

10-S BRAIN PROTOCOL



*A Neurosurgeon's Guide to
Protecting Your Brain for Life*

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Docloques

First Edition · 2026

From my operating room



For twenty-five years, I have spent my days a few millimetres from the most complex object in the known universe. I have held living human brains in my hands, watched them pulse with a heartbeat, seen the tissue that holds a person's memories, their language, their love for their children – and understood how fragile and how magnificent it is.

One question follows me out of that room more than any other. Patients ask it. Their families ask it. "Doctor – what do YOU do to protect your own brain?"

This handbook is my answer. Not internet trends. Not things I read once and never tried. Everything here is grounded in neuroscience, shaped by a quarter-century inside the human skull, and practised by me, every single day.

I have reduced it to ten habits, each beginning with the letter S – the 10-S Brain Protocol:

Sleep · Sunlight · Squats · Strength · Supplements · Socialization · Skills · Savoring · Stress · Stillness

None require a prescription. None require money. Not one requires me. They are the only ten operations you can perform on your own brain – and unlike mine, they leave no scar.

I cannot promise you a perfect brain; no honest surgeon can. But the brain you carry at seventy is being built by the choices you make today. This is how you build it well.

Dr Arun L Naik
Neurosurgeon

Best read on a phone held sideways, or on a tablet

Disclaimer

A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Please read this once.

This is education, not medical advice. This handbook is for general information and education only. It reflects my views and my reading of the science at the time of writing. It is not personal medical advice, and it is not a substitute for a consultation with your own doctor, who knows your history, your medications, and your body. Nothing in these pages is intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease.

Speak to your own doctor first. Before you change your habits, start or stop any supplement, alter your exercise, or act on anything you read here, please talk it through with a qualified healthcare professional — especially if you have a medical condition, take medication, are pregnant or breastfeeding, or are over 65. What is right for me, or for a general reader, may not be right for you.

The supplement chapter describes general principles, not a prescription. Blood tests, dosages, and any decision to take a supplement should be made with your doctor. Supplements can interact with medications and conditions.

Squats, strength training, and movement carry some risk of injury. Start gently, respect pain, and get medical clearance first if you have heart, joint, bone, or balance problems, or have been inactive.

The science evolves. Brain-health research changes. Much of what I describe shows association, not proof of cause — and I have tried to say so honestly throughout. Some findings here will be refined or revised in the years ahead. Where I was confident, I said so; where the evidence was thin, I told you.

This handbook cannot help with urgent or serious symptoms. If you have sudden weakness, difficulty speaking, a severe headache, chest pain, thoughts of harming yourself, or any medical emergency, seek immediate medical care or call your local emergency number.

By reading on, you understand that this handbook is offered in good faith as general education, and that responsibility for any action you take remains with you and your healthcare provider.

Why your brain needs a protocol?

Let me start with the number that changed how I think about my work.

A few years ago, roughly 57 million people worldwide were living with dementia. By 2050, that figure is expected to reach 153 million. As we live longer, more of us will face the slow erosion of the very thing that makes us us — our memories, our words, our selves. For most of my career, we treated this as fate. Something that simply happens, or doesn't. We were wrong.

In 2024, the Lancet Commission reached a conclusion that ought to be shouted from rooftops: up to 45% of dementia cases could potentially be delayed or prevented by addressing everyday, modifiable factors — physical inactivity, social isolation, too little mental challenge, low mood, high blood pressure, poor sleep. Not exotic interventions. Daily habits, within your reach.

That is the entire reason this handbook exists.

Here is the truth I've made peace with as a surgeon: your brain was not designed to last ninety years. That magnificent organ must be maintained to go the distance. A car driven for decades needs care. So does a brain.

Two things give me hope. First, timing — the changes that lead to dementia begin quietly, decades before symptoms. The window to act is long, and open now, whatever your age. Never too early, never too late. Second, simplicity — ten habits, each beginning with S, that you can start today, for free.

I can't promise these will prevent every illness; no honest doctor can. But how you live shapes how your brain ages. This handbook hands you the controls.

Let's begin with S.

How to use this handbook?

This is not a book to read once and shelve. It's a handbook — something to keep, mark up, and return to. Here's how to get the most from it.

