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## Your morning brainstorming palette

**O**K, so now we have the ultimate dream for your morning and the best realistic version of it, your maximum viable ideal or (if you like a good acronym) MVI, as well as plenty of insights from your recent reality. Now it's time to check that all the relevant factors have been addressed so that the viable version can actually be translated into actuality sometime soon.

**T**his lesson gives an overview of all you need to know to turn your maximum viable dream into a dream morning blueprint—the kind of blueprint that can actually get built.

**H**ere are the top 12 factors you need to take seriously. 3 of them overlap with the 6 dimensions you rated your real morning on in the previous lesson. You may already have addressed some or most of them in your MVI description, in which case great, you can just confirm it's all good, but there may well be tweaks you want to make to check you're covering all the bases.

**R**emember that what you're now designing is a morning routine that you can apply very soon. It doesn't need to work for every day, indeed it might be better not to aim for that to start with

—though it should apply at least once a week, otherwise it probably won't feel worth the effort. So, time to get specific!

**Y**ou can listen to or read all 12 points here and then turn to the worksheet to clarify your own intentions for each area, or you can fill in the worksheet as you go along—up to you.

**1 Day(s) of the week.** One of the best ways to fail at habit change is to be too vague and too ambitious. The two often go hand in hand, and not by accident: You don't bother to be specific so you think you can do everything, or you have your head in the aspirational clouds so you don't bother to specify. “Bothering” is in some ways the right word here: It takes effort to drill into the details. But it's also not, because getting specific is such a pleasure once you know how: It's grounding and satisfying and is something you can really get right and that gives enormous rewards when you do. So is this dream morning you're designing going to be for a weekday or a weekend? Maybe it would be best suited to a Monday morning. If you call it your Monday morning dream routine, maybe that will make it more likely to happen every single Monday and get seriously protected than if you pretended you'd do it every day and had given up on it by Thursday because it was never



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a good fit for the other days. Or perhaps Saturday and/or Sunday, if your time is more your own then, would be a nice place to start (and see my Top Tips for an encouragement to start there): enhancing the weekend fun rather than dragging up the weekday slog, if that's how it feels to you, can be a good way to go. Or maybe there are less generic differences that apply to you: Maybe this is for a type of day where your partner is away or you do or don't have the school run or are working from home or from the office. In any case, get this right. Take what you know about your routines, and apply it, so you know exactly when in your week this is going to happen, and why. Maybe your MVI is already explicit about where in your week it applies and doesn't, but if not, add in this detail. And your tracked morning may give you some insight here into what's actually viable on a specific recent day of the week.

**2 Start and end markers.** First up, don't get distracted by clock time. As I said in the first lesson, clock time does matter in some senses: If we're thinking about circadian rhythms it matters (so when is your body naturally adapted to sleep, wake, be metabolically optimized for different activities?), and if we're thinking about how much time you have available (that's next up) it matters. But I'd like to stress again how much this design process is about relative not absolute time. Your "first thing" (by which I mean first thing after your longest stretch of sleep) is your first

thing, whenever it happens. Your planning may require you to carve out more discretionary time than would naturally be available (that's next up), but don't start with the assumption that you should be getting up earlier; work out whether that's true, and if so by how much. Remember that any costs to sleep at the end of the night will be paid for in losses to energy, alertness, and all the beautifully complex repair and processing your body is doing overnight, unless you're bringing bedtime forward the night before. Arguably if you're setting a wake-up alarm you should also be setting a go-to-sleep alarm. In any case, don't treat sleep as a reservoir from which to acquire cost-free morning time. Make proper plans guided by pragmatism not inherited moralizing or an "I'll push through" mentality. And when it comes to starting when you intend to, bear in mind that this may not need to be a fixed clock time; it could just be "when I wake up". If you have the freedom to choose this and do without an alarm, it's important to consider using it (especially if you highlighted this in your dream morning in any way). For me, as I mentioned, there's no better way to make me resent being awake than the feeling that it was too soon for my body. As for end time, it too can be a clock time but it can also be an activity-dependent thing, e.g. after I get back from school drop-off, or before I leave for it. Knowing what counts as your ending as well as your beginning can helpfully sharpen your intentions for the middle. So if either end needs adding into



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your MVI, do so now, again referring back to your daily tracking results if it's helpful to do so.

