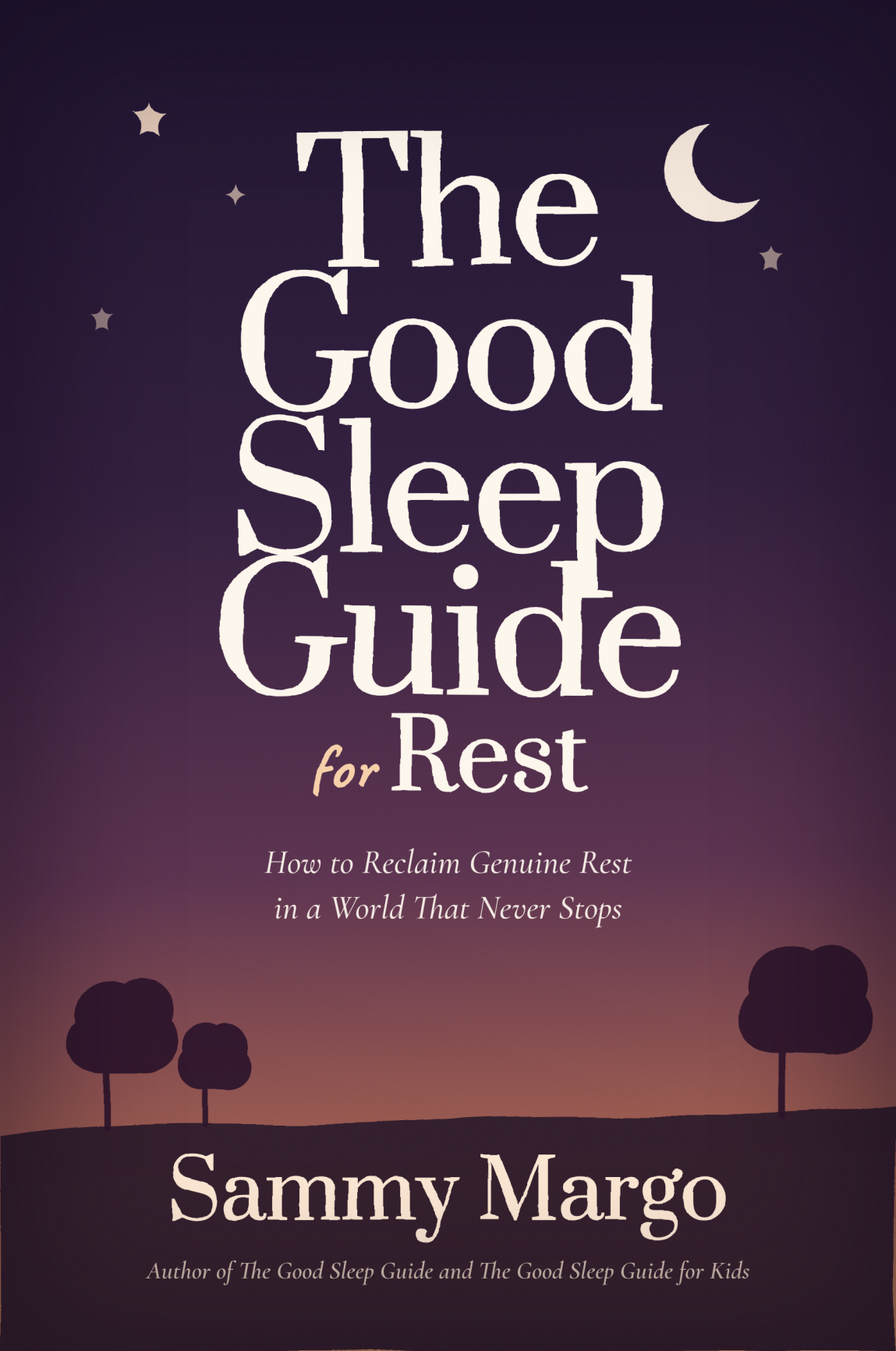




# The Good Sleep Guide *for* Rest

*How to Reclaim Genuine Rest  
in a World That Never Stops*



Sammy Margo

*Author of The Good Sleep Guide and The Good Sleep Guide for Kids*

THE GOOD SLEEP GUIDE

# Rest

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*How to Reclaim Genuine Rest in a World That Never  
Stops*

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*For my brother and sisters.*

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# Foreword



I have a confession. For years, I treated rest as a reward. Something earned at the end of a long week, a demanding project, a packed clinic schedule. I was wrong.

As a Chartered Physiotherapist with over thirty years of clinical experience, I have spent my career helping people understand how the body heals, recovers, and adapts. I wrote *The Good Sleep Guide* and *The Good Sleep Guide for Kids* because I knew sleep mattered. But this book exists because I now understand something more fundamental: rest is not the absence of work. It is an active, multidimensional biological need that our modern world is systematically denying us.

When readers of my previous books began contacting me, not just with questions about sleep, but with a deeper, harder-to-name exhaustion, I knew I needed to go further. They were sleeping, many of them, enough hours. And yet they were not resting. Their evenings were extensions of their days. Their phones were on their bedside tables. Their minds were still at their desks at midnight.

This guide is the result of that investigation. It draws on the best peer-reviewed research published between 2022 and 2026, and it translates that science into practical, honest, achievable strategies for reclaiming genuine rest in a digitally saturated world.

I hope it changes the way you think about your evenings, your weekends, and what your body is quietly asking of you every day.