Read it in any order. The ten S's aren't ranked. Start with any one of these. And if one word tugs at you — the habit you already know you neglect — begin there.

Every chapter follows the same rhythm. A moment from my operating life, the honest science, exactly what I do myself, a short checklist, and one line worth remembering. The uniformity is deliberate: once you learn the rhythm, the whole system becomes easy to hold in your head.

I've promised you honesty, and you'll see it. Twice in this book — on Supplements and Stillness, where the science is genuinely mixed — you'll find a colour-coded verdict box sorting what truly helps from what's overhyped. Where I'm confident, I'll say so plainly. Where the evidence is thin, I'll tell you that too. I'd rather earn your trust than win your applause.

Then put it to work. Toward the back you'll find your one-page Prescription — the whole protocol distilled to ten lines you can photograph and keep.

One last principle, and it's the most important in the book: you don't need a perfect brain, and you won't do all ten perfectly. You need consistent habits, not flawless ones. Start with one. Let it become easy. Add another. That's how a brain is built to last — not in a heroic week, but in a quiet decade.

YES, turn the page, and let's start with S.

SI-SLEEP

Your brain's night shift

FROM THE OPERATING TABLE

Whenever I open the skull, I'm working beside a quiet plumbing system most people have never heard of — tiny channels that bathe the brain in fluid. For years we barely understood it. Now we're fairly sure it does its most important work while you're fast asleep. The brain has a night shift, and it clocks in the moment you close your eyes.

THE SCIENCE

Think of your waking brain as a busy kitchen. All day, as neurons fire, they generate metabolic "leftovers" — including proteins like amyloid-beta and tau, the ones that pile up in Alzheimer's.

During deep sleep, a clean-up system called the glymphatic system becomes highly active, washing much of that waste away. A recent human study found a normal night cleared more of these Alzheimer's-related proteins than a sleep-deprived one — early but genuinely exciting evidence.

I'll be honest, because I'd rather you trust me than be dazzled: scientists still debate exactly when this clean-up peaks. But the direction is clear. Good sleep is one of the most powerful, free things you can do for the organ I spend my life protecting.

The takeaway isn't "sleep prevents dementia" — no one can promise that. It's simpler and truer: sleep is when your brain cleans house. Give it the time to do the job.

WHAT I ACTUALLY DO?

I protect 7–8 hours the way I protect anything that matters — I schedule it. I keep the same sleep and wake time, even on weekends, because my brain loves a rhythm more than a lie-in. I stop caffeine after early afternoon; it lingers longer than most people think. I keep the bedroom cool and genuinely dark. And about an hour before bed I put the screens down — not because a screen is evil, but because the clean-up crew works best when I'm not still sending emails.

SI-SLEEP

Your brain's night shift

THE CHECKLIST

- ☐ Aim for 7–8 hours — an appointment, not a leftover
- ☐ Same bedtime and wake time, weekends included
- ☐ No caffeine after early afternoon
- ☐ Cool, dark, quiet room
- ☐ Screens down ~60 minutes before bed

START HERE

Pick a fixed wake time — even weekends — for one week.

"Sleep isn't the opposite of productivity. It's the night shift that keeps your brain clean enough to be productive at all."

S2-SUNLIGHT

The Best Sleep Pill Rises with the Sun

FROM THE OPERATING TABLE

Deep in the brain, right where I navigate with the greatest care, sits a cluster of cells the size of a grain of rice: the suprachiasmatic nucleus — your master clock. And this tiny conductor sets its time by one thing above all else: the light that hits your eyes in the morning. You don't reach it with a scalpel. You reach it with a walk outside.

THE SCIENCE

Your body runs on a roughly 24-hour clock, and it needs a daily cue to stay accurate. Morning light is that cue.

Bright morning light does two useful things. It shuts down melatonin, the drowsy hormone, so you feel awake and clear. And it nudges cortisol — yes, the "stress hormone," but in the morning it's exactly what lifts you into the day. This is your natural wake-up call, and it works far better than the one on your phone.

