Human Neurobiology 1, 1982, pages 195 to 204. Applying it to a doze on the sofa is my step. The caffeine study is Drake, Roehrs, Shambroom and Roth, "Caffeine effects on sleep taken 0, 3, or 6 hours before going to bed", Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine 9, 2013, pages 1195 to 1200. The dose was 400 milligrams, which is a lot to take at once.

**Chapter 9.** Kamphorst, Nauts, De Ridder and Anderson, "Too depleted to turn in: the relevance of end-of-the-day resource depletion for reducing bedtime procrastination", Frontiers in Psychology 9, 2018, article 252. The contrary finding is in the Kühnel paper above. Moving the bedtime chores earlier is my suggestion. It follows the general principle that easier actions get done more often.

**Chapter 12.** That body clocks differ between people is from the Kühnel paper and the wider literature it cites. That they tend to move earlier with age is widely reported in sleep research, and I haven't cited a single study for it.

**Chapter 13.** Valshtein, Oettingen and Gollwitzer, "Using mental contrasting with implementation intentions to reduce bedtime procrastination: two randomised trials", Psychology and Health 35, 2020, pages 275 to 301. There were 383 students in the first trial and 221 in the second, followed for three weeks and one week. Bedtimes were reported by the students themselves. Plans in "when, then" form are from Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement", Advances in

Experimental Social Psychology 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The six-part method as a whole is mine and hasn't been tested as a package by anyone.

**Chapter 14.** The advice on insomnia and sleep apnoea follows the NHS pages on those conditions, read in September 2026. They're written for England, and services differ elsewhere.