*Sammy Margo*



## INTRODUCTION

# The Exhaustion Paradox



**P**icture this. It is 10:30 pm. You are lying on the sofa, phone in hand, scrolling through nothing in particular. You are exhausted, genuinely, bone-deep tired. But you cannot stop. One more reel. One more article. One more check of your email. An hour later, you drag yourself to bed, and sleep, when it comes, feels thin and unsatisfying.

This is not a personal failing. It is the defining experience of our generation.

We live in the most technologically advanced era in human history. And yet a 2025 global survey of nearly 19,000 people across 19 countries found that 63% now prioritise getting quality sleep more than they did five years ago, a statistic that speaks volumes about how poorly we are actually resting.

We are the most connected generation in history, and among the most unrested. That is the paradox this book sets out to solve.



## RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Global Wellness Institute, 2025*

63% of adults globally now say they prioritise sleep quality more than they did five years ago, yet chronic sleep restriction and poor rest quality continue to rise across all age groups and demographics.

This book is not a manifesto for digital detox. You will not be asked to throw your phone in a river. Technology is woven into our work, our relationships, and our lives. The goal is not elimination. It is recalibration. This book will show small, easy changes that you can make that will have a disproportionate beneficial effect on your sleep and rest quality

What this book offers is an evidence-based, practical guide to reclaiming genuine rest. Every strategy in these pages is grounded in peer-reviewed research. You will understand not just what to do, but why it works, and what is happening in your brain and body when you do it.

PART ONE



*Why We Cannot Switch Off*

## CHAPTER

# 1

# Your Brain Was Not Built for This



## Meet Claire



### REAL-WORLD STORY

*Claire is 41, a secondary school teacher and mother of two. She loves her job and her family. By 9 pm, both children are in bed and the house is quiet. She could rest. But instead she finds herself on her phone for two hours, not really enjoying it, not really choosing it, just unable to stop. She tells me she feels guilty about it every night. She is not lazy. She is caught in a loop her brain was never designed to escape on its own.*

For the vast majority of human history, the rhythm of life was governed by natural cycles. Sunlight meant activity. Darkness meant rest. The human nervous system evolved across hundreds of thousands of years in this alternating pattern, bursts of focused engagement followed by genuine downtime.

Then, in the space of roughly thirty years, everything changed. The internet arrived. Then the smartphone. Then social media, streaming platforms, push notifications, and the always-on work culture of remote and hybrid working. Our brains are still fundamentally the same organs that evolved on the savannah, but they are now being asked to process an almost incomprehensible volume of information, stimulus, and demand, with no natural endpoint and no built-in off switch.

## The Stress Hormone Loop

When you experience a demand, a notification, a work email, a difficult social media post, your body releases cortisol, the primary stress hormone. Cortisol is not inherently bad. In short bursts, it is useful. The problem is that it was designed for short bursts, not continuous low-level drip-feeding.

Chronic low-level cortisol exposure, the kind produced by constant connectivity, keeps the nervous system in a state of perpetual mild alertness. You are not stressed in the way that a predator encounter would stress you. But you are not at rest either. You exist in a physiological no-man's land: too activated to recover, too exhausted to fully engage.



## RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Frontiers in Psychiatry, 2025*

A study published in 2025 found measurable differences in brain functional connectivity during rest in people with burnout syndrome. Chronic occupational stress produces real, observable changes in how the brain operates even during supposedly restful states, including reduced alpha-wave connectivity associated with relaxation and self-regulation.



## SAMMY'S TIP 1

### The 90-Minute Wind-Down

Research suggests the brain needs approximately 90 minutes of progressively less stimulating activity before it is ready for deep sleep. Begin reducing screen brightness and notification exposure 90 minutes before your target bedtime, not just at the point you are ready to sleep. Treat your evening as a gradual descent, not a sudden drop.

## CHAPTER

# 2

# The Machine That Ate Your Evenings



## Meet Daniel



### REAL-WORLD STORY

*Daniel is 35, a software developer who works from home. He finishes work at six, but his laptop stays open on the kitchen table. By 8 pm he has checked his work Slack four times, read two industry newsletters, and watched an hour of YouTube. He thinks he has been resting. He has not. His brain has been in a continuous low-level state of professional vigilance since he woke up. He tells me he cannot remember the last time he felt genuinely, completely off.*

Your phone is not neutral technology. It is one of the most sophisticated behaviour-modification systems ever created, designed by teams of engineers and psychologists whose entire professional purpose is to maximise the time you spend engaged with it. Understanding this is not paranoia. It is the basis of an informed response.

## The Attention Economy

The business model of almost every major digital platform depends on one commodity: your attention. The psychological mechanisms deployed are well-documented. Variable reward schedules, the same principle that makes slot machines compelling, ensure that intermittent positive reinforcement creates persistent checking behaviour. Infinite scroll removes the natural stopping points that paginated content once provided. Autoplay eliminates the moment of decision between episodes.



### RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Frontiers in Psychiatry, 2025*

Even when participants actively used phone app limits and digital downtime features, 50% admitted to ignoring them at least half the time. This confirms that willpower-based approaches to digital boundaries are systematically undermined by platform design. Structural changes to your environment are more effective than relying on self-control alone.



