

You've checked already

A short book about checking the door, the oven and the email you sent, and feeling less sure each time

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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 lock the door, walk to the car, and go back to push the handle. You turn the hob off and look at it again from the doorway. You send an email and open it in the sent folder to read it through, and then once more. Each check is meant to settle something, and each one leaves you a little less settled than before, so you check again.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that checking makes sense from the inside. The things you're checking matter, a check costs seconds, and memory does fail. The second is that repeated checking does the opposite of what it's for. The research on this is unusually clear. Checking something again doesn't make you more accurate. It makes your memory of the first check dimmer and less detailed, and it's the dimness you feel as doubt. The doubt you're trying to remove is produced by the checking. The third is practical. You check once, slowly, with attention, and then you let the doubt arrive and pass without going back. Chapters 17 to 20 cover how.

This book doesn't say that checking is silly or that the things you check don't matter. A locked door and a cold hob matter. It says that the first check does the job and the rest undo it.

Three cautions.

If checking takes up a lot of your time, if you can't leave the house or get to sleep until rituals are complete, if the checking causes real distress or is getting in the way of work or relationships, that may be obsessive compulsive disorder. It's a common condition, it's nobody's fault, and it's treatable. The NHS says you can see a GP or refer yourself directly to an NHS talking therapies service. The ideas in this book come from the same research that the treatment is built on, but a book isn't treatment, and if that description fits you, please get the real thing. Chapter 21 says more.

If your checking is about a baby, such as repeatedly checking they're breathing, and it comes with unwanted, frightening thoughts, the NHS describes this too, and says to speak to a GP or health visitor.

And if you check because you've genuinely been leaving things, the hob on, the door open, more than once in recent months, that's worth mentioning to a GP, especially if it's new. The habit in this book is one where the checks keep finding everything fine.

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 past eight

It's twenty past eight on a Tuesday morning. You've locked the front door and you're halfway to the car when you stop. Did you lock it? You remember the key going in. You think you remember the click. You go back and push the handle, and it's locked, and you walk to the car again, and as you put your seatbelt on you find that the memory of pushing the handle is already less clear than it should be. You look at the door from the driver's seat. It looks locked. Doors do.

At the lights at the end of the road you think about the straighteners. You turned them off. You can see yourself doing it, sort of. You can also see yourself doing it yesterday, and the two pictures are hard to tell apart. You consider going back. You don't, and the thought sits in your chest until about ten, when work crowds it out.

At eleven you send an email to a client. It took twenty minutes to write and you read it through before sending. After it's gone you open it in the sent folder and read it again. There's a comma that could have been a full stop. You read it a third time, looking for something worse, and don't find anything, and don't feel better.

In bed at eleven you check that the alarm is set. It's set. You put the phone down and pick it up again, because you can't quite remember whether the little bell symbol was there or you just expected it to be. It's there. You lie down. A minute later you wonder whether you checked the right day.

Nothing has gone wrong. Nothing has gone wrong for years. The door has always been locked and the hob has always been off and the emails have all been fine. That, oddly, is part of what keeps the habit going, because every check has confirmed that checking was sensible, and none of them has confirmed that it was needed.

I'll use a few terms throughout. **The check** is the act of looking to confirm that something's as it should be. **The once** is the first check, done at the right moment, and it's the one this book will defend. **The recheck** is any check after that, including the one from the car and the one in the sent folder. **The doubt** is the feeling that arrives after a check, that you can't be quite sure you did it, or did it properly. **The picture** is your memory of the check, which starts clear and, as chapter 3 will show, gets less clear each time you go back. And **the fade** is that loss of clarity, which is the thing you've been mistaking for a bad memory.

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

The recheck finds nothing. Almost always. The door was locked. The hob was off. You've done thousands of rechecks and they've caught, perhaps, one thing, years ago, and you remember it perfectly.

Each recheck makes the next one likelier. You didn't feel sure after the second look either.

The doubt is about your memory and not about the door. You don't think the lock is broken. You think you might not remember locking it.

The picture gets worse the more you look at it. By the third check you can't say whether you're remembering this morning or Monday.

And you know it's excessive. You've said so to yourself while going back. Knowing hasn't helped, because the doubt feels like information and you can't argue with information.

Try one thing before reading on, and don't change anything yet. For a week, keep a tally. Each time you recheck anything, make a mark, and note what it was and whether it was fine. At the end of the week count the marks and count the times something wasn't fine. Keep the two numbers.

Why checking seems sensible

I don't want to start by telling you the door is locked. You know it's probably locked. That was never the point, and hearing it makes you feel patronised. There are good reasons why you check, and they deserve stating before anything is said against them.

The things you check matter. A house left open, a hob left on, an email with the wrong figure to a client. These aren't trivial, and being careful about them is what a responsible adult does.

A check is cheap. Ten seconds to walk back and push a handle. Against the cost of a burglary, that's nothing. On those terms, checking is a bargain.

Memory does fail. Everyone has driven somewhere and not remembered the drive. Everyone has put something down and lost it. You know that your memory of locking the door might be wrong, because memories are.

It feels responsible. Going back is what a careful person does. Not going back, with a doubt in your chest, feels like negligence, and if something did happen you'd never forgive yourself.

It works, briefly. The moment your hand is on the locked handle, the doubt goes. That's real, and it's the reason you go back. Chapter 10 looks at how long it lasts.

And it caught something once. Years ago you went back and the door was open, or the iron was on. That memory is vivid, and it's the case for the defence every morning.

I think the habit is trying to meet four needs, and this list is mine. You want the house to be safe. You want to be a person who's careful. You want the doubt to stop. And you want to be certain, rather than merely confident, before you leave.

All four are reasonable. My argument is that the habit serves them badly. The house is exactly as safe after the first check as after the fourth. Being careful is the first check, and the rest is something else. The doubt doesn't stop with rechecking. It's fed by it. And certainty of the kind you're after isn't available from any number of looks, which is why the fourth look leaves you where the first one did, minus the clear picture you started with.

"If I check again, I'll be sure"

This is the belief the habit rests on, and it's the one that turns out to be exactly wrong. It says that doubt is a shortage of evidence, and another look supplies evidence, so another look reduces doubt. It seems obvious. It's the opposite of what happens.

