

What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast

Mornings are a great time for getting things done. You're less likely to be interrupted than you are later in the day. Your supply of willpower is fresh after a good night's sleep. That makes it possible to turn personal priorities like exercise or strategic thinking into reality.

But if you've got big goals--and a chaotic a.m. schedule--how can you make over your mornings to make these goals happen?

Because I write about time management frequently, I've gotten to see hundreds of calendars and schedules over the years. From studying people's morning habits, I've learned that getting the most out of this time is a five-part process. Follow these steps, though, and you're on your way to building morning habits that stick.

1. Track Your Time

Part of spending your time better knows how you're spending it now. If you've ever tried to lose weight, you know that nutritionists tell you to keep a food journal because it keeps you from eating mindlessly. It's the same with time. Write down what you're doing as often as you can. Use a Word document or a pad and pen.

While measuring your mornings, try tracking your whole week. The reason? The solution to morning dilemmas often lies at other times of the day. You may be too tired because you're staying up late. But if you look at how you're spending your nights, you'll notice that you're not doing anything urgent. The *Daily Show* can be recorded and watched earlier--possibly while you're on the treadmill at 6:30 a.m.

As for the mornings themselves, you can be organized but still not be spending them well. Question your assumptions. You may believe that "a man who wants to keep his job gets into the office before his boss" because that's what your father did, but your boss may be disappointed that he doesn't get the place to himself for an hour first! If you decide that something is a top priority, do it, but understand that we *have* to do few things in life.

2. Picture the Perfect Morning

After you know how you're spending your time, ask yourself what a great morning would look like. For me, it would start with a run, followed by a hearty family breakfast. After getting people out the door, I'd focus on long-term projects like my books. Here are some other ideas for morning enrichment:

For personal growth:

- Read through a religious text: Sacred texts can teach us about human nature and history, even if they're not from a religion you subscribe to. If they are, pray or meditate and get to know your beliefs in a deeper way.
- Train for something big: Aiming to complete a half-marathon, a triathlon, or a long bike ride will keep you inspired as you take your fitness to the next level.
- Do art projects with your kids: Mornings don't have to be a death march out the door. Enjoy your time with your little ones at a time of day when you all have more patience.

For professional growth:

- Strategize: In an age of constant connectivity, people complain of having no time to think. Use your mornings to picture what you want your career and organization to look like in the future.

- Read articles in professional journals: Benefit from other people's research and strategic thinking, and gain new insights into your field.
- Take an online class: If a job or career change is in your future, a self-paced class can keep your skills sharp.

3. Think through the Logistics

How could this vision mesh with the life you have? Don't assume you have to add it on top of the hours you already spend getting ready or that you'll have to get to work earlier. If you fill the morning hours with important activities you'll crowd out things that are more time intensive than they need to be. Map out a morning schedule. What time would you have to get up and what time do you need to go to bed to get enough sleep? As for the mornings themselves, what would make your ritual easier? Do you need to set your easel next to your bed? Can you find a more cheerful alarm clock or one you can't turn off so easily?

It's easy to believe our own excuses, particularly if they're good ones. Come up with a plan and assemble what you need, but whatever you do, don't label this vision as impossible

4. Build the Habit

This is the most important step. Turning a desire into a ritual requires willpower. Use these five steps to optimize your routine:

- Start slowly: Go to bed and wake up fifteen minutes earlier for a few days until this new schedule seems doable.
- Monitor your energy: Building a new habit takes effort, so take care of yourself while you're trying. Eat right, eat enough, and surround yourself with supportive people who want to see you succeed.
- Choose one new habit at a time to introduce: If you want to run, pray, *and* write in a journal, choose one of these and make it a habit before adding another.
- Chart your progress: Habits take weeks to establish, so keep track of how you're doing for at least thirty days. Once skipping a session feels like you forgot something--like forgetting to brush your teeth--you can take your ritual up a notch.
- Feel free to use bribery: Eventually habits produce their own motivation, but until then, external motivations like promising yourself concert tickets can keep you moving forward. And keep in mind that your morning rituals shouldn't be of the self-flagellation variety. Choose things you enjoy: your before-breakfast ritual has the potential to become your favorite part of the day.

5. Tune Up as Necessary

Life change. Sometimes we have to regroup, but the goal is to replace any rituals that no longer work with new ones that make you feel like every day is full of possibility.

That is ultimately the amazing thing about mornings--they always feel like a new chance to do things right. A win scored then creates a cascade of success. The hopeful hours before most people eat breakfast are too precious to be blown on semiconscious activities. You can do a lot with those hours. Whenever I'm tempted to say I don't have time for something, I remind myself that if I wanted to get up early, I could. These hours are available to all of us if we choose to use them.

So how would you like to use your mornings? This important question requires careful thinking. But once you decide, small rituals can accomplish great things. When you make over your mornings, you can make over your life. That is what the most successful people know.

by Laura Vanderkam