“

*Your evening does not begin at bedtime. It begins the moment you finish your last meaningful work task. How you spend the hours between work and sleep determines the quality of everything that follows.*



#### **SAMMY'S TIP 2**

##### **The Phone Audit**

Spend 10 minutes this week auditing your phone. Go to Settings > Screen Time (iOS) or Digital Wellbeing (Android) and review your weekly report honestly. Which apps are consuming the most time? Which do you open out of habit rather than intention? This is not about judgment. It is about seeing clearly what is actually happening.

## CHAPTER

# 3

## The Blurred Life



### Meet Priya



#### REAL-WORLD STORY

*Priya is 44, a senior marketing manager who has worked from home since 2020. She loves the flexibility. But her working day has quietly expanded from eight hours to eleven. She is not overworked in any dramatic sense. It is the small things: checking emails at 8 pm, glancing at Slack before bed, waking at 3 am with a work thought she feels compelled to note. She has not had an evening that felt genuinely hers in over a year. She cannot quite remember when it changed.*

Before the pandemic, most people had a physical boundary between work and rest. The office was one place. Home was another. When you left the building, you left the job, not perfectly, not always, but structurally. The building itself enforced a separation that the human nervous system found deeply useful.

Remote and hybrid working has erased that boundary for millions of people. The laptop is on the kitchen table. The work phone is on the bedside table. The Slack notification arrives at 9 pm, and though you tell yourself you will not reply, the message is already read, the cognitive load already absorbed, the stress response already activated.



## RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Journal of Affective Disorders, 2024*

A major meta-analysis of 182 studies covering over 1.1 million participants found significant associations between problematic social media use and depression, anxiety, and sleep problems. Crucially, it was problematic use, characterised by difficulty disengaging, that showed the strongest effects. The key variable is control, not quantity.



### **SAMMY'S TIP 3**

#### **The Shutdown Ritual**

Create a simple, consistent signal that marks the end of your working day. This can be as simple as closing your laptop, writing a brief note to tomorrow's self, and saying aloud: 'Work is done for today.' This deliberate, ritualised closure helps your brain release the day's cognitive load and signals that active problem-solving is complete.

## CHAPTER

# 4

# Fake Rest



## Meet Tom



### REAL-WORLD STORY

*Tom is 29, a junior lawyer at a City firm. He considers himself good at switching off. After work he watches two or three hours of television, usually crime dramas or sports. He wakes most mornings feeling unrested and has a persistent low-level headache that his GP cannot explain. When I asked him to describe what genuine rest felt like, he paused for a long time. He could not remember the last time he had experienced it.*

Ask most people what they do to relax and you will hear a familiar list: watch TV, scroll social media, browse the internet, play casual games on their phone. These activities feel like rest.

They are passive. They require no effort. But the evidence increasingly suggests that many of our most common leisure activities are not providing genuine restoration. Some are actively making things worse.

True rest, the kind that leaves you feeling genuinely refreshed, involves a reduction in cognitive demand and emotional activation, combined with some degree of positive experience or meaning. Most digital leisure fails on several of these criteria. Social media involves constant social comparison and evaluation. Streaming involves emotional activation through drama and narrative tension.



#### RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*JAMA Network Open, 2025*

A study of 122,058 adults found that screen use before bed was associated with decreased sleep duration and worse self-reported sleep quality. Effects were more pronounced in evening chronotypes. Critically, this held across all screen types, not just social media, but TV, tablets, and computers used in passive viewing modes.



*Ask yourself after any leisure activity: Do I feel more restored than before I started? If the honest answer is no, that activity is not providing genuine rest, regardless of how passive it felt.*



#### **SAMMY'S TIP 4**

### **The 10-Minute Replacement**

Identify the one digital leisure activity that most consistently leaves you feeling worse rather than better. Replace just 10 minutes of it each evening with one of the evidence-backed alternatives discussed later in this book, a short walk, a book, a craft activity, or simply sitting without a screen. Habit change research shows that small, consistent replacements outperform dramatic overhauls.

PART TWO



*The Science of Genuine  
Recovery*



## CHAPTER

# 5

## What Happens When You Truly Rest



When your brain is genuinely at rest, not distracted, not stimulated, but truly at ease, something remarkable happens. Far from shutting down, it shifts into a mode of activity that neuroscientists now recognise as one of its most important and productive states.

### The Default Mode Network

The Default Mode Network (DMN) is a set of interconnected brain regions that becomes highly active during wakeful rest, when you are not focused on an external task, but are instead mind-wandering, daydreaming, or simply being. During DMN activity, the brain is engaged in memory consolidation, integrating the events of the day into long-term storage. It is processing social

and emotional experiences. It is generating creative insights and making novel connections between ideas that focused attention cannot access.

None of this can happen while you are scrolling social media or watching a drama series. Screen stimulation suppresses DMN activity, replacing it with stimulus-driven processing that, while engaging, provides none of the restorative and integrative functions that genuine mental rest enables.



#### RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Journal of Imaging, 2024*

A 2024 study on attention restoration theory found that in today's fast-paced, attention-demanding environment, executive functions and attentional resources are chronically taxed. Flow states, achieved during absorbing but manageable activities, may offer a more sustainable form of directed attention, reducing burnout and fatigue while simultaneously providing restoration.

## Sleep Architecture and the Stages of Recovery

Sleep is the most profound form of rest available to us, and it is substantially more complex than most people realise. A full night's sleep consists of four to six complete cycles, each lasting roughly 90 minutes, cycling through distinct stages with different restorative functions.