Marcel van den Hout and Merel Kindt, in Maastricht, set out to explain something puzzling about people who check compulsively. They check a great deal and remain unsure. If checking worked as evidence, the most thorough checkers should be the most certain. They're the least. The researchers built a computer animation of a gas stove and had healthy volunteers, with no diagnosis, check it. One group checked the stove over and over. A comparison group checked light bulbs over and over instead, and the stove only at the start and end. Then everyone was tested on what they remembered about their last stove check.

Across three experiments, with about a hundred people in all, repeated checking of the stove did nothing to accuracy. People who'd checked many times remembered the state of the stove as correctly as people who hadn't. What changed was the quality of the memory. The recollections of the repeated checkers were less vivid and less detailed, and their confidence in their memory was lower. The light bulb group showed none of this. Checking the stove again and again hadn't made anyone wrong. It had made them unsure of being right.

Adam Radomsky and colleagues in Montreal then did the same thing with a real stove. Fifty students turned a kitchen stove on and off and checked it, in a set routine, nineteen times, while a comparison group did the routine on a tap. After the repeated stove checking, memory confidence, vividness and detail all fell. After the tap checking they didn't. The paper's title is "Repeated checking really does cause memory distrust", and the "really" is there because the first finding had seemed too strange to believe.

Look at what this means for the walk back to the door. The first check gave you a clear picture. You went back and pushed the handle, and the picture was now two pictures, and less clear. If you'd gone back a third time it would have been less clear still. By the fourth you'd have had a general, fuzzy sense of having checked, with no particular check in it. That fuzziness is the doubt. You produced it by checking. The lock was never in question.

I'd put it as plainly as I can. Doubt after checking isn't a report on the door. It's a report on what checking has done to the picture. Taking it as a reason to check again is taking the symptom as an instruction to repeat the cause.

"But I really can't remember doing it"

You may accept the experiments and still say that they don't describe you, because you genuinely can't remember. It's not that the picture is a bit faded. It's that when you reach for it, there's nothing there. Surely that's a real gap, and a real gap calls for a look.

Let me describe what van den Hout and Kindt think is going on, because it explains the gap. When you do something for the first time, you take in its particulars. The feel of the key, the sound of the click, the light on the door. That's perceptual processing, in their terms, and it's what makes a memory vivid. When you do the same thing again, it's familiar. The mind doesn't need the particulars any more, because it knows what a locked door is, and so it processes the act as a concept, "locked the door", rather than as an event with details. Familiarity pushes out perception. And a memory made of concept rather than perception feels thin. When you reach for it, you find "I locked the door" and no picture, and the absence of a picture feels like the absence of a memory.

Meredith Coles, Radomsky and Betty Horng found something in a real-stove study that fits this. After repeated checking, people relied more on a sense of knowing that they'd checked and less on remembering it. Knowing is "of course I did". Remembering is "I did, and here's the click". The repeated checkers had lost the second and kept the first. That's your experience at the lights. You know you turned the straighteners off. You can't remember it. The gap is the difference between those two, and it's a gap that checking makes, not one that checking fills.

The same study found something else worth having. The changes appeared after a relatively small number of checks on a single occasion. You don't need nineteen. A few will do it. So the person who checks the door three times in the morning is well into the range where the picture is going.

There's one more thing to notice about the gap. It's a gap in the memory of the check, not in the door. Accuracy in every one of these experiments was fine. People who couldn't picture the stove still knew, correctly, what state it was in. So when you say you can't remember, what's true is that you can't picture it. What isn't true is that you don't know. You know. You locked the door, the way you lock it every morning, and the knowing is the reliable part.

"Going over it in my head doesn't count"

At the lights you didn't go back for the straighteners. Instead you replayed the moment. The bathroom, the plug, your hand on the switch. You ran it three or four times, trying to catch a detail that would settle it. That felt like a reasonable compromise. You weren't checking. You were just thinking.

Radomsky and Gillian Alcolado tested exactly this. Sixty-two students checked a stove either physically or in their heads, repeatedly. Mental checking meant going over the previous check in imagination, the way you did at the lights. The result was that repeated mental checking reduced memory confidence, vividness and detail for the mental checks, just as physical checking did for physical ones. There was also a slight drop in accuracy in each case, which the physical-only studies hadn't found. Going over it in your head is checking. It fades the picture the same way.

This matters because the replay is the recheck that goes everywhere with you. You can leave the door behind. You can't leave your head behind, and so a person who's stopped walking back to the door can still spend the drive to work checking it, and arrive as unsure as if they'd gone back four times. The replay also has no natural end, because there's no handle to push. You can run the bathroom scene until you get to work, and each run makes the scene less trustworthy.

I'd add my own observation about why the replay is so tempting. It feels like remembering, and remembering seems harmless. But there's a difference between a memory that surfaces on its own

and a memory you go looking for, over and over, with a question attached. The second is a search, and the search is for a detail that will end the doubt, and the searching wears the detail away. By the fourth run you're not remembering this morning. You're constructing a plausible morning from all the mornings, and you know it, and that's the doubt.

So the rule this book will come to has to cover the replay as well as the walk back. Checking once means once in the world and none in the head. That's harder, and chapter 18 is about how.

"My memory's just bad"

Underneath a good deal of checking is a belief about yourself. Your memory's poor. Other people can lock a door and know they've done it. You can't, so you have to look. On that view, the checking is a sensible adjustment to a personal weakness.

There are two things to say. The first is that in every experiment described so far, the checkers' memories were fine. Their accuracy didn't drop. Their confidence did. If your memory were bad, the rechecks would sometimes find the door open. Your tally from chapter 1 will tell you how often that happens, and I'd guess the answer is never, or once. That isn't a bad memory. It's a memory you've stopped trusting.

The second is that the belief does damage of its own. Alcolado and Radomsky gave ninety-one students a memory test and then false feedback. Some were told they'd done well. Some were told they'd done badly. Neither was true. Then everyone did two more memory tasks and rated how much they wanted to check their answers. The people who'd been told their memory was poor wanted to check more. Nothing about their memories had changed. What had changed was what they believed about them, and the belief was enough to produce the urge.