Then the clever part: by setting your clock now, morning light schedules your melatonin to rise on time tonight — which is why people who get morning light tend to fall asleep more easily. The sunlight you catch at 7 a.m. is helping you sleep at 10 p.m.

Many people feel brighter in mood, too — likely part serotonin, part the calm of a well-set clock. The fine details are still being worked out, but the everyday effect is real enough that I wouldn't skip it.

So no, sunlight isn't a literal pill. It's better — free, no side effects, and your brain has been waiting for it your whole life.

WHAT I ACTUALLY DO?

I get outside within the first hour of waking — even 10 minutes does it. On grey mornings I stay out a little longer, because clouds cut the dose. I never stare at the sun; I just let the morning brightness reach my eyes while I walk or have my first coffee outdoors. And I've learned a window isn't the same as the real thing — glass filters out much of what my clock is hungry for. So I step outside, not just beside it.

S₂-SUNLIGHT

The Best Sleep Pill Rises with the Sun

THE CHECKLIST

- ☐ Get outside within ~60 minutes of waking
- ☐ 10 minutes on bright days, up to ~20 when grey
- ☐ Real outdoor light — not through a window
- ☐ Never look directly at the sun
- ☐ Pair it with something you already do — coffee, a walk

START HERE

Tomorrow morning: take your first coffee outside for ten minutes.

"The alarm on your phone wakes your body. The sun outside your door wakes your brain."

S₃-SQUATS

Your Brain Begins Below the Waist

FROM THE OPERATING TABLE

I've spent a career reminding people that the brain doesn't live in a jar. It's fed by blood, moved by muscle, and kept sharp by a body that stays strong. And it's rarely the patients with strong legs I worry about. A fall in your seventies can undo a lifetime of good living — and a body that can still stand, sit, and catch itself protects the brain in ways no supplement ever will.

THE SCIENCE

Here's a finding that surprises almost everyone. Researchers followed 324 twins for ten years and found that the strength of a person's legs was one of the best predictors of how well their brain aged. The twin with stronger legs showed less brain shrinkage a decade later than her genetically identical sister.

Let me be a careful doctor, though: that study was in women, and it shows a link, not proof that squats alone rebuild your brain. Strong legs may partly be a sign of an active life. But the link is real, repeated, and points somewhere useful.

Why might legs matter so much? Your leg muscles are the biggest pump driving blood and oxygen up toward your brain. Working muscle releases helpful signalling molecules that seem to talk to the brain. And strong legs keep you upright and steady — fewer falls, and a fall that injures the head is one of the fastest ways a good brain gets into trouble.

You don't need a gym or a barbell. You need to stand up from a chair, again and again, for the rest of your life. That single movement — the squat — is one of the most brain-protective things your body can do.

WHAT I ACTUALLY DO?

I treat the humble squat as non-negotiable, and keep it embarrassingly simple. I do sit-to-stands from a chair — down slow, up strong — in small sets through the day. When I want more, I hold a countertop and go a little deeper. I don't chase heavy weight or perfect form; I chase consistency, because the leg you'll be grateful for at seventy is built by the boring repetitions at fifty. And I never train a joint into pain.

S₃-SQUATS

Your Brain Begins Below the Waist

THE CHECKLIST

- ☐ Sit-to-stands from a chair — small sets through the day
- ☐ Down slow, up strong; let the muscle work
- ☐ Add depth or a countertop hold as it gets easy
- ☐ Show up daily rather than lift heavy
- ☐ Never push a joint into sharp pain

START HERE

Right now: stand up and sit down from your chair, slowly, ten times.

"You will not lose your independence in your head first. You'll lose it in your legs. Guard them."

S4-STRENGTH TRAINING

Muscle Is Medicine for the Brain

FROM THE OPERATING TABLE

For most of my career, we thought of muscle as simple machinery — pulleys of meat that move the bones. We were wrong, and I love being wrong in this direction. Muscle is one of the busiest chemical factories in your body, and some of what it makes seems to travel all the way up to the brain I'm operating on. When you lift something heavy, you're not just training your arms. You may be sending a message to your mind.