Stage 1 is light sleep, the transition between wakefulness and sleep, easily disrupted by noise, light, or stimulation. Stage 2 is core sleep, where body temperature drops and heart rate slows.

Sleep spindles, brief bursts of neural activity, are associated with motor learning and memory consolidation. Stage 3 is deep sleep or slow-wave sleep, the most physically restorative stage, when growth hormone is released and the brain's waste-clearance mechanism operates most actively. REM sleep is the stage most associated with emotional processing, memory integration, and the vivid dreaming that supports creative thinking.



#### **SAMMY'S TIP 5**

### **Protect Your Sleep Architecture**

The most damaging phone habit for sleep quality is not using your phone before bed. It is using it during the night. If you wake at 3 am and check your phone, you are activating your arousal system at the point when your brain most needs to be in slow-wave or REM sleep. Move your phone charger out of the bedroom entirely. Use a dedicated alarm clock. This single change, consistently applied, may be the highest-impact sleep intervention available to you.

## CHAPTER

# 6

## The Eight Types of Rest



One of the most important insights in rest science is that physical tiredness and mental depletion are entirely different states requiring entirely different forms of recovery. There are at least eight distinct types of rest, each addressing a different dimension of human functioning, and you can be severely depleted in several of them while sleeping eight hours a night.

### The Eight Types

#### 1. PHYSICAL REST

Passive physical rest, sleep and lying down, is the most recognised form. But active physical rest also matters: gentle yoga, stretching, and restorative movement that releases muscular tension without taxing the cardiovascular system.

## **2. MENTAL REST**

The inability to stop thinking. Mental rest involves reducing the cognitive load on working memory and the prefrontal cortex, through meditation, mindfulness, boredom, or simply sitting quietly without input.

## **3. SENSORY REST**

We live in an environment of unprecedented sensory demand. Sensory rest means deliberately reducing stimulation, spending time in quiet, darkened spaces, removing earphones, and allowing the sensory processing systems of the brain to recover.

## **4. EMOTIONAL REST**

The exhaustion of managing how you present yourself to others, of suppressing authentic emotional responses to meet social or professional expectations. Emotional rest involves space to be honest, with yourself and with trusted others.

## **5. SOCIAL REST**

Not all social interaction is restorative. Social rest is not loneliness. It is the intentional, chosen experience of solitude that restores rather than depletes. Many people, particularly those with significant social demands in their professional lives, need time away from other people to recover.

## **6. CREATIVE REST**

The depletion of generative energy. Creative rest involves exposure to beauty, novelty, and inspiration without the demand to produce anything. Nature, art, music, and architecture all serve this function.

## 7. SPIRITUAL REST

Not necessarily religious, though it can be. Spiritual rest addresses the need for meaning, connection to something larger than the immediate demands of daily life, and a sense of purpose.

## 8. DIGITAL REST

A category that previous generations did not need. Digital rest is the deliberate removal of screen stimulation, not just reducing it, but creating periods of complete digital absence.



### RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Taylor & Francis, 2025*

Participants who limited their daily smartphone use to a maximum of two hours for three weeks showed significant improvements across sleep quality, stress levels, and overall wellbeing, with measurable effects appearing even within the first week. The study confirms that digital rest is not a lifestyle luxury but a quantifiable restorative intervention.

## CHAPTER

# 7

# The Attention Economy and Your Nervous System



## Directed Attention Fatigue

Attention Restoration Theory, developed by environmental psychologists Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, distinguishes between two types of attention. Directed attention, the effortful, voluntary focus required for work, reading, and problem-solving, is a finite resource that depletes with use. Involuntary attention, the effortless interest evoked by beautiful or gently stimulating environments, requires no effort and can actually restore directed attention capacity.

Digital media is almost entirely demanding of directed attention. The novelty-seeking design of digital platforms means your directed attention is continuously recruited, while the

constant switching between items ensures it is never fully deployed on anything long enough to enter a state of genuine absorption.



## RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Taylor & Francis, 2025*

A 2025 study found that exposure to nature improved subjective fatigue in ways that urban exposure did not, consistently enhancing working memory, attention control, and cognitive flexibility in fatigued participants. Even viewing nature images on a screen showed some restorative effect, suggesting that the quality of visual content, not just screen removal, matters for cognitive recovery.

## Boredom as a Skill

Boredom is the experience of having nothing compelling to engage your attention. In the digital age, this experience has become almost inaccessible. There is always something available to fill any gap. Research shows that boredom activates the default mode network, prompting creative thinking, self-reflection, and the processing of unresolved emotional material. The restless discomfort of boredom is the felt experience of your brain shifting into a restorative mode.





#### **SAMMY'S TIP 6**

### **Practise Deliberate Boredom**

Once a day, for at least five minutes, do nothing. No phone, no music, no podcast. Just sit, wait, or walk without input. The first few times this will feel deeply uncomfortable. That discomfort is normal. Stay with it. After two weeks of daily practice, most people report that the discomfort diminishes and is replaced by something that feels remarkably like relief.

PART THREE



*Practical Strategies*

## CHAPTER

# 8

## The Shutdown Ritual



**O**f all the practical strategies in this book, the shutdown ritual may be the single most impactful. It is the one change most consistently associated with improved sleep quality, reduced evening anxiety, and a genuine felt sense of recovery. And it costs nothing except intention.