So "my memory's bad" isn't a neutral description that happens to lead to checking. It's a cause of checking, on its own, even when it's false. And the checking then fades the picture, which looks like

evidence that the memory is bad, which strengthens the belief, which produces more checking. That's a loop with no door in it. The door has been locked the whole time.

I'd invite you to try describing yourself differently, not as a kindness but as a matter of accuracy. You have an ordinary memory that has been told, thousands of times, that it can't be trusted, and has responded by handing every decision to the recheck. Memories that aren't used get quieter. The way to get the trust back isn't to test it more. It's to do the once, properly, and act on it, and let it turn out to have been right, which it will, and let that count.

There's a distinction worth keeping. Some people do have memory difficulties, from illness, injury, medication or age, and for them a check may be a reasonable aid. If you've been leaving things on, or if the forgetting is new and broader than the door, that's a matter for a GP. The habit in this book is one where the memory is fine and the trust has gone.

"Better safe than sorry"

This is the defence that feels most like adult sense. Even if the recheck mostly finds nothing, the consequences of the one time it would have found something are so bad that the habit is worth it. Ten seconds against a house fire. Who wouldn't take that deal?

Rachman, who spent a career on this, set out how the deal gets sized. Compulsive checking, he proposed, happens when a person feels a special responsibility for preventing harm, mostly to others, and isn't sure the threat has been dealt with. How much they check is set by three multipliers. How responsible they feel. How likely the harm seems. How serious it would be. Raise any of the three and the checking rises with it. That was written about clinical checking, but the multipliers are ordinary, and I think you'll recognise them in your own mornings. The straighteners aren't just a fire risk. They're a fire that would be your fault, that feels quite possible on the days you're tired, and that would take the house.

Look at what the recheck does to each multiplier. It does nothing to the probability. The door was locked before you pushed it. Pushing it didn't lock it more. It does nothing to the seriousness. A fire is as bad after the check as before. What it acts on, briefly, is the feeling of responsibility, which is why it gives a moment's relief. And then, on Rachman's account, something strange happens. He describes a self-perpetuating loop in which checking produces paradoxical increases in the sense of responsibility and in the perceived likelihood of harm, along with the reduced memory confidence

the last chapters described. The more you check, the more it feels like yours to prevent and the more possible the harm seems. The check doesn't shrink the multipliers. It grows them.

Van den Hout and Kindt found a hint of this too. Across five experiments with their stove animation, repeated checking not only undermined trust in memory. There were indications that it also reduced the sense of having acted responsibly. The person who's checked five times feels less like someone who's dealt with it than the person who checked once. That's backwards, and it's what the experiments show.

So "better safe than sorry" is right, and it's an argument for the once. Safe is the door locked and checked properly at the moment of locking it. Sorry is what the rechecks make you feel, because each one leaves you with a fainter picture and a larger sense that the house depends on you. The safe act was done at twenty past eight. Everything after it was the opposite of safety, dressed as care.

"I can't leave until it feels right"

Some readers will recognise a different criterion. It's not that they're weighing risks. It's that they can't leave until something inside says done. They push the handle and wait for the feeling. Sometimes it comes on the first push. Sometimes it takes four. The checking stops when the feeling arrives, and not before.

I want to look at that feeling, because it's doing a job it can't do. What follows is my own reasoning, on top of the research above.

The feeling of certainty is not a measurement of the door. It's a state in you, and it depends on things that have nothing to do with locks. You're tired. You're late. You had a row last night. There's a difficult meeting at ten. On those mornings the feeling is slow to come, and the door gets checked four times, and the door was exactly as locked as on the morning it came at once. If the feeling were tracking the lock, it would be the same every day, because the lock is.

Worse, the feeling is being worn down by the checking that's meant to summon it. Chapter 3's finding is that each recheck fades the picture, and a faded picture is precisely what "doesn't feel right" is made of. So you're waiting for a sense of clarity while doing the one thing that removes clarity. On a bad morning that's a loop that can run until you're late, and the eventual leaving is exhaustion, not certainty.

The way out is to change what decides. Not the feeling. The check. You did the once. You saw the door lock, you heard it, you said so. That's the evidence, and it was complete at the moment it happened. Whether it feels right afterwards is a fact about your morning, and you can note it and leave anyway. The doubt is allowed to come with you in the car. It isn't allowed to turn the car round.

That sounds cold, and for the first week it will feel like walking away from an unlocked house. It isn't. The house is locked. What you're walking away from is a feeling, and chapter 18 is about how to do that without it being unbearable. What I'd ask you to notice for now is that the feeling of certainty was never reliable, and that you've been letting it decide anyway. Deciding by the check, done once and well, is more careful, not less.

"I only do it when I'm tired or stressed"

You may have noticed that the habit isn't steady. On a good morning you lock the door and go. On a bad one, after a poor night or before a hard day, you're back at the handle three times. That seems to you like evidence that the checking is sensible. When you're tired you're more likely to forget, so you check more. What could be more reasonable?

I'd look at it the other way round. What follows is mostly my own reasoning, with Rachman's model behind it.

Go back to the three multipliers from chapter 7. How responsible you feel, how likely the harm seems, how bad it would be. None of them is fixed. All three rise when you're tired, anxious or under pressure, because tiredness and anxiety make every threat feel closer and every duty feel heavier. So on a bad morning the doubt is louder, and the loudness has nothing to do with the door. It's a report on your night. The door is locked in exactly the way it was on Friday, when you didn't go back at all.

There's a second thing that happens on bad mornings. You're distracted, so the once is done on autopilot, without the senses or the sentence. That produces a thin picture, and a thin picture invites the recheck, and the recheck fades it further. So the bad morning gives you a louder doubt and a weaker memory at the same time, and the two together feel like proof that you can't be trusted when tired.

The answer isn't to check more when tired. It's to do the once more carefully when tired, because that's when it's most likely to be skipped. Two seconds longer at the door. The sentence said slowly. Then the same rule as any other day. Leave, and let the doubt be a feeling.

