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Road to Resilience

Peak Performance Flows with Its Own Rhythm: Find Yours and Protect It

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Founders of Professional Mind Resilience Institute (PMRI)

The 5 AM Club has become the anthem of modern productivity, a kind of moral standard for those who wish to lead, succeed, and master themselves. To rise before dawn is to signal control, virtue, and determination. For many, it truly works. The quiet hours before sunrise hold unmatched clarity and calm.

Yet for others, that same ritual feels like punishment. Their minds resist the early light, and their thoughts have not yet gathered themselves. It is not a lack of discipline but a difference in design.

The truth is simple: peak performance flows with its own rhythm. The work of resilience is not to conform to someone else's clock, but to learn your own and protect it.

The Science of Rhythm

Our internal timing is orchestrated by the circadian system, a 24-hour rhythm directed by the brain's suprachiasmatic nucleus (SCN), which synchronises hormones, alertness, and temperature with light and darkness. Within that rhythm, individuals differ in when their energy peaks.

This variation is known as the chronotype, a biological inclination toward certain sleep and wake patterns. The terms "larks" and "owls" originated in chronobiology research by Olov Östberg and Jürgen Aschoff in the 1970s, who used avian metaphors to describe natural early and late risers. Larks thrive at dawn, while owls awaken as the world grows still.

These patterns are partly genetic and remarkably stable. Twin studies and genome-wide analyses (Jones et al., *Nature Communications*, 2019) suggest that roughly 40 percent of chronotype is inherited. As neuroscientist Russell Foster observes, trying to change it is like swimming upstream against your own neurochemistry.

Morning Minds and the Grace of Dawn

For morning chronotypes, the 5 AM ethos feels almost effortless. Their cortisol awakening response peaks between six and eight, and dopamine, the brain's motivation molecule, rises with the light.

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A biologically aligned morning might unfold like this:

- **Wake with light.** Exposure to dawn light activates the SCN and anchors energy for the day.
- **Move early.** Exercise raises dopamine and brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), enhancing neural flexibility and sustained attention.
- **Reflect and plan.** Beta-wave activity is high, supporting structure and goal setting.
- **Deep work before noon.** Analytical reasoning and executive decision-making are strongest during this window.

Performance technique: Morning professionals' benefit from front-loading cognitive intensity.

Research on ultradian rhythms suggests scheduling deep focus in 90-minute blocks followed by short recovery breaks maintains peak neural efficiency. Morning journaling also enhances dopamine-driven motivation by clarifying purpose at the day's start.

Caution for the 5 AM Club: Even the earliest risers must guard against over-exertion. Beginning the day long before the body is ready can sustain elevated cortisol for hours, which may later collapse into fatigue and reduced focus. Research indicates that perceived productivity gains can fade as cumulative sleep debt builds, resulting in mid-afternoon slumps and poorer executive function.

Waking early does not guarantee productivity; deliberate planning and sufficient sleep do. If the price of rising at 5 AM is depleted energy by 3 PM, discipline becomes exhaustion rather than performance.

Evening Minds and the Symphony of Night

Evening chronotypes are tuned differently. Their melatonin release and body temperature rhythms shift later, and the brain's default mode network, responsible for creativity, insight, and associative thinking, activates most powerfully after sunset.

Many describe a "second wind" around eight or nine in the evening, when concentration deepens and ideas begin to connect with surprising clarity. This is the mirror image of the morning lark's dawn flow, an effortless alignment between biology and focus. When the 5 AM Club is winding down, fighting to stay awake through a late dinner, or struggling to hold an engaging conversation, the 9 PM mind is just coming alive. For them, the night hums with quiet possibility.

A supportive routine for the evening chronotype begins not with imitation but with awareness. Mornings should transition the body gently from rest to readiness, reserving the sharper cognitive edges for when they naturally emerge.

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A neuroscience-aligned day for the 9 PM Club might look like this:

- **Wake later when possible.** Even 45 minutes more sleep improves prefrontal performance and emotional regulation.
- **Seek light and hydration.** Morning light helps suppress melatonin and recalibrate the SCN, while hydration aids metabolic activation.
- **Move softly.** Gentle stretching or walking stimulates dopamine and circulation without triggering premature cortisol spikes.
- **Do lighter tasks early.** Use mornings for administration or reading until cognitive sharpness rises.
- **Protect evenings for deep work.** When focus and creativity align, these hours are golden.