### Why Your Brain Needs a Clear Signal

The human brain does not naturally distinguish between work thoughts and leisure thoughts. If unresolved tasks, unfinished conversations, and pending decisions are present in working memory, your brain will continue processing them regardless of whether you are still at your desk. A shutdown ritual serves a specific neurological function: it signals to the brain that active problem-solving on work-related material is complete for the day, and that it is safe to release that cognitive load.

## Designing Your Shutdown Ritual

An effective shutdown ritual typically takes between 10 and 20 minutes and includes three components. First, a review of what was accomplished today and what genuinely requires attention tomorrow, written down so the brain does not need to hold it in working memory overnight. Second, a clear statement of completion, said aloud or written. Third, a physical transition, closing the laptop, changing clothes, or stepping outside, that signals the shift from work mode to recovery mode.



### SAMMY'S TIP 7

#### **The Handover Note**

At the end of your working day, spend five minutes writing a brief note to tomorrow's self. List the three most important tasks for tomorrow and any pressing items that need attention. This is not a to-do list. It is a cognitive offload. Research on the Zeigarnik effect confirms that unfinished tasks occupy working memory until they are either completed or explicitly scheduled. Writing them down frees the mind from the obligation of remembering them.

## CHAPTER

# 9

# Digital Boundaries That Actually Work



## Meet Sarah



### REAL-WORLD STORY

*Sarah is 37, a freelance designer who set up extensive screen time limits on her phone six months ago. She has broken every single one. She overrides the limit daily, sometimes multiple times. She does not lack motivation. She does not lack knowledge. She lacks structural support for the behaviour change she genuinely wants to make. When we moved her phone charger to the hallway and removed social media apps from her phone's home screen, she reduced her evening usage by 70% within two weeks. She had not changed her resolve. She had changed her environment.*

Willpower is not the answer to digital overuse. Research confirms that willpower-based approaches to any behavioural pattern are systematically less effective than environmental and structural interventions. The most effective digital boundaries are not acts of discipline. They are acts of design.

## The Most Effective Interventions

Move your phone charger out of the bedroom. This single change, requiring the phone to live elsewhere overnight, removes the most disruptive sleep habit, checking the phone during the night, without requiring any ongoing willpower. It is a one-time decision with permanent benefit.

Remove social media apps from your phone's home screen. Research shows that the friction of searching for an app, even the three seconds of additional effort, is sufficient to interrupt habitual, mindless opening. Replace the apps on your home screen with something you want to do more of.

Use the 'do not disturb' schedule on your device to automatically silence all non-emergency notifications from 9 pm to 8 am. This creates a structural evening boundary that operates regardless of your moment-to-moment willpower.



## RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Aviva / Censuswide, 2026*

A 2026 survey of 2,000 UK adults found that 39% felt anxious after receiving a poor sleep score from their wearable device, and 25% said that tracking their sleep actually kept them awake. This paradox, technology introduced to improve rest becoming a source of rest-disrupting anxiety, is a distinctly contemporary challenge.



## SAMMY'S TIP 8

### The One-Week Experiment

For one week, implement just one structural boundary: move your phone charger to a room other than your bedroom. Buy a separate alarm clock if needed. Do not attempt anything else this week. At the end of the week, assess honestly: did you sleep differently? Did you wake feeling differently? Did your morning feel less pressured? Most people who complete this experiment do not go back.

## CHAPTER

# 10

## Mindfulness Without the Mysticism



**M**indfulness has accumulated such a weight of spiritual and commercial association that many people dismiss it before examining the evidence. This is a practical loss. The evidence base for mindfulness as a restorative intervention is substantial, rigorous, and growing. And the practices themselves are far simpler than their reputation suggests.

### What Mindfulness Actually Is

At its core, mindfulness is the practice of directing attention deliberately to the present moment, without evaluation or judgment. It is not about achieving a particular mental state. It is



not about emptying the mind. It is simply the repeated act of noticing where your attention is and choosing to redirect it, gently, without self-criticism, to whatever you have chosen as your focus.

## The Evidence

Studies consistently show that regular mindfulness practice, even in modest doses of 10 to 15 minutes per day, reduces activity in the brain's default threat-detection systems, lowers cortisol levels, improves sleep onset time, and increases the proportion of slow-wave and REM sleep. These are not marginal effects. They are the kinds of changes that, sustained over weeks and months, meaningfully alter the baseline of your nervous system.



### SAMMY'S TIP 9

#### **The Three-Breath Pause**

This is the smallest effective mindfulness practice I know. Three times each day, at a moment of your choosing, stop whatever you are doing and take three slow, deliberate breaths. Breathe in for a count of four, hold briefly, breathe out for a count of six. That is it. The extended exhale activates the parasympathetic nervous system, physically reducing your arousal level. Three times a day, three breaths each time. Eleven minutes a week. The research suggests this is enough to shift your baseline.

## CHAPTER

# 11

## Analogue Pleasures



### Meet Marcus



#### REAL-WORLD STORY

*Marcus is 52, a retired engineer who took up woodworking three years ago. He describes it as the first time in his adult life that he has felt genuinely present. When he is in his workshop, he does not think about his phone, his finances, or his health anxieties. He is simply attending to the wood, the grain, the angle of the chisel. He sleeps better on workshop days than on any other day of the week. He was not looking for a sleep intervention. He found one anyway.*

There is a category of activity that research consistently identifies as powerfully restorative: absorbing, manageable, analogue, and productive in a tangible sense. These activities engage the brain in

a way that is demanding enough to prevent rumination, but not demanding enough to activate the stress response. They produce a physical output, something in the world that did not exist before, which provides a form of meaning and satisfaction that digital activity rarely matches.