**3 Duration.** How much time do you want, and how does that relate to how much you can get? If this is a short and sweet wake-up ritual that will take about 15 minutes and that's how long you have to play with, that's great. Your design outcome may be quite simple, but the process of getting there may be complex, and getting it right will make a massive difference: If you only have 15 minutes to yourself at the start of your day, what you do with each of them is even more crucial than if you had 120. Alternatively, if you have 15 easy minutes but could quite easily get yourself 30, and what you've sketched out is no way going to fit into 15—or if you decide after doing the 15-minute version for a few days that you actually really want 30—there are usually ways of getting it. Again, this will often involve making changes to your evening that let you get to bed earlier so that you can wake up earlier without sacrificing sleep. I realize I'm repeating myself here, but it's important: However you create the time in which your morning routine will unfold, remember that it doesn't get magicked out of nowhere, and that sleep deprivation is not a sustainable resource. Add in how long you want or need for what you have planned if the MVI didn't specify. If there's a massive discrepancy between this and the total duration of

your tracked morning, you may then need to rethink!

**4 Location.** Place matters. You may have a lot of options, you may not. But you definitely have some. Environmental factors are some of the most powerful drivers of our behaviours, and some of the most commonly ignored. A lot of what becomes habitual to us does so in a feedback loop with our surroundings: I drink a lot of tea, so I acquire tea paraphernalia, so when I want a drink tea is the most obvious, so people notice that I drink a lot of tea, so I get given yet another beautiful teapot... If for some strange reason I wanted to give up tea, my starting point should probably be to get rid of my three everyday teapots and my tins of tea and my favourite mug—or at least put them away in a cupboard until I see sense. If your routine involves being at home the whole time, your default is nothing changing because the environment's inertia is so great. So you should think about environmental cues that you want to introduce or remove to help you do something different, like putting important props (foam roller, cereal bowl, earphones) in salient places and/or getting predictable distractors (your phone or computer, or specific apps or browser tabs, say) out of sight. Switching up the environment in its entirety instead of adjusting the home one can work very well too: Then you just have to get out the door rather than making sure several micro-adjustments happen and stay that way. If you



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already spend some of your morning routine out of the home and want to keep it that way, or want to introduce time elsewhere (work, a café, an outdoor space, etc.), you need to choose well with your priorities in mind. For instance, the small busy coffee shop closest to home might be a poor choice, even if you love it, if you know you want to do some writing and that you need reasonable amounts of peace and quiet to focus well. Conversely, a place you normally walk past because it looks too quiet may be just the ticket. Your MVI may already be very clear on environment, either in general terms (e.g. café) or with specifics (Café Coco round the corner); flesh out the details either way, including in relation to timings: when you're going to be in particular places from and until.

**5 Intrinsic enjoyment.** Your guiding feeling. What is this all about? When you hear about other people's mornings, or dream about a life that's a little or a lot different from how yours is right now, what are you hankering after? What's that corner-of-the-eye feeling that if you look at it head-on it evaporates but that you can catch glimpses of now and then: the elusive feeling you have when you are beginning your day precisely how you want to? For me it's a calm kind of focus, a quiet but ruthless kind of protection of what is here right now and what I know is right for me and would not exist if I didn't help it to. If I try to encapsulate this in a simple phrase, it might be "this is how it's meant to be". So

here, just get yourself a rough sense of what kind of thing you're looking for: Beyond the practical details, as the sum that's greater than their parts, what is the point of this for you, when it comes to how you feel? This should be strongly implicit in your MVI, if not fully explicit, but the changes you made from the ultimate ideal may have affected this element quite strongly even if they weren't very numerous (e.g. location changes can make a massive difference and may often be required in the short term). So what's really the feeling you're going for here?

**6 Substantiveness.** Your top-priority intrinsic ingredient. Is there one thing your morning routine has to contain that matters more than all the rest? One thing that as long as this thing happens, the routine was a success? For this question, come up with something contained within the morning itself rather than something that sets you up well for later (which comes next). It can be really tiny, like 10 minutes of knitting or taking the time to fry some eggs. Pinning down one top priority can create a lot of clarity everywhere else. This is then a single non-negotiable ingredient around which you can calibrate all the rest. If your MVI didn't include anything of this kind, should it? The answer may be no, but it's good to ask. If there was one in your tracked morning, did it feel like the right one?



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**7 Getting your day started.** A lot of what makes a good morning routine good is about how it prepares you for the rest of your day. The previous point gave you one thing you plan to prioritize that's about now, about making this actual morning time itself good. Now you can also give thought to the preparatory work this routine is doing: What is all this the precursor to? A good place to start may be by asking: Should it complement or contrast with the rest of my day? For instance, if the relevant day tends to be pretty hectic, do you want something that energizes you or something that gives you some real calm before the storm? So make a few notes on what the subsequent phases of the day are going to be like, especially the one that follows directly from this, and on what ingredients would be good to help everything that needs to happen later feel good and work well. What you come up with might have quite global benefits for later on, like taking time to plan out your day in advance, or very specific payoffs, like doing some vocab revision for your French conversation class later, or a mixture, like making a nice lunch to take with you that will save you time and money, give you something to look forward to, and make your afternoon more productive. Your MVI may not be very context-sensitive, so if you've now made clear that this is for Monday to Wednesday and you think any adjustments should be made to help this routine prepare for the realities of your Monday to Wednesday, you can do so now. Again, your tracked

morning may give you some insights into which preparatory elements are serving useful purposes that could be transferred into or adapted for your new dream morning.