It helps to know in advance which mornings will be bad. After a late night, before an interview, in a difficult week. On those mornings, expect the doubt to be loud and treat its loudness as a mood, the way you'd treat irritability or a headache. "I'm tired, so the doubt is loud today" is a sentence that takes most of the force out of it, because it names the real cause. The alternative, "I'm tired, so I'd better check," takes the loudness as information about the house, and it isn't.

One caution. If stress has made the checking spread quickly and take up real time, that's the moment to reread the first caution in this book. A habit that grows sharply under strain is one worth mentioning to someone.

"It calms me down"

It does. Your hand on the locked handle, and the doubt goes, and for a moment you're fine. That's not imaginary, and it's the whole reason the habit exists. Anything that removes an unpleasant feeling at once will be done again.

But look at how long the calm lasts. Back in the car, the seatbelt on, and already the picture of the handle is softening. By the lights it's the straighteners. The relief bought you ninety seconds. Then the doubt is back, and it has grown, because the picture it feeds on is fainter than it was.

There's a pattern here that's worth naming, and it's the same one that runs through every habit of reassurance. Something makes you anxious. You do a thing that relieves the anxiety for a short time. The relief teaches you to do the thing. And because the thing doesn't touch the cause, the anxiety returns, and the thing is done again, and each time the relief is shorter and the return is quicker. Rachman's loop from chapter 7 is this pattern applied to checking, with the extra twist that the checking damages the memory it's meant to confirm.

What I'd ask you to notice is the difference between calm and certainty. The recheck gives calm, briefly. It can't give certainty, because certainty of the kind you want, a guarantee that nothing has been left, isn't on offer from any number of looks. The door could be locked and a window open. The hob could be off and the toaster plugged in. There's always another thing, and the doubt, once it's learned that checking calms it, will find one. This is why

people who check the door come to check the windows, and then the taps, and then the car. The calm is portable. It goes wherever the doubt goes, and the doubt goes wherever the calm has been.

So the calm is real, short, and expensive, and it's the thing you have to give up to end the habit. Not the safety. The safety was the once. What has to go is the ninety seconds of relief from the recheck, and in its place there'll be a few minutes of doubt that you sit through, which chapter 18 describes. The doubt will pass on its own, and each time it does, the next one is smaller. That's the trade. Ninety seconds of relief that grows the doubt, against a few minutes of doubt that shrinks it.

"Everyone checks"

You may have noticed that your partner goes back to the door too. Your mother checks the gas. A colleague admits to reading sent emails. If everyone does it, it can hardly be a problem, and this book is making a fuss about ordinary care.

Everyone does, or nearly. Muris and colleagues asked a hundred and fifty ordinary people about their rituals, and more than half said they had them. Their rituals were less frequent, less intense and less bound up with bad feeling than the compulsions of people with a diagnosis, but in content they were much the same. Checking, ordering, counting, washing. The researchers' conclusion was that there's a continuity between ordinary rituals and clinical ones. It's a matter of degree, not kind. Experts shown the two lists often couldn't tell them apart.

I'd take two things from that. The first is that you're not odd. Checking is one of the most human things there is, and the once is something everyone should do. The second is that the fact that everyone does it tells you nothing about whether it's costing you. Most people do it a little. Some do it a lot. The mechanism in chapter 3 works the same way at every level. A person who rechecks the door once a week is losing a little clarity once a week. A person who rechecks it four times a morning is losing a lot every day, and has noticed the loss and called it a bad memory.

The question isn't whether you check. It's whether the checking is answering the doubt or feeding it. If you check once and leave, and the doubt at the lights is a passing thought, you're fine, and you can

stop reading. If you check and the doubt comes back and you check again and it comes back bigger, you're in the loop, and the loop doesn't care that it's common.

There's a line somewhere along this continuum where the habit becomes the condition, and the NHS puts it in terms of time, distress and interference. If checking takes up a lot of your day, causes real distress, or gets in the way of your life, that's the point at which it has a name and a treatment, and chapter 21 says what to do. Most readers of this book are well before that point. But the direction of travel matters, and the direction of a rechecking habit is always towards more.

"The email's different, I might have got it wrong"

The door is one kind of check. The email is another, and it deserves its own chapter, because the argument for it sounds stronger. A locked door is locked or it isn't. An email might contain a mistake, a wrong figure, a name misspelt, a tone that reads badly. Reading it again might really find something. So the sent folder is a different case.

I'd grant part of that and then look at the rest. Reading an email before you send it is the once. It's exactly the check this book defends. You wrote it, you read it through, you fixed the comma, you sent it. The question is what the reading after sending is for.

It can't change anything. The email has gone. Whatever it contains, the client has it. So the reread isn't a check in the sense of a chance to put something right. It's a search for a reason to feel bad or good about something that's over, and it will find one, because any piece of writing read with a suspicious eye has something in it. The comma that might have been a full stop. A sentence that could be read two ways if you tried. The third reading finds these because it's looking for them, and having found them it feels worse, not better, and there's nothing to be done, so you read a fourth time to see whether it's really that bad.

This is the fade from chapter 3, applied to a piece of writing instead of a door. The first time you read the email, you read what it said. By the third, you're reading your own doubt about it, and the words have gone flat and strange the way any sentence does when

you stare at it. You can't tell any more whether the tone is fine, because you've lost the ability to read it as the client will, which is once, quickly, on the way to something else.

What follows is my own suggestion. Do the reading before sending, and do it properly, with the attention chapter 17 describes. Read it once for the facts and figures. Read it once for the tone, aloud if you can, as the person receiving it. Fix what needs fixing. Send. Then the sent folder is closed, and if the doubt arrives at eleven, it's the same doubt as the one at the lights, and it gets the same answer. The email was read, twice, by a careful person, and that's the once.

If something in it really was wrong, you'll find out the way everyone does, which is that someone tells you, and you send a correction, and the world goes on. That happens to everyone occasionally and it isn't prevented by the fourth reading. It's prevented, as far as it can be, by the reading before, and the reading before is the only one that can act.

"What if this is the one time?"

Every rechecker has a story. The morning, years ago, when they went back and the iron was on, or the door was open, or the email had the wrong attachment. That story is retold every time the doubt arrives. It's the one time, and it proves the habit was worth it.