## Evidence-Backed Analogue Activities

### **COOKING**

Cooking engages multiple sensory systems simultaneously in a way that is absorbing but not demanding. The clear endpoint provides a satisfying sense of completion that open-ended digital activities lack. Research on cooking as a wellbeing practice consistently shows improvements in mood, sense of agency, and social connection.

### **GARDENING**

Gardening combines physical movement, nature exposure, sensory stimulation, and creative expression in a single activity. Research on gardening as a health intervention shows effects on depression, anxiety, and cognitive function that are comparable to some pharmacological treatments in mild to moderate presentations.

### **READING PHYSICAL BOOKS**

Physical books do not vibrate with notifications. They do not tempt you to switch tabs. They do not emit blue light. The linearity of physical reading trains sustained attention in a way that screen reading rarely does. Reading before sleep is one of the most reliably effective ways to prepare the brain for rest.

## CRAFT, MAKING, AND MANUAL WORK

Knitting, woodworking, drawing, painting, pottery, model-making: any form of skilled hand-work that requires gentle concentration and produces a physical output. The visible result of analogue making provides a form of meaning and satisfaction that digital activity rarely matches.



### SAMMY'S TIP 10

#### Rediscover One Abandoned Analogue Pleasure

Most adults had analogue hobbies before smartphones colonised leisure time. Think back: what did you do before you had a device in every pocket? Make a commitment to spend 30 minutes this week revisiting it. Do not aim for mastery or productivity. Aim only for engagement. The goal is to remember that absorption and satisfaction are available from sources that do not require a login.

## CHAPTER

# 12

## Nature as Medicine



**T**he evidence for nature's restorative effects on human cognition, mood, and physiological stress response is now substantial enough that some healthcare systems are beginning to prescribe it formally. You do not need a forest, a beach, or a countryside retreat to access these benefits. You need exposure to natural elements, and you need to access them without a screen in your hand.

### What the Research Shows

Natural environments have a quality that the Kaplans, in developing Attention Restoration Theory, called soft fascination: the capacity to capture attention effortlessly, without demanding directed cognitive engagement. A view of trees, moving water,

clouds, or a garden does not require you to evaluate, compare, or decide anything. It simply holds your attention gently, and in doing so, allows directed attention to recover.



## RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Taylor & Francis, 2025*

A 2025 study using neuroimaging found that nature exposure improved subjective fatigue and showed meaningful differences in prefrontal cerebral activity compared to urban visual exposure. Working memory, attention control, and cognitive flexibility all showed improvements following nature exposure, effects that could not be replicated by relaxing in an urban environment.

## Walking Without a Podcast

This deserves its own section because it is one of the most counterintuitive recommendations in this book for many people. Walking while listening to a podcast or music, while not without value, bypasses the specific restorative mechanism that unmediated walking provides. A walk in silence allows the default mode network to activate. It creates the conditions for the mind-wandering, memory integration, and creative insight that directed stimulation prevents.



#### **SAMMY'S TIP 11**

### **The 20-Minute Nature Prescription**

Research suggests that 20 minutes in a natural setting is the threshold at which cortisol levels show measurable reductions. Aim for at least one 20-minute outdoor experience each day. Leave your phone in your pocket or at home. Notice the specific qualities of what you see, hear, and smell. Active sensory engagement with the natural environment enhances its restorative effect.

## CHAPTER

# 13

## Sleep as a Non-Negotiable



**S**leep is not a lifestyle preference. It is a biological imperative, as fundamental to health as food and water. This chapter moves beyond the sleep hygiene basics that most people have heard, to address the specific digital threats to sleep quality that are most common and most damaging.

### Blue Light and Circadian Disruption

The short-wavelength blue light emitted by LED screens mimics the light spectrum most associated with daytime. When your eyes register this light in the evening, your suprachiasmatic nucleus, the brain's master clock, interprets it as a signal that it is still day,



suppressing the melatonin release that prepares your body for sleep. The result is a delayed sleep onset that can, over time, shift your circadian rhythm later and reduce total sleep time.

## The Orthosomnia Paradox

An important new development in sleep science is the phenomenon researchers have begun calling orthosomnia, sleep anxiety caused by sleep tracking. Wearable devices now provide detailed data on sleep stages, duration, and quality, and while this information can be useful, for a significant minority of users it creates a new source of anxiety that itself disrupts sleep.



### RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Aviva / Censuswide, 2026*

A 2026 survey of 2,000 UK adults found that 39% felt anxious after receiving a poor sleep score from their wearable device, and 25% said that tracking their sleep actually kept them awake. Over a third had become obsessed with hitting their sleep targets.

## Building a Sleep Environment That Works

**Temperature:** A bedroom temperature of 16-18 degrees Celsius supports the core body temperature drop associated with sleep onset. Many people sleep in rooms that are too warm. **Light:** complete darkness is ideal. Even the small LED indicator on a TV or phone charger can affect sleep quality in light-sensitive

individuals. Sound: silence is best, but consistent background sound, white noise or gentle natural sound, is significantly better than unpredictable environmental noise.