THE SCIENCE

Squats were about your legs as a pump and a foundation. Strength is about something more astonishing: your muscles as a gland that talks. When a muscle contracts hard against resistance, it releases signalling molecules called myokines into the blood. One leading theory is that some reach the brain and encourage the release of BDNF — often called "fertiliser for the brain," because it helps neurons survive, connect, and grow, especially in the memory centre.

My honest caveat: this muscle-to-brain conversation is a promising story, not a closed case. In humans the BDNF results are mixed, and researchers are still mapping how the signal travels. What is increasingly clear is that older adults who train their strength show better memory, sharper thinking, and better-preserved brain tissue than those who don't.

So I don't oversell it — and I don't need to. Lifting appears to do something no crossword ever will: it may change your brain's chemistry from the muscle up. Twice a week is enough to be in the conversation.

WHAT I ACTUALLY DO?

I strength-train 3-4 times a week, and keep it unglamorous. I work the big movements — pushing, pulling, carrying something heavy across the room — because big muscles seem to send the loudest signal. I lift until the last couple of reps are genuinely hard; that honest effort is what appears to matter, not the number on the weight. I add a little more over time, patiently. And I protect my joints and form, because an injury that stops me training undoes all of it.

S4-STRENGTH TRAINING

Muscle Is Medicine for the Brain

THE CHECKLIST

- ☐ Strength-train 2-3 times a week
- ☐ Favour big movements — push, pull, carry, lift
- ☐ Make the last 1-2 reps genuinely hard
- ☐ Add resistance over time, patiently
- ☐ Protect form and joints — an injury stalls everything

START HERE

This week: pick two days and carry something heavy across the room.

"Your muscles aren't just for lifting. They're a gland that speaks to your brain — so give them something worth talking about."

S5-SUPPLEMENTS

Supplement a Deficiency, Not Your Anxiety

FROM THE OPERATING TABLE

I'll tell you something the supplement aisle won't. In twenty-five years, I have never once opened a skull and wished my patient had taken more pills off a shelf. What I have seen is the quiet damage a genuine deficiency can do – and the difference it makes when a real one is found and fixed. That's the whole truth of this chapter.

THE SCIENCE

We live in the golden age of the supplement – a pill promised for every worry. Let me be the doctor who tells you what the evidence actually says.

The honest headline: for a well-fed person, most brain supplements don't do much. Take omega-3 fish oil, the darling of brain health. Across the large trials, results are genuinely split – some show a small benefit, many show none, and recent research hints that very high doses may do harm. Not a reason to panic; a reason not to megadose.

Now the other side, where supplements earn their place. Some deficiencies really do hurt the brain. Low vitamin B12 is linked to memory and thinking problems, and grows more common with age or certain diets. Low vitamin D is widespread. When these are genuinely low, correcting them is real medicine. When they're normal, more does little.

A supplement is a repair tool, not daily insurance. The magic isn't in the pill – it's in the deficiency it corrects. And food first, always – oily fish, eggs, leafy greens.

THE SUPPLEMENT VERDICT

Worth it – when you're actually low

- Vitamin B12 – correcting a real deficiency protects memory; low levels rise with age and plant-based diets

- Vitamin D – widespread deficiency; worth correcting when a test shows you're low

The jury's still out

- Omega-3 – trials split; a modest dose is fine, but don't expect miracles or megadose

- "Brain" blends – a little of everything, rarely enough of anything

Not what the label implies

- High-dose anything "for the brain" in a well-fed person – more is not better

S5-SUPPLEMENTS

Supplement a Deficiency, Not Your Anxiety

THE TWO YOU'LL ASK ABOUT

Creatine — the gym powder, and one of the more promising brain supplements. Careful trials suggest a modest lift to memory and mental speed, clearest when the brain is strained: poor sleep, older age, or in vegetarians. Cheap, safe, well-studied. Reasonable to try — just don't expect a new brain.

Magnesium — two truths the marketing blurs. One: many people genuinely don't get enough from food, and correcting that is sensible. Two: the premium "brain" form (magnesium L-threonate) has encouraging early trials, but several are small and funded by the sellers — so hold those claims loosely. Eat magnesium-rich foods first; correct a real gap; don't overpay for hype.

WHAT I ACTUALLY DO?

