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# SET YOUR INTENTIONS

**L**ike most of us, I want to be happier. Whether it's waking up with more spark or going to bed more satisfied with my day, I want to open my life to the opportunity for greater joy.

As such, I love to read books about happiness. My writer pal Gretchen Rubin has written a few of those, and in one of them she recommends a small, powerful idea that has taken hold to become a big, strong force in my own life.

That idea is to choose a word each and every year that represents the year you have in front of you. Rather, to choose a word *for* your year. (Oh, and take a cue from Gretchen: years don't need to start in January.) Choose one single word that imbues the type of year you wish to have, one word that can serve as a guidepost for what you want in the season to come. A singular word you can always harken

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back to in moments of darkness and doubt. One word that informs your decisions, crystalizes your passions and priorities, and embodies you—the new you!—in the months ahead.

Depending on the type of year you seek, there are many words that can do the trick. Words like Move, Pause, Breathe, Dance, Less, Family, Health, Travel, and Choose all hold a certain special sauce.

The guidelines are simple. The word can be a verb or a noun. It can be a long word or a short word. But it is key that the word brings together everything you fervently hope to live and breathe in the year to come. One word to inform and synthesize the year you have ahead of you. One word to mean everything you want the year to be, and one word that will help serve as a guiding light when times get tough and you're not clear on where your priorities are.

A few years ago, my word of the year was Rest.

It was a word that meant the world to me in that season of my life. I was harried and overwhelmed from a few too many years of corporate globetrotting, and I needed a daily reminder to do less. And so I did. Although my Rest might not have been as restful as the Rest that some might be able to enjoy (I saw nary a beach that entire year), my word still served as a key force in getting me to slow down. It helped

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me to make decisions, and to keep in mind what was really important when difficult choices arose.

Should I go to that social event—or stay home? Should I say yes to what could be a great opportunity, or pass it up to wait for something better to come along? Should I travel to that work meeting—or call into it instead?

When life and work calls for us to be busy, it is hard to slow down. However, by attempting to make this word forefront in my mind, I sought to make small strides that would lead to notable changes and positive transformation. I knew I wouldn't be perfect. I knew I would never get it 100 percent. But I did know that by setting the intention, I could make some progress.

In the end, I did. And you can, too. Set a word now, and watch your year rise up to take shape around it.





# BECOME A MORNING PERSON

If you've heard it once, you've heard it a thousand times:  
The early bird gets the worm.

It turns out that cultures all over the world have concepts that convey the same idea.

Morning people get more done. Morning people are more effective. Morning people win more often.

The reality is that morning people *do* seem to get an awful lot accomplished, and even night owls have reported that short periods of morning waking have made them feel more productive, even if they really aren't.

As a self-professed night owl (or "late chronotype") who has worked hard to get up earlier, I can vouch that waking up in the morning earlier can make you *feel* you've done more. In contrast, doing a lot between 1:00 and 4:00 a.m., like many a raging night owl, invariably makes me feel behind when I

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drag myself out of bed at noon the next day. Waking at 5:30 a.m., watching the sunrise, and literally feeling that you beat everyone at the first competition of the day—getting up—is something that just can't be matched.

There are many reasons to try your hand at getting up earlier. Here are my favorites:

**You get the best of you.** If you're generally sleeping enough and you aren't suffering from health problems, then you should feel rested in the morning. In those first precious hours, you'll have energy in abundance to do what you need to do. This is the golden hour of productivity, and by getting up early you can use it to the best of your ability to kill your to-do list and really get rocking.

**You get the best of others.** I once heard someone say that people are nicer in the mornings because they haven't yet had the chance to have a bad day. It just might be true, and you just might benefit as a result.

**You get quiet.** Fewer people are around in the morning—in your house, in your office, and in the world at large. That means quiet, peaceful time for you to do what you need to do. Make the best of these moments.



## Become a Morning Person

**Getting things done early makes you happier all day long.** The earlier you get done the necessities, the better you'll feel the rest of the day, no matter what pops up to surprise you. You're also far less likely to be off-track at the end of the day, because you'll have at least gotten *something* done in the morning.

**You're likely to get more done by the end of the day.** Even if your workday is the exact same nine hours it might have been had you started work at eleven in the morning, by starting earlier you're likely to get time on your side through the simple art of personal motivation. The more you get done earlier, the more you're likely to get done *as the day progresses*. By the end of the day, you'll be farther along than you would have been had you started later on.