#### **SAMMY'S TIP 12**

### **The Sleep Tracking Decision**

If you use a wearable sleep tracker and find that checking your score in the morning reliably improves your mood and motivation, keep using it. If checking your score reliably makes you feel anxious or worse about your day, stop. The data is not worth the cortisol. Sleep quality is best assessed by the simple question: how do I feel? If you consistently wake feeling restored, your sleep is working, whatever the algorithm says.

PART FOUR



*Redesigning Your World*

## CHAPTER

# 14

## Evening Architecture



### The Wind-Down Sequence

Think of your evening as a series of stages, each progressively lower in stimulation and cognitive demand. The key principle is progressive deceleration: each hour of the evening should be, on balance, less stimulating than the one before.

#### **STAGE 1: TRANSITION**

The shutdown ritual. Physical movement if possible, a short walk, some stretching, a change of clothes. Something that signals to your body that the work context has ended.

## STAGE 2: ENGAGEMENT

This is the time for activities that require some engagement but are enjoyable rather than stressful. Cooking, social time, exercise, hobbies. Screen use at this stage is not prohibited, but should be intentional, a specific film, a video call with family, not passive scrolling.

## STAGE 3: UNWINDING

Progressive reduction of stimulation. Lower lighting. Quieter sound. Slower, softer activities, reading, gentle conversation, light stretching. Screen use significantly reduced or eliminated.

## STAGE 4: PREPARATION

The final transition. No screens. A consistent pre-sleep ritual, a warm bath or shower, herbal tea, journalling, or simple breathing exercises. The same sequence, performed the same way, every night.



*The power of an evening ritual is not magical. It is associative. When the same sequence of activities is repeated consistently before sleep, the brain begins to associate those activities with sleep onset. The ritual becomes a neurological trigger.*



### **SAMMY'S TIP 13**

#### **Redesign Your Living Room Lighting**

Most living rooms are lit for visibility, not for evening recovery. Bright overhead lighting suppresses melatonin production in the same way screens do. Invest in warm-spectrum bulbs (2700K or lower) and use lamps rather than overhead lighting in the evening. Smart bulbs that automatically shift colour temperature after 7 pm are an effective set-and-forget solution. Once the bulbs are changed, the benefit is automatic.

## CHAPTER

# 15

## Social Rest and Digital Relationships



### The Difference Between Connection and Performance

Social media is not, primarily, a platform for connection. It is a platform for broadcast. The associated anxiety, who will respond? how will it be received?, is incompatible with the experience of genuine social rest. Genuine social rest involves the experience of being with other people without performance pressure. It is the long, unplanned conversation with a friend. The comfortable silence with a partner. These experiences are deeply restorative precisely because they do not require the self-monitoring and impression management that social media demands.



## RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Journal of Affective Disorders, 2024*

A meta-analysis of 182 studies found that problematic social media use was negatively associated with wellbeing and positively associated with depression, anxiety, and sleep problems. The research identified social comparison and difficulty disengaging as the primary drivers of harm, not the content itself, but the relational dynamic of public performance and evaluation.



## SAMMY'S TIP 14

### **The Conversation Worth Having**

Research consistently distinguishes between the number of social contacts and the depth of social connection. It is possible to be surrounded by people and messages and be profoundly lonely, as many heavily-connected social media users report. Prioritise depth over frequency. One genuine, present, uninterrupted conversation with someone you care about, without phones on the table, provides more social restoration than a dozen group chats.



CHAPTER

# 16

## Families, Children, and Screens



### Modelling Rest

Children learn their relationship with technology primarily by watching the adults around them. If the adults in a household are perpetually on devices, treat every notification as urgent, take their phones to the dinner table, and scroll through evenings that could otherwise be spent in engagement and connection, children register this and replicate it. The most powerful intervention you can make in your child's relationship with screens is to model a healthy relationship with your own.

## Shared Family Rituals Without Screens

The most effective family digital boundaries are not restrictions but replacements, activities that are genuinely enjoyable, regularly practised, and screen-free by design. A weekly family meal where all phones are in a separate room. A shared physical activity, walking, cycling, swimming, that provides connection, nature exposure, and physical rest simultaneously. A family reading hour, each person with their own book, in the same room, in comfortable silence.



### SAMMY'S TIP 15

#### **The Basket Method**

A practical family boundary that many households report success with: a physical basket or tray in a central location where all family phones are placed during dinner and during the hour before children's bedtime. The physicality matters. It is harder to 'just quickly check' something when doing so requires getting up and going to the basket than when the phone is in your pocket. Make the placement of phones in the basket a routine rather than a negotiation.

## CHAPTER

# 17

# Work, Employers, and the Right to Disconnect



## The Right to Disconnect

The right to disconnect, the legal or contractual right of employees to not respond to work communications outside of working hours, has been gaining traction globally since France introduced legislation on the subject in 2017. Research consistently shows that employees in organisations with strong disconnection norms sleep better, report higher job satisfaction, experience lower burnout rates, and are, paradoxically, more productive during working hours than those in always-on cultures.



## RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Work & Stress Journal, 2025*

A 2025 review highlighted that burnout, characterised by exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy, results from chronic workplace stress without adequate recovery. Structural organisational factors, rather than individual resilience deficits, are the primary drivers of burnout, and interventions at the organisational level consistently outperform those aimed solely at individual coping strategies.



## SAMMY'S TIP 16

### **Set Your Communication Expectations Explicitly**

Add a simple note to your email signature: 'I typically respond to emails within 24 hours on working days.' This single line manages the expectations of hundreds of correspondents without requiring individual negotiation. For internal messaging, agree with your team on what constitutes a genuinely urgent message requiring immediate response, versus a standard query that can wait for a scheduled check.