I don't guess — I test. I get my levels checked and supplement only what's actually low; for me that's usually vitamin D, and I watch B12 as I age. I take Vit B12, D, fish oils and Creatine. I take plain, sensible doses, not heroic ones, because more is not better and can be worse. I get most of what I need from real food, and treat the supplement shelf as a pharmacy for gaps — not a grocery aisle for anxiety. And I re-test rather than assume.

THE CHECKLIST

- Test before you supplement — find real gaps
- Correct genuine deficiencies (often vitamin D; watch B12)
- Food first — oily fish, eggs, leafy greens, nuts, seeds
- Sensible doses only — more is not better
- Re-test over time; adjust rather than assume

START HERE

This month: book a blood test for vitamin D and B12 before buying anything.

"A supplement is a repair tool, not daily insurance. Fix what's actually missing — and let a blood test, not a billboard, decide."

S6-SOCIALIZATION

The Brain That Talks, Thrives

FROM THE OPERATING TABLE

Some of the most sobering moments of my career come not in the operating room but in the days after. I've watched two patients with nearly identical surgeries recover in completely different ways — and again and again, the one surrounded by people who visit, who call, who argue about the football, does better. Medicine measures the tumour and the blood pressure. But I've learned to notice who's sitting in the waiting room. The brain is a social organ. It heals, and holds up, in company.

THE SCIENCE

We treat connection as a luxury — something for when the "real" health work is done. The evidence says the opposite: your relationships are the real health work.

Studies that follow people for years find the socially connected keep their thinking sharper for longer, while the isolated decline faster. Brain scans add a striking detail: isolated and lonely people show, on average, less volume in the very regions that matter most for memory.

One distinction most people miss: there's social isolation — objectively few people around you — and loneliness, the painful feeling of it. You can have either without the other, and the objective isolation seems to carry much of the risk on its own. This isn't only about feelings. It's about actual contact.

Why would company protect the brain? Isolation raises stress and inflammation. It drags sleep and activity down. And conversation itself is a genuine workout — following words, reading a face, holding your reply.

My careful-doctor caveat: some of this is a two-way street. A brain quietly beginning to change can cause a person to withdraw — so isolation is sometimes an early sign, not only a cause. Probably both, feeding each other. Which is why the response is the same: stay in contact, on purpose.

S6-SOCIALIZATION

The Brain That Talks, Thrives

WHAT I ACTUALLY DO?

I protect connection the way I protect sleep — I refuse to let it be the thing that slips. I keep a few real relationships watered with regular, unglamorous contact: a call on the drive home, a standing meal, a message that isn't about work. I try to have at least one proper, face-to-face conversation most days, because a voice and a face do something a text can't. I say yes to the gathering even when I'm tired, more often than I say no. And I've started treating "who will I still be talking to at seventy?" as a real question worth planning for now.

THE CHECKLIST

- ☐ One real, face-to-face or voice conversation most days
- ☐ Keep a few close relationships in regular contact
- ☐ Say yes to gatherings more than you say no
- ☐ After retirement, rebuild purpose — a group, cause, or craft
- ☐ Treat connection as health, not leisure — schedule it

START HERE

Today: call one person you've been meaning to talk to — voice, not text.

"You will not protect your brain alone in a room. The people who keep calling you are part of your medicine — so keep calling them back."

S7-SKILLS

Confuse Your Brain to Improve It

FROM THE OPERATING TABLE

Some of the most sobering moments of my career come not in the operating room but in the days after. I've watched two patients with nearly identical surgeries recover in completely different ways — and again and again, the one surrounded by people who visit, who call, who argue about the football, does better. Medicine measures the tumour and the blood pressure. But I've learned to notice who's sitting in the waiting room. The brain is a social organ. It heals, and holds up, in company.

THE SCIENCE

Your brain runs on a simple rule: neurons that fire together, wire together. Practise something and you strengthen those circuits — that's neuroplasticity.

But here's what most “brain games” get wrong. Plasticity doesn't respond to busy. It responds to new and hard. When older adults took up genuinely demanding new skills — photography from scratch, quilting — their memory improved. Those who did familiar or comfortable activities didn't. If it feels awkward and frustrating, that's not you being bad at it. That's the sound of your brain rewiring.

