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Context to the nugget

Matt speaks about why the “morning person” and the “night person” are not behavioural choices but often hard-wired into us. He says that there might be a wiggle room of around 30-45 mins to move the clock against our type but fundamentally it might be hard to change the wiring. He also traces this variation in sleep preferences to evolutionary phenomena on why this phenomenon might have benefited a tribe as a whole.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): We'll get to how much sleep is enough in a bit in this conversation Matt, but maybe to start with some of the basics in the book you talk about the notion of circadian rhythm. I hope I pronounced it, right and you go on to speak about the notion of morning people and night people, you call them morning larks and night owls and the fact that this might be a hardwiring by DNA and not a behavioral choice. And in my personal instance that topic alone has accounted for about 40% of the marital fights. So it's out of selfish interest that I want to get some clarity here, but give us a sense of what you mean by circadian rhythm and how some of us might be wired differently here.

Matthew Walker (MW): So, most living organisms, even things such as plants but including animals and mammals and us human beings we all have what is called a circadian rhythm which essentially is a 24-hour rhythm. And in human beings there is a master clock that sits inside of our brain, it's called the suprachiasmatic nucleus and it entrains our bodies and our brains to a 24-hour rhythmic activity and part of that rhythmic activity includes when we want to be awake and when we want to be asleep. Now for the most part human beings are diurnal species, in other words we typically like to be awake during the day and we like to be asleep at night. However, there is variance in when our preference is as human beings to go to sleep and to wake up and this comes on to the notion that you mentioned which is called chronotype. Are you a morning person are you an evening person or are you somewhere in between? And a lot of us in society because society is mostly geared towards morning types and we have a bias towards applauding morning types and chastising evening types as being lazy, that's rather unfair because we know that a significant proportion of whether you are a morning type or you are an evening type is determined by your genetics. And we now know that there are at least I think at last count well over 22 different genes that we know determine whether you are a morning type or an evening type. So, it's not really your choice, it's not really your fault that you are an evening type and the morning types shouldn't be quite so proud either because it's not really their choice to be a morning type. Again, it's gifted by your genetics; it's hardwired into your biology. And so, depending on the distribution and data that you look at, about 30% of individuals seem to be morning types about 30% evening types and then the rest of us are somewhere in the middle of that. So, we do know that there is this genetic dependency that dictates

whether you want to wake up early or whether you want to wake up late? Can you change that isn't always a question that I'm asked and there is some wiggle room, if you are an evening type and you want to become more of a morning type it's good to try and abstain from caffeine in the second half of the day and certainly into the evening. It's also good to try and block out a lot of night time light. So, staying away from blue light devices in the evening, trying to switch off half the lights in your home in the last hour before bed and then conversely getting lots of morning light. Those three different tips can try to help an evening type become a little bit more of a morning type. But the amount of wiggle room there isn't particularly very much. You may be able to drag yourself back by 30 minutes maybe up to 40 minutes, but you are not going to go from being someone who likes to go to bed at 1:00 a.m. to then finding it very easy to go to bed at 10:00 p.m. That's a little bit too much of a stretch to ask of your genetic hardwiring.

DJ: And I like the point you make in the book about the evolutionary hypothesis around this, which is trying to diversify the sleep waves so that as a group you have a wider security cover in the night. I thought that was an interesting... Could you expand on that a little bit? I thought that was a pretty nuanced insight.

MW: So if you look at cultures who have not really been touched by electricity, for example, if you look at hunter-gatherer tribes whose way of life has not changed for thousands of years, we can ask some very fundamental questions about not how we are sleeping in modernity today but how should we be sleeping as a species, how are we originally designed to sleep. And there are several insights that we've had from studying those populations but one of them is that sleep typically isn't an isolated activity. So, in many developed nations now we often will go to a separate room to sleep or we sleep with, you know, our marital partner etc. But sleep doesn't seem to necessarily be like that in these cultures, these hunter-gatherer tribes. Their sleep is much more of a social activity where the multiple family members will all sleep in the same room, children, aunts, uncles, mother, father etc. And why is this important to your point? Well, what we see is that there is quite a lot of diversity in terms of chronotype. So, think about from that evolutionary stance that I described earlier. You as a human being let's say that you are sleeping eight hours, that would mean that you are vulnerable as an individual for 8 hours that night but what if you were sleeping as part of a group and as part of that genetic diversity some of the group will actually be going to bed at midnight or 1 o'clock and other members of the group will be going to bed at 9:00 p.m. or 10:00 p.m. And then the people who went to bed early will be waking up early and the people who went to bed late will be waking up late. What that means is that as a group overall you may collectively only be "asleep" as a group for a sum total of let's say three or four hours because there are going to be some people at the bookends that will be awake late and watching over the group and other people who will be awake early and watching over the group. So, as a collective you are only vulnerable because of mother nature's genetic diversity of chronotype for perhaps three or four hours rather than as an individual vulnerable for eight hours. So, everyone gets their 8-hour chance for sleep but as a group you decrease your risk probability and perhaps you are only collectively as a group vulnerable for three or four hours.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I must confess that in my home, I am a morning lark and my wife is a night owl. There was a phase in our lives where I lived in India and she lived in the US and we actually had some of our best conversations then. She would call me from New Jersey at around Mid-night which was around morning time in India and I would be up and running and at my best. We have been trying to figure out how to replicate that energy when we are collocated in the same geography. After this

conversation with Matt, I guess we can formally put that effort to rest and make do with what we can give the phase lag in our body clocks! I guess the unchangeable cannot be changed!

Thank you for listening. If you are finding this conversation purposeful, you might also like to tune into my conversation with Matt Dixon a Triathlon coach in Silicon Valley, who specifically speaks about the role of rest and recovery when you train for triathlons.

End of nugget transcription

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Matthew Walker - Nuggets

- 55.00 Matthew Walker - The Full Conversation
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- 55.02 Matthew Walker - Morning Larks and Night Owls - a hard wiring
- 55.03 Matthew Walker - Dealing effectively with Jet-lag
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- 55.05 Matthew Walker - REM and Non-REM sleep and criticality of each
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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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