I want to take the story seriously and then look at what it proves.

It proves that things are occasionally left. Of course they are.

People are tired and distracted and the morning is full. The question is which check catches them. Think about the morning of the story. You went back and the iron was on. Why was it on? Because you hadn't turned it off, which means you hadn't done the once, or had done it while thinking about something else. The recheck caught what the first check had missed, because there hadn't really been a first check. That's an argument for doing the once properly. It isn't an argument for rechecking a check that was done.

Now look at your tally from chapter 1. However many marks it has, the number of times something was wrong is close to zero, and if it isn't zero, look at whether the thing that was wrong had been properly checked in the first place. In my observation, the story of the one time almost always turns out to be a story of a missed once, and never a story of a good check that somehow came undone.

There's also the arithmetic of the story. One vivid case, years ago, against thousands of rechecks since that found nothing. Rachman's multipliers explain why the one case weighs so much. It raises the perceived probability of harm, and a raised probability keeps the checking going, and the thousands of clean checks don't lower it again because clean checks aren't memorable. You remember the open door. You don't remember the four thousand locked ones. So the story grows and the evidence against it doesn't, and the habit feels justified every morning by an event from years ago.

I'd put it this way. The one time is real, and it's the reason to check once, well, every time. It's not a reason to check four times, because the fourth check protects you from nothing the first one didn't, and it takes away the clear picture that would have let you leave.

"I'll just ask, it's no trouble"

There are rechecks that don't look like rechecks. "Did I lock the door?" said to your partner in the car. A photo of the hob taken on the way out, to look at later. The app that shows the smart lock is engaged. Texting home to ask someone to look. Each of these feels like a sensible modern alternative to walking back, and each is the recheck by another route.

Take asking. Chris Parrish and Radomsky interviewed people who seek reassurance and check repeatedly, and found the two go together, and that people with a diagnosis sought reassurance about the same kinds of threat they checked for, fire and theft among them. Asking your partner is checking by proxy. It works the same way, gives the same short calm, and has an extra cost, which is that your partner is now part of the loop. They say yes, you locked it, and they've learned that the question will come again tomorrow, and they've begun, without meaning to, to watch you lock the door so that they can answer. Your doubt has become their job. The kindest thing they could do would be to stop answering, and the kindest thing you could do is stop asking. Chapter 21 has a form of words for both of you.

Take the photo. It seems clever. A picture of the hob, taken as you leave, settles the question for good. Except that the photo has to be looked at, and looking at it is a check, and the fade applies. You look once and feel fine. You look again at the lights, because the doubt has arrived, and the photo now seems ambiguous. Is that dial on zero or just near it? Was it taken this morning? You've moved the checking from the kitchen to your phone, and phones

are always with you, so the checking can now happen anywhere. The same goes for the app that shows the lock. It's a handle you can push from your desk, and you will.

The deeper problem, and this is my own reasoning, is that all of these keep the question open. A check that ends with you leaving and not looking back is a closed question. A photo, an app or a partner who'll answer is a question that's still available, and the doubt, once it knows a source of relief is available, will go to it. Every proxy is a door you can go back to.

So none of the proxies is a way round the habit. They're the habit with better technology. The way round is the same as it always was. The once, done properly, and then nothing. No photo. No app. No asking. Your partner will be relieved.

The circuit before bed

The morning has a mirror, and for many people the mirror is worse. The circuit before bed. Back door, front door, hob, oven, plugs, windows, the straighteners again. Done once, then again from the top because you can't remember the back door, then a third time because the second was rushed. Then bed, and the replay, and sometimes getting up. This chapter is my own suggestion for it, using the methods in chapters 17 and 18.

The circuit has two things that make it harder than the morning. There's no leaving. In the morning, the car is a deadline and it takes you away from the door. At night, the door is fifteen feet from the bed, all night, and the recheck is always available. And the replay has the whole of the dark to run in. Lying still with nothing to do is the perfect condition for going over the back door, and going over it, chapter 5 showed, is a check that fades the memory like any other.

So the circuit needs a firmer once than the morning does. Make a card, or a list on the fridge, with the four or five things on it in the order you meet them on the way to bed. Do the walk once, with the card, saying each item aloud as you do it. "Back door locked. Hob off. Plugs out. Front door locked." Put the card down. That's the once, and the whole circuit is one check, not five, because it was done as one walk with one purpose.

Then go up, and here's the rule. You don't come down. Not to look, not to touch, not to stand at the top of the stairs listening. If the doubt arrives in bed, and in the first week it will, you have the card

and you have the sentences, and you reach for those and not for the picture. "I did the circuit. I said each one." That's all the evidence there is, and it's complete.

The replay wants special attention at night, because it's the only recheck available without getting up, and it will present itself as harmless. Notice it starting. "That's a recheck." Turn over, or put the radio on low, or run through something else, the plot of a film, a list of anything. What matters is not to lie there searching the picture of the back door for a detail that will settle it, because the search is the thing that unsettles.

Some people worry that the card makes the circuit into a ritual. I understand the worry, and the difference is in what the card is for. A ritual is done until it feels right. The card is done once, in order, to make the recheck unnecessary, and then it's finished whether it feels right or not. If you find that the card is being done twice, that's the recheck wearing the card's clothes, and the answer is the same as for any recheck. Once, and then bed.

In my expectation, the circuit is the last part of the habit to go quiet, because the night gives the doubt so much room. It does go quiet. The first night you fall asleep without going over the back door, you'll notice in the morning that you slept, and that the house is as you left it, and that's a deposit.

What the checking costs

You may think of the habit as costing a minute a day and some private embarrassment. I think it costs more, and most of this chapter is my own reckoning. I'll say where a study comes in.

The picture. Every recheck fades the memory of the once. That's the finding in chapter 3, and it's the cost that makes all the others. You've spent years turning clear memories into fog, and you've called the fog a bad memory.

The trust. You don't believe your own recollection of the most routine acts of the day. That's a strange way to live, and it spreads. A person who can't trust that they locked the door begins not to trust that they sent the form, paid the bill, or said the right thing. Alcolado and Radomsky's experiment showed that low confidence in memory produces urges to check on its own. The habit has been manufacturing that confidence problem daily.