An honest limit: getting good at guitar mostly makes you good at guitar. The idea that one skill makes you a genius at everything has thin evidence. So chase real, effortful learning across different domains — not a magic app.

What you're building is reserve — a deeper brain that copes better when age eventually pushes on it. The common thread isn't the skill. It's the difficulty, kept up over time. So: stay a beginner at something, on purpose, for the rest of your life.

S7-SKILLS

Confuse Your Brain to Improve It

WHAT I ACTUALLY DO?

I keep myself a permanent beginner. During Covid I taught myself video editing from nothing but YouTube — and I still learn something new about it almost daily. I'll never become a master editor, and I don't want to. Because the moment you master a skill, the brain goes on autopilot and the benefit fades. So I stay slightly out of my depth on purpose. I do the same with my hands: I shoot, I engineer my sound, I edit and I post. Social Media gives my thinking brain enough stimulus to be creative! I maintain my own aquarium, and look after my swimming pool's pumps and wiring myself. I could pay someone — but fumbling with a pump I don't fully understand is a better workout than any puzzle app. Don't aim to master everything. Aim to always be learning something.

THE CHECKLIST

- ☐ Always be learning something new and difficult
- ☐ Choose "new and hard" over "familiar and comfortable"
- ☐ Favour skills using hands + mind — instrument, language, craft, repairs
- ☐ Skip brain-training apps; pick real-world skills
- ☐ Don't chase mastery — a half-learned skill challenges the brain more

START HERE

This week: begin one thing you're genuinely bad at — and stay bad at it a while.

"A finished skill is a quiet brain. Stay a beginner on purpose — the fumbling is the medicine."

S8-SAVORING

Velcro for Bad, Teflon for Good

FROM THE OPERATING TABLE

I've delivered a lot of good news — "the scan is clear," "the surgery worked," "you can go home." And I've noticed something almost universal: the relief lasts about a day, then the mind drifts back to worrying about the next thing. We are magnificent at holding on to fear and astonishingly bad at holding on to relief. That isn't a flaw. It's how the brain was built — and once you understand it, you can gently correct for it.

THE SCIENCE

Your brain has a built-in negativity bias. It evolved where missing a threat could kill you, but missing a pleasure merely disappointed you — so it learned to grab the bad and let the good slide off. The psychologist Rick Hanson puts it perfectly: the brain is Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones.

You feel this daily. Ten things go right and one goes wrong, and it's the wrong one you replay at 2 a.m. This is ancient and universal — not you being pessimistic, just your nervous system doing its old job.

Here's the hopeful part. Because the brain is shaped by what we dwell on, you can deliberately give good experiences more time to sink in. When something pleasant happens — a warm coffee, a laugh, sun on your face — most of us register it for a split second and rush on. Pause and stay with it a few seconds longer, and you give your brain a real chance to keep it.

You'll sometimes hear a precise figure — "hold it twenty seconds." Treat that as a helpful rule of thumb, not a law. But the idea is sound: linger on the good on purpose, because your brain won't do it for you.

This is where gratitude earns its place — not a cliché, but structured savoring. People who practise it tend to report less anxiety and better mood and sleep, partly because it forces the Teflon brain to hold the good long enough for it to stick.

S8-SAVORING

Velcro for Bad, Teflon for Good

WHAT I ACTUALLY DO?

I've built tiny savoring habits into ordinary moments. When something good lands — a patient's recovery, my kid's laugh, the first sip of coffee — I catch myself and stay with it a few extra breaths instead of rushing on. Most nights I bring to mind two or three genuinely good things from the day and let myself feel them, not just list them. And when my mind snags on the one thing that went wrong, I don't fight it — I widen the frame to the nine that went right.

THE CHECKLIST

- ☐ When something good happens, pause and stay with it a few seconds
- ☐ Keep a simple nightly gratitude habit — 2–3 things, actually felt
- ☐ Catch the 2 a.m. replay; widen to what went right
- ☐ Savour small sensory pleasures fully — coffee, sun, a laugh
- ☐ Treat it as training, not mood — repetition over time

START HERE

Tonight: name three good things from today — and let yourself feel each one.