**8 Your other ingredients.** Now it's time to check all the rest of what made it into your MVI and test it against the time you have available, and other aspects of reality: specifically, the things that need doing that may not feel massively ideal (e.g. flossing, washing up). You should also make sure to think properly about food and drink if your MVI wasn't very specific about these. It's important that this routine be nourishing in the most literal as well as the broader senses of that term. You can see the breakfast lesson for more on this. Meanwhile, I'd like to remind you again that this is not about you reining yourself in, combating wants with sensible oughts, chaining yourself into some "clean", "virtuous", "admirable" kind of morning. In fact it's the opposite. It's about finding out what your desires really are, and giving them credit. It's possible that you long for crack cocaine and self-harm in the morning, but unlikely. If you do, you'll probably get a lot of useful insight into where that longing comes from and what to do with it by taking it seriously rather than not. And if there are other less self-destructive things that you want, you probably want them for good and important reasons, whether or not they feel like things you should want. Overall, completing this course is about you asking—and



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then finding out—what really works for you, not devising new tactics for controlling yourself. So, let onto your ingredients list only things that are either really necessary (e.g. brushing your teeth, getting your child dressed) or really wanted, which should be in your MVI already (e.g. 20 minutes of cat videos on YouTube, half an hour writing that children’s story you never find time for). If you have an idea that falls under neither of these headings (really necessary or really wanted), be very sceptical about it. Just because it’s in your tracked morning doesn’t mean it deserves to survive!

**Order.** Now you know what set of things you want in your morning, putting them in the right order is one of the best ways to get them all to happen. The later something happens, the more vulnerable it is, since it’s more dependent on everything else (or enough else) having gone right before it. But well placed precursors can also increase the chance of a certain later thing happening, like some journalling helping reinforce your priorities for the day or some judicious stretching helping your back feel good enough to make a swim appealing. The question of what order is especially crucial with things that involve incursions of other people, since this is the prime way for unpredictability to get introduced into the system. As soon as you let the internet or your inbox or your social media feed into your day, you have instantly welcomed in a vast number of unknowns. So, given that all tech is expertly designed

to make us want more of it, sooner, you might want to put this stuff later than it would naturally come in if you didn’t make an active decision about it. This might involve changing some other things, so if you normally use your phone as your alarm and you don’t want to see your WhatsApp messages as soon as your eyes open, you might want to use flight mode, or if you suspect that won’t be enough to help you resist turning flight mode off to check who’s messaged you while you’re still coming to, you could buy or dig out an old-fashioned alarm clock and keep your phone off until after some specific thing is done. And this brings us back to the relative/absolute time distinction. If you say “no phone before 9 am”, 9 o’clock may feel like a usefully clear line, one you can set a reliable alarm for and appreciate the immovability of. On the other hand, it might also end up feeling arbitrary, if it gets to 9 and you’re 5 minutes away from finishing your podcast while you tidy the kitchen. In this sense, it might work better to peg the “phone on” time to something more inherently meaningful, like once you’re done with dishwasher-emptying. Beyond techy dangers, order matters in ways that may be very personal to you. For example, it may make a big difference whether you do your journaling before or after you water the plants, or whether you have breakfast before or after you make your lunch. So don’t just do things in the order you always have, or in the order you think everyone else does; every habit you might be contemplating, however outland-



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ish, someone else somewhere is already doing it. Shower doesn't have to be first, or happen every morning, or every day. What might change if you didn't wash your hair so often? Ask questions about everything! If your MVI specifies, great, but check you still think it gets it right; if it doesn't specify, do your best to work out the best option from first principles and/or from what your tracking data tell you about the good and the bad in your existing habits.

**10 You and other people.** Other people are, as noted, one of the main ways best-laid plans get derailed. They're also a lot of the beauty of some kinds of plans—and of planned and unplanned parts of life more broadly. Both in real life and virtually, people you know personally and those you don't can help and hinder you in the creation of a routine that is great for you. They can be involved in many ways, for example by sharing in the routines with you, by asking things of you or otherwise interrupting you, or by introducing new information into your day and mind (e.g. via online content). So if you have other people (whether it's children, partners, employers, colleagues, clients, friends, or whoever else) who need or want your attention early in your day, you may want to think about whether it's possible for you to get some "first thing" time that precedes them, because then it's fully yours. Or if that can't happen, you could consider how to really ringfence the giving of attention to them when it's needed so that you