The morning. The first hour of the day, when you should be thinking about what's ahead, is spent on the door, the hob and the straighteners. Then the drive is spent on the replay. Work begins with a residue of doubt that takes until ten to clear.

Time and lateness. Small per check, and the tally will show the total. Rechecks are also why some people are late, and they say it's traffic.

The spread. Chapter 10 described how calm is portable and doubt follows it. A habit that began with the front door now covers the hob, the straighteners, the alarm, the sent folder and the car, and

it's still recruiting. The cost isn't the checks you do now. It's the ones the habit will find next year.

Other people. The partner who's learned to answer. The colleague who gets the "did you get my email" that's really "was my email all right". The child who watches you go back three times and learns that leaving the house is dangerous.

Responsibility, inflated. Rachman's loop and van den Hout's finding that repeated checking reduces the sense of having acted responsibly. You feel the house depends on you more than it does, and you feel less like someone who's dealt with it, and both feelings grow with the checks.

The self. Somewhere in there you became a person who checks. Anxious, unreliable in your own eyes, a bit of a joke to the family. None of that is true of you. It's true of the habit.

In return for all that, you've had ninety seconds of calm several times a day, each one paid for with a fainter picture and a larger doubt. That's the trade, laid out. I'd take the other side of it.

Checking once, properly

The first practical step is to make the once worth trusting. Most of the checking research points here. A check done with attention makes a vivid memory. A check done on autopilot makes a thin one, and a thin one is what invites the recheck. Everything in this chapter is my own method, built on the research earlier in the book.

Slow down at the moment. The door, the hob, the straighteners, the send button. For each, stop for two seconds. Not to worry. To look.

Use the senses, on purpose. Look at the lock. Feel the key turn. Listen for the click. Van den Hout and Kindt's account is that vividness comes from perceptual detail, and the details are only there to be stored if you attend to them. On the first check, you're gathering exactly what the recheck will later go looking for and fail to find.

Say it aloud, with the time. "Door locked, twenty past eight." "Hob off, all four." "Straighteners off, unplugged." Speaking it does two things. It makes the check an event with a sound in it, which is more memorable than a silent one. And it gives you a sentence to hand the doubt later. When the doubt arrives at the lights, you don't reach for a picture, which will have faded. You reach for the sentence, which won't.

Do it once, at the right moment. The right moment is when you're doing the thing. Locking the door is the check of the door. Turning off the hob is the check of the hob. Reading the email before sending is the check of the email. There's no separate checking stage. The act, done with attention, is the check.

Then leave. Walk to the car without looking back. This isn't a rule against looking back for the sake of it. It's that the once is complete, and anything after it starts the fade.

If you didn't do the once, go back and do it. This is the one exception, and it's important. If you get to the car and realise that you locked the door while on the phone and have no sentence and no picture, that's not doubt. That's a missing check. Go back, do the once properly, say the sentence, and then leave. The rule is one attentive check, not zero.

Keep the tally going. Each time you do the once and leave, make a mark. Each time you go back, make a different mark. Over a fortnight you'll see the first column grow and the second shrink, and you'll have a record of how many times the once was enough, which will be all of them.

The point of all this is to give you something to stand on. The recheck has been the thing you stood on, and it turned out to be sand. The once, done well, is rock. It's the same check everyone should do, done deliberately by someone who has decided that it's the last one.

Letting the doubt be a feeling

You've done the once and left. Now the doubt arrives, in the car or at the desk, and this chapter is about what to do with it. This is my own method, and the reasoning behind it is in chapters 3, 5 and 10.

Expect it. The doubt will come. For the first couple of weeks it will come as strongly as ever, because the habit has taught it to. Its arrival is not evidence that something's wrong. It's the habit doing what it does, and it will do it whether or not the door is locked, because it isn't about the door.

Name it. "That's the doubt." Or "That's the fade." Naming it takes it from something that seems to be about the door and puts it where it belongs, which is in your head as a feeling. It's a feeling you've had thousands of times, and on every one of those occasions the door was locked.

Reach for the sentence, not the picture. "Door locked, twenty past eight." You said it. That's the evidence, and it's complete. Don't try to picture the check. Trying to picture it is the replay, and chapter 5 showed that the replay is a check and fades the memory like any other. One sentence, once, and then you turn to something else.

Don't go back, and don't go over it. No walk to the door. No photo. No app. No asking. No replay. This is the whole of the change, and everything else in the chapter is there to make it possible.

Let it be uncomfortable. The doubt will be unpleasant for a few minutes. It has a shape, and the shape is that it rises, holds, and falls. Time it, if you like. Most people find, in my observation, that

it's noticeably smaller within ten minutes and gone within twenty, if it isn't fed. What feeds it is the recheck. What starves it is doing nothing.

Turn to the next thing. The radio, the road, the first job at work. Not as a trick to forget the door, but because the door is finished and the day isn't.

Notice what happens next. Nothing. You get home and the house is as you left it. That's a piece of evidence, and unlike the recheck it's real evidence, because it comes from the world and not from a faded picture. Let it count. Say to yourself, "I did the once and didn't go back and it was fine," and add it to the tally. Each of those is a deposit in the trust that the habit has been withdrawing from for years.

The first week is the hard one. The doubt is loud and the calm of the recheck is very available, and you'll go back a few times. When you do, note it and don't make anything of it. The second week the doubt is usually quieter, because it's been ignored a few times and it's learning. By the fourth, in my expectation, it's a passing thought at the lights, which is what it is for people who don't have the habit.

The email, the alarm and the things you can't touch

Some checks don't have a door to walk back to. This chapter is the method for those, and it's mine throughout.

The sent email. The once is before sending. Read it for facts, then read it for tone, aloud if you can, as the person receiving it. Then send, and the sent folder is closed for that email. If the doubt arrives, it gets the sentence. "Read it twice, sent it at eleven." If you find you can't stop opening the sent folder, move it out of sight in your email program, or set the folder to hide read items. Making the recheck harder is legitimate, because it's the availability of the check that keeps the doubt going.