Performance technique: Members of the 9 PM Club can structure their work in flow cycles of 60–90 minutes during their natural evening peak, followed by brief recovery rituals such as stretching, hydration, or mindful breathing. This helps sustain dopamine without overstimulating cortisol. Neuroimaging research shows that evening chronotypes recruit associative networks more strongly at night, which favours synthesis and creative drafting.

Caution for the 9 PM Club: The evening rhythm, though powerful, carries its own risks. Over-extending late into the night can delay melatonin release and make restorative sleep elusive. When work continues past the body's natural wind-down, the nervous system remains in a state of alertness that bleeds into the early hours. The result is curtailed sleep, difficulty waking, and a constant lag when the world expects functionality at 7 AM. Studies on evening chronotypes highlight this “social jet lag” as a key contributor to fatigue, mood decline, and reduced cognitive performance. The discipline for the 9 PM Club lies not only in harnessing the night but in knowing when to close it.

Evening minds are not indolent; they are phase-shifted. When their rhythm is respected, their work reflects a distinctive intelligence that thrives in stillness rather than sunrise.

When Biology Collides with the Billable Day

Society, and the legal profession in particular, rewards morning visibility. Court hours, firm culture, and billable expectations often force night chronotypes to operate in a state of social jet lag.

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Many evening professionals sleep less than their early-rising peers because they use their natural peak at night but must still rise early. Chronic sleep restriction impairs the prefrontal cortex, undermining judgment, empathy, and cognitive control, the very foundations of legal excellence. And because they cannot meet the dawn with a run or a smoothie, they often abandon self-care altogether, reinforcing fatigue and guilt.

What the Evidence Actually Says

Most public advice treats early rising as a universal edge. The data are more nuanced. Prominent late-working exemplars such as Barack Obama, Winston Churchill, Bob Dylan, Elon Musk, and Charles Darwin produced their best work at night, which suggests timing is a variable, not a virtue signal. Expert reviews caution that forcing a 5 AM start without adequate sleep, or in conflict with one's chronotype, can impair attention and decision-making. Sleep researcher Neil Stanley notes there is no scientific evidence that waking at 5 AM inherently increases productivity or success. Other summaries reach a similar conclusion. The advantage is not in the hour, but in the alignment between sleep sufficiency, circadian timing, and the cognitive demands of the task.

Permission to Perform Differently, Yet Excellently

True discipline lies not in conformity but in alignment. The most resilient professionals learn when their mind is sharpest, when empathy peaks, and when creativity flows, and they reserve those hours for their most demanding work. For morning people, the quiet dawn is sacred. For evening minds, the hush of night offers equal brilliance. At PMRI, we do not prescribe a bestseller blueprint. We teach professionals to align sleep, light, and workload with their chronotype so that performance is sustained rather than borrowed. Give your best hours to your best work and protect the rest.

For more on cognitive resilience and sustainable performance frameworks, visit www.pmri.co.za.

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About the Authors:

Sonja Cilliers is an advocate of the High Court of South Africa. She was admitted as an attorney of the High Court in 2001 and, after practicing as an attorney for several years, did pupillage and became a member of the Pretoria Society of Advocates in 2005. Sonja has been in practice, as attorney and advocate for an aggregate of 24 years, and obtained extensive experience in litigation in various fields of the law; including contractual law, banking law and litigation, corporate law, family law, insurance law and personal injury law. Sonja completed her B(Proc) (1998), LLB (1999) and LLM (contractual law) (2003) degrees at the University of Pretoria. She is qualified as an AFSA trained Arbitrator and Mediator and obtained the one-year diploma from AFSA in Arbitration and Mediation in 2003.

Maryke Groenewald is a transformation coach with a passion for facilitating personal and professional growth. She holds an Honours in Psychology, a BCom in Behavioral Sciences, and certifications in Master Transformation Coaching, NLP Practitioner, and Neuro-Coaching. Maryke combines her diverse skill set and experience to help individuals unlock their full potential. Maryke has been coaching and training individuals for over 10 years. She frequently does group training and coaching for corporate teams and universities.