Even if you agree that waking up earlier is a good move for you, however, it's not (yet) possible to turn on a magic switch to make it happen. Instead, you've got to work a bit to make it a reality. Thankfully, it may be easier than you think. In my efforts to do just this, I've learned a few key lessons:

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### Accept the Fact That You Will Be Tired at First

The first step in becoming a morning person is acknowledging that the initial adjustment won't be pretty. If you are not already in a state of perpetual exhaustion (I hope not!), when you try to go to bed two to three hours earlier than you normally do, it just isn't going to work. Thus, the result of the initial shift to waking earlier will be a tired, grumpy you no one wants to be around. Warn those around you, and remind yourself you're doing it for a greater cause. Better yet, try to combine it with that necessary red-eye flight you have to take, or that crying baby that just can't seem to get to sleep on her own (I have one you can borrow, if needed).

### Immediately Find a Way to Reward Yourself in the Morning

Especially in the beginning, you've got to find a way to reward yourself for the effort of getting out of bed before the sun brightens the sky. What is one thing you wish you could do each day that you rarely give yourself time for? Reading a novel? Watching a TV show you love? Doing the Wednesday *New York Times* crossword (not too hard, not too easy)? In the beginning, do that one fun thing each morning to reward yourself for getting up and to make you excited to keep doing so. One day soon, you won't need it.

## Start a Morning Routine

Once you've found a way to create the initial shift to getting sleepy earlier at night, and have done so for a few days in a row, you've got to find a way to develop a strong morning routine that will get you waking up at that same (early) time each morning. As we'll talk about, no one routine works for all breathing beings, and ultimately, it's all about finding a series of morning steps that work for you, and then making them automatic.

Soon enough, your (more) productive self will thank you.



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# TRY THE PRESENT PRINCIPLE

**N**o matter what time you get up, having a morning routine will help ground your day. Most days, I start my mornings with a seven-step process I have come to call the Present Principle. It's a simple routine built around the simple acronym P.R.E.S.E.N.T., which reminds me to implement the seven most important things I need to do daily to keep me present—and to do those things in the mornings.

My routine won't work for everyone, but I hope it will give you the inspiration you need to come up with a morning routine of your own that will lead you to success. As you'll see as you read through mine, the key to developing a routine of your own is to identify the handful of important activities you want to accomplish each and every day, and then to front-load them into your morning.

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### The 7 Steps in My Morning Routine (the Present Principle):

#### **P—PRAY (or PAUSE)**

I start my days with a steaming cup of bulletproof coffee or tea and a prayer of guidance, thanks, and direction for my day ahead. Another way to think of this moment more broadly is as a “pause”—for prayer and contemplation. It’s a critical way to start a busy life, day in and day out.

#### **R—READ**

After praying and pausing, I dive into reading something inspirational and motivational. I generally work through one particular devotional for a few months, and sometimes have a few going at a time. Make sure to find one that speaks to you personally, and not one that someone else loves but you think reads like fluff (been there, done that). If you aren’t into the idea of inspirational or spiritual reading at this groggy hour, think about a good read on business, leadership, or productivity that you can slowly work through sections of, day in and day out.

## Try the PRESENT Principle

### **E—EXPRESS**

After reading, I then take my own thoughts to paper. I use a black Moleskine journal that has seen better days, but a Post-it note or Evernote document will do just fine. The key is just to get your feelings out there. Worries, thoughts, thanks, angst; anything and everything.

### **S—SCHEDULE**

Now's the time in my routine that I sketch out an overview of my day and do a check-in on my week. I typically spend five minutes on this step—drafting my day's schedule and checking in on the week at large. I do this on paper, with the goal of this step being offline, but you may find it works best to use your computer or an app.

### **E—EXERCISE**

I try to get in exercise of some sort every day (I run most days, except when my jogging stroller gets the best of me), and I find that doing it in the morning is the most effective way to keep at it. Experts say this is also smartest when working to form solid habits. Move daily, and you'll feel better.

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### **N—NOURISH**

Each day, do one thing that truly nourishes you. Go on a walk. Take a bubble bath. Read a novel. Talk to someone you love. Do something for you. It's fun to do this in the morning straightaway, but if not, put this off until later as a reward for getting your big tasks of the day done.

### **T—TRACK**

At the day's end, look back at how many of the steps in your routine you were able to accomplish. Can you do better tomorrow? Track your progress, and think about what is working and what isn't. This will better poise you to make tweaks and win long-term.

I'm not always perfect. Some days I don't do every step, and some days I don't do any of them at all, but trying to implement this routine each and every day has been an incredible motivation for me and has given me the conviction that morning routines can make anyone's day better and brighter.

Now you try it.