The alarm. Set it, look at it, say it. "Alarm set, half past six, tomorrow." Put the phone face down, and it stays down. Picking it up again is the recheck, and the little bell will be no more convincing the second time. If you find you can't trust a phone alarm, buy a plain alarm clock with a physical switch, set it once, and let the phone stay in another room. A switch you can feel is a once that's easy to make vivid.

The bag, the passport, the tickets. Pack once, from a list, ticking each thing as it goes in. The list is the sentence. Then close the bag. If the doubt arrives at the station, the list is in your pocket and every item has a tick. You don't open the bag. You read the list.

The things you do on the way out. Most morning rechecks are about four or five things. Door, hob, straighteners, windows, taps. Put them on a card by the door, in the order you meet them, and do them as a single walk, once, saying each one. "Straighteners off. Hob off. Windows shut. Taps off. Door locked." Then the walk is the once for all of them, and the card is the sentence. Some people find this too much like a ritual, and I understand the worry. The difference is that it's done once and then finished, and the point of it is to make the recheck unnecessary rather than to make the checking feel right.

The thing you can't check at all. Sometimes the doubt lands on something with no check available. Did you say the wrong thing at the meeting? Did you offend someone last week? There's no door and no sent folder. The replay is the only recheck on offer, and chapter 5 showed what it does. These get the same treatment. Name it, reach for what you know, and don't go over it. If something really needs saying to someone, say it once, plainly, and then it's done.

The shape in every case is the same. One attentive act at the right moment. A sentence to hold. Then nothing. The things you can't touch are, if anything, easier than the door, because there's no handle to push and the only recheck available is the one in your head, and that one you can decline.

The decision

This chapter asks you to decide something. It comes late because at the start it would have sounded like the advice you've always been given, which is to stop checking. By now you've seen why that advice never landed, which is that the checking seemed like care, and why it's right anyway. Rechecking fades the picture and makes doubt. Going over it in your head is a recheck. The doubt is about the fade and not the door. The feeling of certainty isn't a measurement. The calm is short and grows the doubt. And the once, done with attention, is all the care the door needs.

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

I check once, with attention, and then I let the doubt be a feeling and not an instruction.

It has five parts, and each answers a chapter.

I do the once properly. Slow, with the senses, at the moment of doing the thing. I say it aloud, with the time.

I don't go back. No walk to the door, no photo, no app, no asking, no sent folder.

I don't go over it. The replay is a recheck. When I notice it starting, I reach for the sentence and turn to something else.

I let the doubt come and go. I name it, I sit through the few minutes, and I let the world's evidence count when I get home and everything's fine.

If there was no once, I go back and do it. One attentive check, not zero. That's the exception and it's part of the rule.

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 I'm halfway to the car and the doubt arrives, I'll say the sentence aloud and keep walking.

When I notice myself replaying the check in my head, I'll say "that's a recheck" and turn the radio on.

When I've sent an email and my hand goes to the sent folder, I'll close the program and start the next job.

I'll be honest about what to expect, and this is my expectation and not a finding. The first week will feel careless and slightly frightening. The doubt will be loud, and you'll go back a few times, and you'll spend some drives in a state you'd rather not be in. The second week it'll be quieter. Someone may notice you leaving the house without the usual circuit and say something, and you'll mind it.

Against that, you should find within a fortnight that the doubt is shorter and fainter, because it's not being fed. You should find that you can remember locking the door, because you're doing it once with attention instead of four times on autopilot. The mornings should get back the twenty minutes the habit had taken. And at

some point you'll be at the lights and notice that you're thinking about the meeting, not the straighteners, and that will be the first morning in years that started with the day and not the door.

When it's more than a habit, and other hard cases

When the checking has taken over. If it takes up a lot of your time, causes real distress, or interferes with work, relationships or leaving the house, the NHS describes that as obsessive compulsive disorder and says it's unlikely to get better without treatment. The main treatment is a talking therapy, usually cognitive behavioural therapy with exposure and response prevention, which involves facing the doubt without doing the compulsion, starting with the easiest situations. It's the same principle as this book, delivered by someone trained, with support, and it works for many people. You can see a GP or refer yourself directly to an NHS talking therapies service. Medicine can help too, and that's a conversation with a GP. Nothing here should delay that.

When the checking is about a baby. Checking a baby's breathing repeatedly, with unwanted and frightening thoughts, is something the NHS specifically describes. Speak to a GP or health visitor. It's common, it's treatable, and it isn't a sign of anything about you as a parent.

When you've actually been leaving things. If the hob really has been left on, or the door really has been left open, more than once recently, do the once from chapter 17 with more care, and mention the forgetting to a GP if it's new or spreading. A habit of rechecking is one thing. A memory that's changed is another, and it deserves a look.

When your partner asks you to check for them. Agree a sentence together. Something like "I'm not going to answer that, because you know the answer and answering makes it worse." Say it kindly and mean it. The first few times will be hard for both of you. It's the most useful thing you can do for someone in the loop.

When you're the one who's been asking. Tell your partner what you've learned and ask them to stop answering. Give them the sentence above. Then when you ask anyway, and you will, they can use it, and you can be grateful rather than hurt.

When you're away from home. Hotel rooms, other people's houses and hire cars all offer new things to check. Do the once, say the sentence, and treat the rest exactly as at home. The doubt is portable and so is the method.

When it's a high-stakes email. The contract, the resignation, the message to the ex. Read it more than twice before sending if it warrants it. Sleep on it if it warrants that. Then send, and close the folder. The stakes raise the care that goes into the once. They don't change what happens after.

When the doubt won't fade. Occasionally it holds for longer than twenty minutes. Let it. Do the next thing anyway. The doubt isn't dangerous, and it's not made smaller by attention. If doubt of this kind is with you most of the day, most days, that's a matter for a GP, whether or not the checking has taken over.

When someone else's habit is worse than yours. You may live with a checker. The kindest thing is not to join in and not to mock. Don't check for them, don't answer, and if it's taking over their life,

suggest, once, that they talk to a GP.

When you slip. You'll go back to the door, or open the sent folder, or ask. Note it, and note that the door was locked, and do the once tomorrow. One recheck doesn't restart anything. What restarts the habit is deciding that the recheck proved something.