PART FIVE



*Your Personal Rest Plan*

## CHAPTER

# 18

## Your Rest Audit



Everything in this book has been building toward this: a structured, honest assessment of your own rest, where you are depleted, what is driving that depletion, and what specific changes are most likely to make a meaningful difference.

### Your Depletion Profile

Rate your current experience in each of the eight rest types from 1 (well rested) to 5 (severely depleted). Most people find that their highest depletions are not in physical rest, where they have the most established habits, but in mental, sensory, emotional, and digital rest.

## Your Digital Depletion Drivers

Answer the following questions honestly. How many hours of screen time are you averaging per day? What is your first interaction with your phone in the morning, and how soon after waking does it happen? Do you have a consistent shutdown ritual? Is your phone in your bedroom at night? When did you last spend an hour without a screen available? Rate your sleep quality over the past month from 1 to 10.

## Your Top Three Priorities

Based on your depletion profile and your honest answers above, identify the three areas where targeted change would have the greatest impact on your rest and wellbeing. Be specific. Not 'improve my sleep' but 'move my phone charger out of the bedroom this week.' Write these down. Tell someone. Then act on them, beginning today, not from Monday.

CHAPTER

# 19

## Building Your Rest Practice



### The 30-Day Rest Reset

#### **WEEK ONE: AWARENESS**

No major changes yet. Your only task this week is to observe, honestly and without judgment. Keep your screen time data visible. Note when you feel most depleted during the day and what preceded it. Notice how you feel after different types of evening activity. Record your sleep quality each morning with a simple number from 1 to 10.



## **WEEK TWO: SMALL CHANGES**

Introduce three changes only. Move your phone charger out of the bedroom. Implement a 10-minute shutdown ritual at the end of your working day. Replace one 15-minute evening screen session with one of the analogue activities from Chapter 11. Notice whether these three changes affect your sleep or your felt sense of recovery.

## **WEEK THREE: ENVIRONMENT**

Redesign your physical environment to support the habits you are building. Audit your phone notifications and remove all non-essential ones. Adjust your evening lighting to warmer, lower levels after 7 pm. Identify and create one phone-free zone in your home. Plan and execute one 20-minute outdoor walk without headphones this week.

## **WEEK FOUR: RHYTHM**

The goal of Week Four is consistency, the same bedtime within a 30-minute window, the same shutdown ritual, the same morning practice of not checking your phone for at least 20 minutes after waking. Rhythm is what transforms individual practices into a sustainable pattern. The brain is a pattern-recognition machine. It responds powerfully to consistent routines, eventually making the behaviours automatic rather than effortful.



## RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Taylor & Francis, 2025*

Participants who reduced smartphone use to under two hours per day for three weeks showed the strongest improvements in the first week, suggesting that even short-duration changes produce measurable benefits rapidly. However, old patterns began reasserting themselves when active attention to the practice lapsed. Maintenance requires ongoing, if lighter, intentionality.

## Dealing With Setbacks

You will have evenings when the boundary dissolves. Weeks when work overwhelms the shutdown ritual. Nights when anxiety drives you to the phone at 2 am. This is not failure. It is the normal pattern of behaviour change. The variable that most strongly predicts long-term success is not the absence of setbacks, but the speed with which you return to the practice after one. When you slip, the only question is: what is the next right action, taken today?

## CONCLUSION

# Rest as Resistance



We began this book with a paradox: the most connected, time-efficient, labour-saving generation in history is also one of the most unrested. By now, you have a clear picture of why, and, more importantly, of what you can do about it.

The pressure to be always available, always productive, always reachable is not accidental. It is the intended output of systems designed by organisations whose interests are served by your continuous engagement. Your attention is a commodity being extracted. Your rest is being colonised. Choosing to reclaim it is not merely a personal health decision. It is an act of resistance against a culture that has confused connectivity with meaning, availability with value, and exhaustion with commitment.

The evidence is unambiguous. You think more clearly when rested. You make better decisions. You are more creative, more empathetic, more patient, more present. You are a better colleague, partner, parent, and friend. The world does not benefit from your exhaustion. It benefits from your recovery.

## A Final Invitation

Rest is not a reward for completed work. It is not something you earn at the end of the week or the quarter or the year. It is a practice, daily, ongoing, built in small choices and consistent habits, that makes everything else possible.

Begin tonight. Not next Monday. Not after this project is finished. Tonight, one small thing: the phone in a different room, the evening news left unwatched, a book opened, a walk taken without headphones.

*Sleep well. Rest deeply. Live fully.*

# About Sammy Margo



**S**ammy Margo is a Chartered Physiotherapist with over 30 years of clinical experience, including as the first female physiotherapist in English professional football. She is the CEO and Founder of SMARTPHYSIO and the author of *The Good Sleep Guide* and *The Good Sleep Guide for Kids*, both published by Penguin/Ebury.

Sammy is widely recognised as one of the UK's leading voices on sleep, recovery, and the physiological science of rest. She combines rigorous clinical expertise with a warm, practical approach to helping people understand and improve their own wellbeing.

*The Good Sleep Guide for Rest* is the second in a series of evidence-based e-books exploring the science of sleep and recovery across different areas of life. The series also includes *The Good Sleep Guide for Strength*, and *The Good Sleep Guide for Health Tech*.

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