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Context to the nugget

Matt speaks about how much sleep human beings need and he quotes some epidemiological studies that establish the range but also some experiments that study the causality between more or less sleep and outcomes. He alludes to “day light savings time” as a global experiment where we have an opportunity to study 1.6 Billion people.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): In terms of how much is enough Matt, you talk about eight hours but somewhere you talk about seven hours, seven to nine. So, there are a lot of numbers being thrown around in the context of what's adequate sleep and very often I guess all of us fall into the temptation of saying maybe for me six is enough, for the rest maybe eight is required. So, give us a sense of how we should think about how much is enough and how much leeway should we give ourselves to cheat on this metric?

Matthew Walker (MW): So, there is a range and that range seems to be between seven to nine hours of sleep with the mean for the average adult being eight hours. And that range is given to us both by large-scale epidemiological studies, which help us inform once you get below a certain amount of sleep, then you start to increase your risk significantly for a variety of deleterious health outcomes such as diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease, stroke, depression, anxiety etc. and dementia. So, it's the epidemiological studies that guide those recommendations, but then it's also causal experimental studies that back that up because epidemiological studies cannot provide causal evidence of a relationship. They just show an association and those experimental studies then help us firm up those recommendations that its seven to nine hours for the average adult and that shouldn't be a surprise by the way. It's the same way for our calorie recommendations. We could say for the average adult male its 2,000 calories a day, but depending on your size and what you've been doing that day and your age there's going to be some variance around that calorie recommendation and the same is true for sleep. What we certainly do know is that once you get below seven hours of sleep, we do seem to be able to measure impairments in your brain and body. Does that mean that there are some individuals who can sleep for six hours without showing impairments? There are some genetic variants, some very rare genetic mutants that we found that can survive on six hours of sleep without showing significant impairment, but the probability of you and the listener being one of those individuals is really quite low. It seems to be only either a fraction of a percent or at least a couple of percent of the population. So, it is statistically very unlikely that you are one of those individuals. So that's the recommendation and for example here in America the Centre for Disease Control suggests that short sleep is defined as less than seven hours of sleep. We also know that Harvard Medical School and the Centre for Sleep Medicine there demonstrates that once people get less than eight hours of sleep regularly you do increase your risk for a number of

significant medical conditions. So, we have good advisory data there. How do you know if you are getting sufficient sleep? Well, short of doing sleep studies and having a vast array of biometrics performed on you that's the harder question to answer scientifically, but from a more practical advice-based way, I would suggest there are at least two ways that you can answer that question. Firstly, most people are short sleeping during the week and if when it comes to the weekend, if you don't have to work at the weekend you start to increase your sleep amount as if you are trying to get back sleep that you've lost which by the way sleep doesn't work like the bank and we can speak about that. But if you are trying to binge on sleep at the weekend that usually means that you are not getting sufficient sleep during the week and perhaps an even simpler test of whether you are getting the sleep that you need is the following. If you did not set an alarm or by chance your alarm in the morning did not go off would you sleep past your alarm and if the answer is yes, then it means that you would need more sleep that you are not getting the sleep that you actually naturally need. So, there are a couple of practical ways that you can ask yourself honestly am I really getting the sleep that I need.

DJ: And if I maybe take a particular use case Matt, a lot of the professionals in high intense professions, right whether it's lawyers, bankers, management consultants, several advisory professionals and several entrepreneurs often burn the candle at both ends and just to take a very specific use case they... I think if I do a mental distribution a lot of them might be saying let me sleep for six hours, it's not as grave as four or five hours; six hours still seems okay. Give us a realistic sense of the downsides of maybe losing about an hour or two of sleep a day. How does that play out over the medium and long term?

MW: So firstly I would say that sleeping six hours a night is certainly better than sleeping five hours a night or four hours a night, but I will just give you one example of the impact of an hour of lost sleep because it turns out that there is a global experiment that is performed on about 1.6 billion people across about 70 countries twice a year and it's called daylight savings time. Now in the spring when we lose just one hour of sleep opportunity, we see a subsequent 24% increase in heart attacks as a result. Whereas in the autumn when we gain an hour of sleep opportunity, there is a 21% reduction in heart attacks. And so, I think that that's clear evidence of how vulnerable our bodies are to even just the smallest perturbation of sleep. And by the way we see exactly that same profile that I just described for things such as road traffic accidents on our highways. We see the same profile for suicide rates. You can even see the same profile by the way for the harshness of sentencing from federal judges here in the United States when you lost an hour of sleep harsher sentencing, when you gain an hour of sleep more lenient sentencing. We can also see it at a much more minute level. For example, your genetics, there was a great study done out of Surrey University in the United Kingdom and they took a group of individuals and they placed them on a diet of six hours of sleep for one week and then they measured the change in their gene activity profile relative to when those same individuals were getting a full eight or nine hour sleep opportunity. And what they found was that when you are sleeping for six hours a night for just one week there were upwards of... in fact there were 711 genes that were distorted in their activity by way of that one week of six hours of sleep. So, in other words even the very DNA nucleic alphabet that spells out your daily health narrative can be seen to be impacted by just one week of six hours of sleep relative to when you are giving yourself the correct opportunity for sleep.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: What struck me the most here was the point Matt makes about the fact that only 1 or 2% of the people have a genetic variation that gets them comfortable with 6 or less hours a night. I am

reminded of an experiment where a professor distributed a form to the class and asked the students if their intellect was above or below the class average and about 95% of the class felt they were above average. So, it's worth remembering that we are much more likely to belong to the 98-99% of the population that needs 7-9 hours of sleep.

A lot of people treat sleep as a balancing figure. After they have pushed themselves hard on various things (work, exercise, partying and so on), they just live with whatever hours of sleep they get. And that approach is all the more tempting because a lot of the visible downsides are often visible only several years later. I used to be like that and really sacrifice sleep to pursue running in the morning but I could see the impact it was having on my productivity and effectiveness. This came up in my conversation with Matt Dixon (MD) as well, a Triathlon coach in the valley. He works with some of the leading CEOs and Entrepreneurs in the valley and he speaks about the importance of rest and rejuvenation.

MD: "Accumulation of stress and fatigue and so the biggest mistake that we see people make is to think I know I need to exercise because I know that's something to do that's makes me healthy so, how am I going to add this on the top of life and many people what they do and the great example is Oh it's wonderful go to bunch of friends I am going to do Ironman Turkey and it sounds wonderful and what does it take to train for that and it takes 20 hours a week goodness me I don't have twenty hours a week but there's the training program and to dump it on top of life and I am just going to have to find a way to cram it in. To be successful and to actually integrate the key components of rejuvenation and recovery as well as training what we have to realize is that we have to integrate it into a person's life so that not only does, they can then improve in that discipline because hopefully they are looking for improvement but so that they can lift their health they can lift their performances as a CEO or an executive and it can help them to thrive across areas of life and so it's all about integration, we go through a very particular process where we look up the habits the start and we look up their genuine landscape of their life what have been non-negotiable? And when we think about non-negotiable there's obviously the commitments in the work place quite often there's the commitment with their family and we want them to be available and present for their family, their children, their wives, their husbands or whatever it might be and then the other component that we have is non-negotiable is sleep and saying ok how much do you sleep and is that necessary and is it high enough quality which is the other component of effective sleep not just quantity are you getting enough?"

DJ: Treating sleep as a non-negotiable and organizing the rest of our life around it is an interesting frame as compared to treating it as a residual variable.

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.

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End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Matt Dixon that is referenced: [Rest, Sleep and recharge](#).

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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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