"Your brain will hold on to the one thing that went wrong all on its own. Savoring is teaching it to hold on to the nine that went right."

S9-STRESS

Your Brain Needs an Off Switch

FROM THE OPERATING TABLE

Stress, in short bursts, is not the enemy — I rely on it. A sharp jolt keeps my hands steady and my mind precise during a difficult operation. The body is built for that: danger, response, then release. The trouble in modern life isn't the stress. It's that we never switch it off. We carry surgical-level alarm into the traffic jam, the inbox, the 2 a.m. worry — and a brain left in that state for years pays a real price.

THE SCIENCE

Under threat, your body releases stress hormones — cortisol chief among them — and in the moment they're useful: sharper focus, faster reactions. Acute stress, followed by recovery, is healthy.

The problem is chronic stress — the alarm that never resets. When cortisol stays elevated for months and years, it's linked to changes in two regions that matter enormously: the hippocampus, your memory centre, and the prefrontal cortex, the seat of calm, rational thinking. Prolonged stress nudges you toward a brain that remembers less well and reacts more fear-first.

So the goal was never to eliminate stress. It's to get good at the off switch — to bring your body down after the alarm, so stress is a wave that passes, not a tide that stays.

And you have a physical off switch built in, working faster than trying to think yourself calm: your breath. One pattern in particular — the physiological sigh. In a Stanford study, five minutes a day of it improved mood and calmed the body more than other breathing styles or even meditation. You can't always talk yourself calm. But you can breathe yourself calm — and the exhale is the switch.

S9-STRESS

Your Brain Needs an Off Switch

WHAT I ACTUALLY DO?

I don't try to live without stress — I try to be excellent at coming down from it. My most-used tool is that physiological sigh: in the car, between patients, before anything that matters. I protect genuine "off" time — no inputs, no problem to solve — because a brain needs the trough after the wave. I move my body when stress is high, because a stress response is built to be discharged, not marinated in. And I've made peace with the fact that recovery isn't laziness — for a brain under load, it's the work.

THE OFF SWITCH: THE PHYSIOLOGICAL SIGH

The moment stress rises — traffic, a hard conversation, 2 a.m.:

1. Inhale through your nose — a normal breath in.
2. At the top, take a second short sip of air in through your nose.
3. Then a long, slow exhale out through your mouth — longer than the inhale.

One or two steadies you in under a minute. For a deeper reset, repeat ~5 minutes. No app, no cushion.

THE CHECKLIST

- ☐ Learn the physiological sigh — use it in the moment
- ☐ Make the exhale longer than the inhale
- ☐ Protect true "off" time daily — no inputs
- ☐ Discharge high stress through movement
- ☐ Treat recovery as essential, not indulgent

*"Stress isn't the problem — a stress response that never switches off is.
Your longest exhale is the switch."*

SIO-STILLNESS

Silence Is a Neural Superpower

FROM THE OPERATING TABLE

In the operating theatre, we control the noise. Alarms are tuned, chatter drops, and in the hardest moments the room goes almost silent — because I need every bit of my attention pointed at one place. I've come to believe the brain craves that quiet far more often than we give it. We feed ours a constant stream — notifications, podcasts, noise to fill every gap — then wonder why it feels frayed. This last habit is the simplest, and for many the hardest: giving the brain silence on purpose.

THE SCIENCE

Your brain is never really "off." When you stop focusing, a network switches on — the default mode network — the seat of mind-wandering, rumination, and the endless inner narrator. A little is creative and necessary. Too much, unbroken, is the machinery of worry running with no brakes.

Stillness practices — meditation, or simply quiet, undirected time — appear to quiet that restless network and strengthen your grip on attention. In plain terms: stillness is training for the muscle that lets you choose where your mind goes, instead of being dragged wherever it drifts.

But meditation is surrounded by big claims, so here's the honest sort (see below).

The reassuring truth: stillness is bigger than formal meditation. A quiet walk with no earphones. Two minutes of doing nothing. Coffee without reaching for the phone. Each is a small dose of the same medicine — a brain briefly released from input, free to settle. In a world built to never let you be bored, choosing silence is almost radical — and your brain will thank you for it.

WHAT I ACTUALLY DO?