can revert to something of your own right after. For example, if you have to feed a baby or child first, you might want to make a particular point of not also switching on your phone before you do so, so other more grown-up humans don't get the chance to muscle in on your day already too. It could also be really powerful to know exactly what you're going to do once the feeding is done. For people who aren't physically present but may be expecting contact with you, you should train them not to expect it during your protected time. So you could let your clients or colleagues know that you won't be checking email until after a particular time of day, which will also reinforce your personal intention not to (and may be a nice reminder to them that it's possible and may be good to set boundaries like this). In ways like this, getting other people involved may have the potential to strengthen your routine and generate other extra benefits. Agreeing to sit down to porridge with your partner, or meet a friend for a café breakfast, will strengthen your relationship with them as well as making sure the meal really happens as planned. And with virtual connections, reading a specific regular newsletter email or checking a particular social media account may get you into a great frame of mind for the other things you have planned. In all of this, help people to interact with you as you want them to, and everyone will be happier. So give a little thought to any important kinds of contact you'd like to prevent or include, drawing on what's specified in your MVI



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and/or your tracking results and fleshing things out where needed.

**1 1 Alternatives to will power.** This is not about how much will power you have. If will power even exists in any meaningful sense, which I'm sceptical of, it's limited and precarious in everyone. The way to make good things happen and keep happening is to make those things rewarding to you. If your plan involves 20 minutes of pilates because you need to do pelvic floor strengthening but you hate pilates and you aren't doing anything else to speed up the rehab process, the physical benefits probably aren't going to be quick or noticeable enough to keep you doing it day after day. So you could, for example, up the intrinsic enjoyment and reduce the commitment size by carefully selecting just your five favourite moves, so you bring the sequence down to 10 minutes with less diluted short-term effects. Or you could tack an extrinsic reward onto the 20 minutes, like something nice you do straight afterwards. Or you could ask your physio to suggest ways of getting the relevant exercises into your days in other forms. Or you could write a list of benefits doing it will give you, including some short- and medium-term ones (e.g. things you'll be able to do or enjoy) if possible, to help yourself care more. Or you could up the frequency of your physio or osteo sessions for a defined period, so you have more of an incentive to say you did the daily exercises, and more benefits from intensive manipulations that enhance the efficacy of

the home routine. In general you should prioritize making plans that you want to follow and that reward you when you do. So list some alternatives to falling into the "I'll just make myself do it" trap and also note why you think these tactics will help. Your tracked morning may be a good source of evidence or counter-evidence about ways in which you relied unsuccessfully on will-power, or found better ways to help yourself do things.

**1 2 Step by step or all at once?** You have a great detailed thoughtful plan now, but you may not be able to get there all in one go. Some people respond well to the challenge of drastic change and can't make themselves care about smaller changes; others find that incremental alterations are the only things they can first confidently sign up to and then execute. Both have their pros and cons. Making big changes, especially multiple changes at once, can be a great way to ride the exhilaration of really making a difference, but can also involve a lack of realism about what's really possible and sustainable, potentially setting you up to fail. Small incremental alternations can be a great way to build small successes that in turn build confidence in the next and get a lasting habit of improvement embedded, but can also give too poor a cost/benefit ratio to generate the payoffs that will keep the process in motion for long enough to really yield the desired outcomes. You probably already have a sense of which way these advantages



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and disadvantages tilt for you. If you want your current hasty shower plus cereal routine to be a 90-minute oasis as described in your MVI, how do you feel when you imagine leaping straight into the latter versus just carving out 15 extra minutes for time out on the balcony with a book before breakfast? Do you feel more excitement or fear at the first idea, more satisfaction or impatience at the second? Your defaults exist, and two of the main questions to answer in any habit change process are first what they are and second how hard to push against them. These constitute one version of the great ambition versus acceptance balancing act, and as with everything, the right answers come only through trial and error. If you can get to your full MVI right away, fantastic. If not, sketch out a step or two to make your way towards it.

**1 3 Experiment!** Overall, I encourage you to adopt a spirit of curious experimentation in all of this. Try something out, see whether it makes a good kind of difference. If yes, keep doing it; if not, try something else. Designing and doing anything at all is already a huge improvement on not. So enjoy that knowledge of being ahead right from the start, and expect good things without requiring that they be great straightaway. Can you think of anything practical that will make it easier for you to embrace this attitude of experimenting with your own life? It might be that having bought this course and using these structured materials is enough of a help already;

you don't want to waste this chance to be really creative. But you could also add things like planning a time to debrief with a partner or friend or child, so you get to formulate your observations and have the fun of sharing them with someone else. Or you could dare yourself to include one thing that feels really risky or one thing you've always noticed person x doing and always been a bit intrigued by. Getting the level of realism versus ambition right should also help here, by reminding you that this isn't all or nothing, perfection or useless failure. So, to conclude, note down any practical strategies and/or any other kind of reminder that you're a scientist performing a well-designed experiment on your own life.