5 EVENING ROUTINES FOR MASSIVELY PRODUCTIVE MORNINGS

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INTRODUCTION

Many people have written about the importance of getting up early and being productive in the first hours of the day. Usually this advice takes the form of a set of morning routines and rituals, including everything from <u>mindfulness</u> and gratitude diaries to matcha tea and pushups.

And yet, many of us still struggle to consistently wake up early and do our best work. I believe **the real reason we struggle so much in the morning is that our evening habits sabotage us**:

- *Going to be too late makes it difficult to wake up on time with good energy.*

- *Not knowing specifically what you need to work on leads to <u>procrastination</u> and indecision.*

- *Having to make dozens of small decisions before you walk out the door—from what to wear to which USB dongle you'll need for that afternoon presentation—causes <u>unnecessary stress</u> and fatigue.*

- *Not having a plan for breakfast means stoping for fast food, which leads to guilt and poor energy levels.*

Because we don't set up our evenings with an eye toward our mornings, we end up hitting unexpected obstacles in our morning goals which makes it hard to follow through on them—especially on a consistent basis.

This checklist is all about **how to be intentional with our evening routines in order to remove the logistical and emotional friction that sidetracks us from our morning productivity goals**.

Here are the 5 evening routines I use every day to maximize my chances of having ultra-productive mornings.

1 | SHUT DOWN YOUR DAY WITH THE 4:55 DRILL

Every weekday at 4:55 (or a few minutes before I leave my office), I get out a pad of sticky notes, pull one off, and stick it smack dab in the middle of my desk.

Next, **I write down the 3 most important things I need to get done the next day, beginning with the most important task that I want to accomplish with my morning.** Typically this this first task is some form of Deep Work that's cognitively demanding and creative, like writing an article or constructing a case conceptualization.

Finally, I draw a line under my three high-priority tasks, and write down one *Evening Intention*—an aspiration or intention for how I want to spend my evening at home with my family.

The 4:55 Drill does two things, both of which support a focused and productive early morning the following day:

- **Really Relax in the Evening.** By specifically stating what I need/want to do the following day, my brain is less likely to "throw" these tasks at me in the form of worry during the evening. It's as if I've said to my brain, "It's okay to relax and come out of work mode because we know exactly what needs to happen." In other words, the 4:55 drill helps me to leave work at work and therefore be truly present and relaxed at home. Setting a specific intention for how I want to spend my evenings also helps me to relax and disengage from work because my brain has a specific alternative to focus on.

- **Eliminate Morning Procrastination.** Besides helping me relax and re-charge, the 4:55 drill also helps me to hit the ground running in the morning and get right to work. The biggest obstacle to doing my best work in the morning is procrastination. And a huge source of procrastination is a lack of clarity about what exactly I'm going to do. Specificity is clarifying and clarity is motivating.

2 | AUTOMATE MORNING PREP

A big reason for stress and low motivation in the mornings is D*ecision Fatigue*—having to make too many decisions in a given space of time, which leads to exhaustion and difficulty sticking with our intentions.

My routines became far more streamlined when I got in the habit of making as many of my morning decisions as possible the night before. The are three main areas of morning decisions that can be pre-done the night before:

• **Food.** Take a few minutes and prepare tomorrow's breakfast and lunch in the evenings. Often right after dinner is a good time since you're already dealing with food and it's easy to allocate leftovers into a breakfast or lunch container. It also helps if you can get in the habit of eating the same thing each day. Not having to decide what you're going to eat is a great way to reduce friction and decision fatigue.

• **Clothes.** Having to decide on and find clothes and outfits each morning is a huge waste of cognitive resources in the morning that could be done just as easily the evening before. It seems like a small thing, but it's usually a good idea to put clothes in the exact spot where you get ready in the morning, especially if you're getting up earlier than anyone else in your household. I set out all my clothes on the couch in the living room, for example, because I don't want to wake up my wife in the bedroom.

• **Supplies.** When you stop and think about it, it's often surprising how much time and energy we spend each morning looking for all our stuff—phone chargers, files and documents, access keys, wallet/purse, etc. It should all be right by your door, ready to be unthinkingly grabbed as you leave.

The key idea here is to **remove as much friction from your mornings as possible**. While no one of these may be a significant obstacle to being productive in the mornings, together they can be a major source of resistance. Thankfully, almost all of the small tasks we need to do in the morning can be done the night before if we're willing to create and stick with a routine.

