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Context to the nugget

Matt speaks about the role of sleep in the wellness trinity – Diet, Exercise and Sleep. He goes onto say that not only is sleep one of the three legs of this trinity, it is possibly the foundation on which the other two rest. He specifically comments on the trade-off between a healthy night of sleep and early morning exercise (a trade-off that a lot of early morning runners end up making)

Transcription

DJ: I may be picking up from there Matt. I was influenced by the book *Eat Move Sleep* by Tom Rath, which I read a few years back where he talks about the importance of diet, exercise and sleep for our well-being and at least in my head I always knew that sleep was one of the three important pillars of wellness, but you actually go on to say that sleep is the preeminent force in this health trinity and you use an interesting term sleep as the Swiss army knife of wellness. Give us a give us a sense of why this is so.

MW: Yeah, I used to think that sleep was perhaps the third pillar of health alongside diet and physical activity, but the more I read the research I started to wonder if it was actually a little bit different that in fact sleep was the foundation on which those two other things sit. And I can just give you some examples as to why I changed my mind. Firstly, if you are dieting and trying to lose weight and watch what you eat, but you are not getting sufficient sleep, 70% of the mass the weight that you lose will come from the lean body mass such as muscle and not fat. In other words when you are under-slept and you are dieting the body becomes stingy in giving up its fat and it will hold on to that fat, but you will lose other components such as muscle. So when you are not sleeping well, but you are trying to be good and adhere to a diet, unfortunately, you will lose what you want to keep a hold of which is muscle and you will retain what you want to get rid of which is fat. And so, I think that's just one example in the field of nutrition. We also know for diet sorry for physical activity and exercise that if you are not getting sufficient sleep firstly the simple motivation for you to get out there and do some physical activity is significantly decreased; second, even if you do start to exercise, but you are not getting sufficient sleep firstly the intensity with which you exercise is actually less. We also know that the peak muscle strength and the peak jump height for example are impaired when you are not getting sufficient sleep. The time to physical exhaustion is decreased when you are not getting sufficient sleep. Even basic processes of exercise, for example, the ability of your lungs to respire and exhale carbon dioxide and inhale oxygen become compromised when you are not getting sufficient sleep. And we also even know that your ability to perspire which is critical when you are being physically active to cool your body and keep it at peak performance, that physical perspiration capacity also decreases when you are not getting sufficient sleep. So, I really do think that sleep... there is good argument to suggest from the data that sleep is the foundation on which those two other things sit. It's not just another pillar.

DJ: Hmm, and maybe if I persist with this theme Matt, clearly compared to eating exercising consumes time, and maybe if I take a very particular very specific use case early morning running, especially in a country like India where, you know, once the traffic starts it's difficult to find the time and space and the oxygen for running. A lot of people often end up having to compromise on sleep to squeeze in running as an exercise. Do you have any studies or any research that talks about the trade-off between lost sleep and early morning running?

MW: I think it seems to be clear that being physically active is absolutely of course essential but it doesn't seem as though you can exercise your way out of poor sleep or you can exercise your way out of inadequate sleep and you have to think about this from a high altitude evolutionary perspective. Sleep is something you can't short change your brain or body of and expect to get away with and from an evolutionary perspective sleep if you think about it is the most idiotic of all creations. When you are asleep, you are not finding a mate, you are not reproducing, you are not caring for your young, you are not finding food and worst still you are vulnerable to predation. And so, on any one of those grounds, but especially all of them together sleep should have been strongly selected against during the course of evolution. However, what we know is that in every animal species that we've carefully studied to date sleep is present and what that means is that sleep has fought its way through heroically every step along the evolutionary path. And my point is really just the following that sleep if it didn't serve an absolutely vital set of functions it would be the biggest mistake the evolutionary process has ever made and now we understand that sleep actually... that mother nature did not make a spectacular blunder in creating this thing called sleep that it serves so many vital functions. So, to think about compromising sleep even perhaps for the capacity for physical activity is perhaps unwise. Sleep is a biological need and when you fight biology you typically lose and the way that you know you've lost is usually through disease and sickness.

DJ: And often possibly there's even a time lag right between when you do this and when the disease hits you, sometimes the delayed feedback possibly gives people the false notion that one could get away with this.

MW: Gosh, yeah that's such an insightful point Deepak. I think there are acute effects of sleep deprivation that can be observed and perhaps the most tragic and immediate one is that you have what we call a micro sleep when you are driving a car and these micro sleeps you are typically not aware of them, it's where the brain just goes to sleep for just a second or two. But if you are traveling at 50 or 60 miles an hour and you have one of those micro sleeps, it can be the difference between staying in lane versus drifting to the opposite lane of oncoming traffic. And so, if you have one of these micro sleeps, it could be the last micro sleep that you ever have. And that's one of the most immediate and acute ways that a lack of sleep can be desperately impactful. But you are right to suggest that many of the impacts of chronic under-sleeping, chronic insufficient sleep as we describe it is that it's an aggravating influence over time. It's very much like hypertension. If you eat the wrong diet, or you are not physically active gradually your blood vessels start to harden and gradually you become more and more hypertensive, your blood pressure starts to increase and maybe it's only after 20 years of a lack of physical activity or poor diet that you get hit with cardiovascular disease or a heart attack. And the same can also be true for insufficient sleep. And this is why I think some people will say well, I'm in my 60s or in my 70s and I have only been sleeping, five hours a night and I'm just fine and I think there are good examples of this of very vocal heads of state Margaret Thatcher or Ronald Reagan. They were both very clear chest beaters regarding how little sleep that they seemed to need. Now, you mentioned at the start of the program that there are increasing and causal links to insufficient sleep and your risk for Alzheimer's disease and dementia and tragically... and this is completely not scientific, but I think it's perhaps not coincidental that both Thatcher and Reagan went on to sadly develop the disorder of Alzheimer's

disease and it took their lives. And so, you are right, insufficient sleep seems to get you either acutely or chronically no matter what.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Recently, one of the legends of Management thinking, Clay Christensen of Harvard Business School passed away. I was deeply influenced by his book – How will you measure your life. One of the points that stayed with me was the point he makes around how we deploy the marginal unit of time. We tend to deploy that on areas that yield immediate results but forget to deploy that on things that matter over the long run (relationships, friendships, exercise and so on).

Of late, I have been trying to bring sleep back into the equation in my life. I must confess that I was one of the people that traded off an hour or two of sleep to get up early say around 5 am or 530 am to get some morning mileage before coming back to wake up the kids. This was when I used to train for a half marathon a few years back. I quickly realized that the lack of sleep was coming in the way of my being effective through the day and my ability to be nuanced and thoughtful on complex matters, something that we address a bit later in the conversation with Matt.

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

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Matthew Walker - Nuggets

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- 55.03 Matthew Walker - Dealing effectively with Jet-lag
- 55.04 Matthew Walker - How much sleep do we REALLY need?
- 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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