I guard small pockets of silence like appointments. Most days I take a few minutes of genuine quiet — sometimes a breath-focused meditation, sometimes just sitting without a screen to grab me. I keep ordinary moments phone-free on purpose: the first coffee, part of a walk, the drive with no podcast. I don't chase a perfectly empty mind — that myth makes people quit — I just gently return my attention when it wanders, because that return is the entire exercise.

SIO-STILLNESS

Silence Is a Neural Superpower

THE STILLNESS VERDICT

Reasonably solid — worth your time

- Lowers stress and anxiety — among the best-supported benefits of regular practice
- Sharpens attention and emotional control — you get better at steering a wandering mind

Promising, not yet proven

- Lasting changes to brain structure — real signals in imaging, but many studies are small
- Long-term "rewiring" — plausible and encouraging, still being properly tested

Overclaimed — be sceptical

- A cure, memory-booster, or dementia-prevention — not supported; stillness is maintenance, not medicine
- "You must meditate like a monk" — untrue; short and consistent beats rare and heroic

THE CHECKLIST

- ☐ A few minutes of daily quiet — meditation or silence
- ☐ Keep some moments phone-free
- ☐ Don't aim to empty your mind — return attention gently
- ☐ Choose short and consistent over long and rare
- ☐ Let a little boredom exist before you fill it

START HERE

Right now: sit for two minutes with no screen, and just let your mind settle

"You find a quiet mind not by adding more, but by briefly, on purpose, subtracting everything. Silence isn't empty — it's where the brain repairs."

PRESCRIPTION

DR. ARUN L. NAIK · Senior Neurosurgeon



Valid for life

1. Sleep — 7-8 hours, same time nightly. Let your brain clean house.
2. Sunlight — 10 minutes of morning light. Set your clock at sunrise.
3. Squats — Sit down, stand up, all day. Guard your legs, guard your mind.
4. Strength — Lift twice a week. Let your muscles speak to your brain.
5. Supplements — Test first. Fix real gaps only. Food before pills.
6. Socialization — One real conversation a day. Connection is medicine.
7. Skills — Stay a beginner at something hard. Never stop learning.
8. Savoring — Hold the good a few seconds longer. Make it stick.
9. Stress — Double inhale, long exhale. Learn your off-switch.
10. Stillness — A few quiet minutes daily. Give your brain silence.

Sig. Take all ten daily. Miss a dose — resume the next day.

Disp. One lifetime supply.

Refills: Unlimited.

No pharmacy required. No cost. No permission needed but your own.

Signed,

Dr. Arun L. Naik

Before you go

If you've read this far, I want to say something I mean with my whole heart: thank you for taking your brain seriously. Most people won't, until it's too late to easily change course. You have.

Let me leave you with the truth beneath all ten S's. Twenty-five years at the operating table has taught me something the science only recently caught up to: the brain is far more resilient, and far more within your hands, than we ever believed. Not infinitely – I won't pretend that. But enough that how you live genuinely writes how you age. That's not a burden. That's a gift most generations never had.

So please don't read this, feel inspired for an afternoon, and shelve it. And don't try to do all ten perfectly starting tomorrow, exhaust yourself by Friday, and quit. Both are the same mistake: treating this as a sprint.

It isn't. You don't need a perfect brain. You need consistent habits. Pick one S – the one your Audit exposed, or simply the easiest to start. Do it until it's boring and automatic. Then add another. That quiet, unglamorous layering – across months and years – is the most powerful thing you can do for the person you'll be at seventy, and eighty, and beyond.

The person reading this today is building the brain you'll live inside for the rest of your life. Build it with care. Build it with patience. Build it starting now.

I'm rooting for you – and for that future brain of yours.

With respect and hope,

Dr. Arun L. Naik

The brain you carry at seventy is being built
by the choices you make today.

In twenty-five years operating on the human brain, Dr. Arun L. Naik has learned that its most important protection happens outside the operating room — in the small daily habits within everyone's reach. The 10-S Brain Protocol distills the science of brain health into ten simple, memorable habits, honestly sorted for what truly works. No hype. No miracle cures. Just what a neurosurgeon actually does — and would tell every patient.



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