3 | BUILD A 'SLEEP RUNWAY'

A *Sleep Runway* is a period of time (usually an hour) immediately before getting into bed that promotes *deep relaxation*, the mental state that's most conducive to falling asleep quickly and effortlessly. **Just like a jet landing at an airport needs a runway to slow down on, our minds need a stretch of time to slow down on before we can fall asleep.**

Quality sleep is essential to working at our full potential. On the other hand, we all know how hard it is just to drag ourselves out of bed—much less do great work—when we've had a poor night's rest.

The secret to getting consistently high-quality sleep is to make the process of falling asleep effortless and automatic. And we're best able to do this when we're in a state of deep relaxation—when our mind and body are moving at snail's pace, with nothing in particular to think about.

To achieve this deeply relaxing state of mind, we need to create an environment that's strictly non-stimulating. Some examples of good non-stimulating Sleep Runway activities include:

- *Watching old re-runs of a favorite TV show (I like Seinfeld and Parks and Recreation).*

- *Reading or flipping through magazines (think Architectural Digest not something about the news or politics).*

- *Light stretching or calm yoga.*

- *Puzzles or simple non-competitive card games.*

To maximize our morning productivity we must be well-rested, which means getting consistently good sleep. And **the best way to consistently sleep well is to have a good Sleep Runway that promotes a mental state of relaxation and calm.**

4 | MINIMIZE PRE-BED TASKS

This routine is incredibly simple but also incredibly important. If you've done a good job of putting yourself in a relaxing mindset via your *Sleep Runway*, **it's crucial to minimize the number of things you need to do before bed so that you can remain relaxed while you get into bed.**

If possible, do as many pre-bed routines and tasks as possible before you begin your *Sleep Runway* activity. If you can, brush your teeth, wash your face, and put your pajamas on beforehand.

Personally, I like to have a little desert or adult beverage during my *Sleep Runway* sometimes, so I still brush my teeth, use the restroom, and put our dog in his crate before I get in bed.

Importantly, these are the exact same routines I do every single night, which means I can essentially do them without thinking. They're automatic. Which is important because as soon as you start thinking and making decisions, you start counteracting the relaxation you've built up in your sleep runway.

In short, **ruthlessly minimize the number of things you need to do in between your Sleep Runway activities and getting into bed by doing them first.** If you do have some things to do, be consistent and do the same things (in the same order) every night.

5 | CULTIVATE A 'SLEEP TRIGGER'

A *Sleep Trigger* is a cue or prompt for your brain to know that it's time to fall asleep. **Just like Pavlov's dogs learned to associate the sound of a bell with food, and so, salivated whenever it rang, our minds can learn to associate a number of things with falling asleep.**

If you've done a good job with your *Sleep Runway* and minimizing your Pre-Bed tasks, the way to really ensure quick and quality sleep is to have a trigger for sleep as soon as you get into bed. My *Sleep Trigger* is Sherlock Holmes.

Most nights, I crawl into bed, kiss my wife goodnight, roll over, pull out my phone, open up iBooks, and start reading from The Complete Novels and Stories of Sherlock Holmes. Usually, I get through about two pages before my eye lids feel too heavy to keep open, so I roll over and let sleep do its thing.

I've trained my brain to associate Sherlock Holmes with the physical act of falling asleep. As a result, I can't remember the last time I've taken longer than 10 or 15 minutes to fall asleep.

It's basic behavioral psychology, but it's incredibly powerful. Because, as with the previous two steps, **there's probably nothing better you can do to maximize your early morning productivity than to get a good night's sleep.** And Sherlock Holmes is the final step in a finely tuned set of routines that allow me do do just that. Night after night after night.

You don't have to read Sherlock Holmes, of course, but it's a good idea to **pick something that's appealing enough to sound mildly enjoyable but not so appealing that it's stimulating.** Aim for fiction, something you've already read before, and ideally something written before 1900 (there's something about that Victorian sentence structure that just really knocks me out!)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Wignall is a clinical psychologist and author who helps busy creatives and entrepreneurs use psychology and behavioral science to do their best work.

You can find more of Nick's work at his website NickWignall.com where writes about everything from mindfulness and productivity to stress and emotional fitness.