Tuesday again

It's twenty past eight on a Tuesday morning, some weeks on. You lock the front door and stand for a second with your hand on it. "Door locked, twenty past eight." You walk to the car and get in.

At the end of the road, at the lights, the doubt arrives, as it does. Straighteners. You notice it. "That's the fade." You reach for the sentence, "Straighteners off, unplugged," which you said in the bathroom with your hand on the plug. You put the radio on. By the roundabout you're thinking about the meeting.

At eleven you send the email to the client. You read it twice before, once for the figures and once aloud for the tone, and changed a sentence. Then you sent it, and closed the program, and started the next job. The sent folder is somewhere you don't go now. You haven't looked in it for three weeks.

In bed, you set the alarm and say so. "Half past six, tomorrow." The phone goes face down on the far side of the room. You don't pick it up. Once, in the first week, you did, three times, and lay awake afterwards not sure whether you'd set Tuesday or Wednesday, and it was Tuesday, and you learned something.

It wasn't always like this. The first week was bad. You went back to the door on four mornings out of five and hated yourself for it, and then hated yourself for hating yourself, and wrote it all down anyway. The second week you went back twice. The third week you sat through a doubt at the lights that lasted the whole drive, and got to work, and did the day, and the house was fine, and that was

the day the doubt got smaller. Your partner stopped answering the question in week two, using the sentence you'd agreed, and it was awful for about three days, and then you stopped asking.

You've slipped since. A morning after a bad night when you did the whole circuit twice. An email to your manager that you read four times after sending. Both times you noted it, and noticed that nothing had been wrong, and the next day was ordinary.

The tally on the fridge has two columns. The first, the mornings you did the once and left, is long. The second, the mornings you went back, trails off after the third week. The third column, the one for times something was actually wrong, is empty. It was always going to be empty. You just hadn't been keeping the count.

If you've read this far and changed nothing yet, try one thing. Tomorrow morning, lock the door, look at it, and say aloud that it's locked and what time it is. Then walk to the car without turning round, and see what the doubt does when you don't feed it.

Notes

This book gives general information about an everyday habit. It isn't medical advice, and it's no substitute for assessment and treatment where checking has become a condition. The NHS services I mention are those for England as I found them in September 2026.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction or correction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 2, 8, 12, 15, 17, 18, 19 and 22. The Tuesday, the door, the straighteners, the client's email and everything else in the running example are invented.

Before you start. The description of obsessive compulsive disorder, the advice to see a GP or self-refer to NHS talking therapies, the note about checking a baby's breathing and the statement that it's unlikely to improve without treatment are from the NHS pages "Overview" and "Treatment" for obsessive compulsive disorder.

Chapter 3. Van den Hout and Kindt, "Repeated checking causes memory distrust", Behaviour Research and Therapy 41, 2003, pages 301 to 316. Three experiments with healthy volunteers, 39, 40 and 40 people, using a computer animation of a gas stove. Radomsky, Gilchrist and Dussault, "Repeated checking really does cause

memory distrust", Behaviour Research and Therapy 44, 2006, pages 305 to 316. Fifty undergraduates, a real stove and a real tap, 19 checking trials. Both used people without a diagnosis, which is the population this book is for. The application to the front door is mine.

Chapter 4. Van den Hout and Kindt as above, for the account of familiarity, conceptual processing and vividness. Coles, Radomsky and Horng, "Exploring the boundaries of memory distrust from repeated checking: increasing external validity and examining thresholds", Behaviour Research and Therapy 44, 2006, pages 995 to 1006. Two studies with a real stove. The summary says the changes appeared after a relatively low number of checks and doesn't give the number, so I haven't.

Chapter 5. Radomsky and Alcolado, "Don't even think about checking: mental checking causes memory distrust", Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry 41, 2010, pages 345 to 351. Sixty-two undergraduates. The account of why the replay is tempting is mine.

Chapter 6. Alcolado and Radomsky, "Believe in yourself: manipulating beliefs about memory causes checking", Behaviour Research and Therapy 49, 2011, pages 42 to 49. Ninety-one undergraduates, false feedback on a memory test, urges to check measured by self-report. The suggestion about describing yourself differently is mine.

Chapter 7. Rachman, "A cognitive theory of compulsive checking", Behaviour Research and Therapy 40, 2002, pages 625 to 639. A theoretical paper about clinical checking. Applying the multipliers

to everyday checking is my extension. Van den Hout and Kindt, "Obsessive-compulsive disorder and the paradoxical effects of perseverative behaviour on experienced uncertainty", Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry 35, 2004, pages 165 to 181. Five experiments. The summary says there were "some indications" that repeated checking reduced the sense of having acted responsibly, and I've kept that hedge.

Chapter 9. Rachman as above, for the three multipliers. That they rise with tiredness and stress is my reasoning.

Chapter 10. Rachman as above, for the self-perpetuating loop. The general pattern of reassurance is described from the cognitive behavioural literature without a specific citation. The observation that doubt follows calm to new objects is mine.

Chapter 11. Muris, Merckelbach and Clavan, "Abnormal and normal compulsions", Behaviour Research and Therapy 35, 1997, pages 249 to 252. One hundred and fifty people, 54.7 per cent reporting rituals. The comparison group were patients with a diagnosis. The NHS description of when checking becomes a condition is from the pages cited above.

Chapter 13. Rachman as above, for the effect of perceived probability. The claim that the one time is almost always a missed once is my observation and hasn't been studied as far as I know.

Chapter 14. Parrish and Radomsky, "Why do people seek reassurance and check repeatedly? An investigation of factors involved in compulsive behavior in OCD and depression", Journal

of Anxiety Disorders 24, 2010, pages 211 to 222. Fifteen people with OCD, 15 with depression and 20 controls, interviewed. What I say about photos, apps and the partner's role is my reasoning.

Chapter 16. Alcolado and Radomsky, Rachman, and van den Hout and Kindt 2004, as above. Everything else is my reckoning.

Chapter 20. 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 21. NHS pages as above, including the description of cognitive behavioural therapy with exposure and response prevention and medicine. Everything else in the chapter is my own suggestion.