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Context to the nugget

Matt speaks about how travellers who fly across time zones should think about acclimatizing themselves to the new location without too much disruption. He refers to the timing of when we sleep and how we think about eating and suggests that we should forget about the time zone of the origin and start aligning to the destination the moment we board the plane. He also shares some perspectives around how long it takes to adjust the body clock from one-time zone to another.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And I want to pick up on a related theme Matt which is jet lag right, which a lot of busy leaders contend with and you make the point that circadian rhythms are independent of where you are; it's your internal body clock, but sometimes we need to adjust our body clock to an external clock and if we create shocks on the external clock by traveling on a on a jet plane, I'm curious about your thoughts on how we grapple with it. And I thought to make it tactical from an Indian perspective if I take two archetypes, right one has travelled to the US which moves the clock by around 12 hours plus or minus or let's say you travel to Europe or to let's say Singapore or Sydney in Australia, which puts the clock plus or minus 6 or 8 hours. So, I'm curious about your thoughts on how leaders can grapple with jet lag when they're either moving eastward or westward in these sort of leaps of time.

Matthew Walker (MW): So, you are right that it is quite a torturous activity on our biology. We were never designed to be fast forwarded or reversed in time by way of this remarkable invention called the jet engine and when we arrive in a new time zone there is a lag that happens and that lag is the difference between the actual time the clock face in that new time zone versus our internal clock, that 24-hour master clock that I spoke about before. And when you arrive in a new time zone, those things are markedly mismatched and that mismatch between your internal biological clock and the external new time zone is what we call jet lag. And that does come with deleterious consequences; we know this from for example cabin crew or airline pilots. We've studied those individuals who are constantly going back and forth between repeated exposures to jet lag and there are for example neurological changes that we see. Pilots, for example who've been flying and who do long-haul shifts, long-haul flights and parts of their brain particularly the memory centres of the brain end up shrinking. Now, you could imagine that that's just an associational effect that for some reason people who become pilots already had a smaller memory centre of the brain so it's not causal but against that hypothesis what we know is that the number of years that they've been doing that actually correlates with the severity of atrophy in those parts of the memory centres of the brain. We also know that there are impacts downstairs in the body when you have that severe sleep weight disruption that comes with jet lag. It increases significantly your risk for the development of cancer and there are significantly higher rates of breast cancer, for example, among female cabin

crew so much so that there have been court cases of government workers who undergo shift work and jet lag and they've won their case because of severe higher rates of breast cancer. So that's just to put some context around the impact of consistent jet lag. But your question is interesting, which is how do we try to risk mitigate or de-risk the consequences of jet lag. It's very difficult. There is no cure for jet lag or actually I should say there is a cure for jet lag which is don't travel but that's not particularly helpful piece of advice. Can we treat jet lag to a degree and here are some tips I guess for trying to help? The first thing that you should do as soon as you get on an airplane traveling long-haul flights is set every device that you have a clock face to including your wristwatch, your computer, your phone, your tablet, set all of those devices to the new time zone to which you are currently traveling and immediately that gives you context as to what time it is in the new zone. In other words that gives you a target to shoot for. And then you need to start asking yourself on that flight when should I be thinking about sleeping and use that new time clock on your phone for example to tell you when you should be sleeping relative to when everyone else in that new time zone is sleeping. So, a good example is if I'm traveling from let's say San Francisco back to London, London is eight hours ahead and when I see people on that plane, they typically are sleeping at the wrong time. Most people sleep late in the second half of the flight, which is the wrong time. Instead you should be sleeping early in the flight because everyone in the UK is already eight hours ahead of me. And so if I'm sleeping in the last few hours of that flight, I'm sleeping at nine o'clock in the morning, 10 o'clock in the morning, 11 o'clock in the morning UK time. Instead I should be trying to get to sleep as soon as I can and then I should actually wake up in the middle of the flight when everyone else in the United Kingdom is waking up. And the important thing is this whatever time you want to be going to bed in the new time zone you should then count back 12 to 14 hours and that's the time that you need to be waking up on your long-haul flight. The reason is because you need to accumulate at least 12 to 14 hours of sustained wakefulness for you to have enough sleepiness built up so that when you try to go to bed in the new time zone that you've just arrived in you are going to be able to fall asleep and stay asleep. And often the reason that people can't do that on that first night is because they've slept too late in the flight and they only woke up maybe six or seven hours before then now then going to try and get back into bed and fall asleep again, and that's just not enough time of accumulated wakefulness for you to feel sleepy or to stay asleep. So that's the first two tips is to set your devices to the correct time and then sleep at the appropriate time but in fact wake up at the appropriate time. Try to avoid alcohol and caffeine on those flights, even though they sometimes are served for free and the temptation is to indulge, try to stay away from that and then finally once you arrive in the new time zone you should understand that your body clock can only catch up about one hour for every day that it is in the new time zone. So, let's say that you have travelled to a location that is six hours difference from where you left. It's going to take you about six days before you feel normal and you are acclimated to that new clock. How can you fast forward that or increase that speed of acclimation? Firstly, in the new time zone try to make sure that in the morning you get at least 30 to 40 minutes of exposure to daylight. It doesn't have to be bright sunshine, even a dull cloudy day can help you but try to be outside. Secondly, try to get some exercise in the morning that helps like a set of fingers on the dial of the wristwatch to stop moving it more quickly to acclimate to the time zone. And then the other thing that's usually underappreciated is feeding. It turns out that the intake of food is just as powerful re-setter of your biological clock as is daylight. And so, try to resist the temptation to eat when you are hungry, but instead try to eat at the same time when everyone else is eating in that new time zone and that can also help you as well.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: At least talking about myself, I have the habit of setting the clock to the destination only as I am about to land in a new place. Matt's suggestion is simple yet quite profound. Setting it to the destination time zone the moment we enter the plane and using the destination schedule as a frame of reference as we think about eating and sleeping on the plane is an interesting tip indeed.

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.

If you are deriving value from the podcast, please consider paying it forward to Antarang Foundation, an organization I work with closely. Antarang Foundation is a not for profit that works with 1000s of young adults and helps them play to their potential. While the world of human potential, I believe, is uniformly distributed, the world of opportunity is unfortunately unevenly distributed. We may not realize it or want to acknowledge it, but the reality is that a lot of us are beneficiaries of the ovarian lottery that sets us up very differently. To know more about how you can make a difference, do visit the Pay it forward section at PlaytoPotential.com.

End of nugget transcription

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Matthew Walker - Nuggets

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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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