

EPISODE 193

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:03.0] PF: Welcome to episode 193 of Live Happy Now. This is your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us today. This week, we have a really special guest. Daniel Pink is a New York Times bestselling author. With his latest book, *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing*, he takes a fresh look at how we make decisions.

Now we make decisions every day and we ask ourselves what we need to do, how we're going to do it and sometimes why we need to do it. With his latest book, Daniel shows us how the way we time our decisions can change our days, our jobs and even our relationships. Let's hear what he has to say.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:40.5] PF: Daniel, thank you for joining us today on Live Happy Now. It's really a pleasure to have you here today on our show.

[0:00:45.9] DP: It's great to be with you.

[0:00:47.4] PF: You've looked at a topic that is something I don't think a lot of us have put a lot of thought into, even though we are making decisions every day, we really don't look at timing. What is it though that made you decide to start looking at the science of timing and how that affects us?

[0:01:04.2] DP: Yeah, I think it was really more frustration than anything else, because exactly as you say, I was making all kinds of timing decisions in my own life. I'm a writer, when should I do my writing? When should I exercise in the day? When should I start a project? When should I stop a project? I was making those decisions in a very haphazard way that frustrated me. I looked around for guidance, didn't find it. Then I started and just said, "Hey, I wonder if there's any research on this topic." It turned out, there was a huge amount of research on this topic. The challenge was that it was not in a single discipline.

There were some in psychology, but it wasn't only in psychology, because there was some in economics and it was in anthropology and it was in molecular biology. There's a whole field called chronobiology and it was in endocrinology and it was in anesthesiology and all of these disparate fields were asking very similar questions. What's the effect of time of day on how we feel, how we perform? How do beginnings affect us? How do midpoints affect us? How do endings affect us? I took a long time to track through all the research. Once I did, I feel this research offers clues about how to make these timing decisions in a smarter, shrewder way.

[0:02:17.6] PF: How does learning the power of when change the way that we make our decisions? You said we make them in a shrewder way, but how is that?

[0:02:25.7] DP: Yeah. Well I mean, on just about every level. I'll give you the most obvious one, which is that what a lot of research tells us, both again in psychology and in aspects of biology and in chronobiology and even in sociology, tells us this; our brain power does not remain the same over the course of a day. It changes. It changes and can change in very significant ways. It changes in predictable ways. There are certain times of day when we are better at certain kinds of tasks. Simply knowing that and moving the right work to the right time can make a world of difference.

[0:03:05.3] PF: Is it different for every person though? I read so many things – I'm a night owl. I'm not a morning person at all. I read so many things about you have to no matter what, you have to get up early, you have to do all these things.

[0:03:16.2] DP: I'm so glad that you asked that, because the idea that there is one size fits all is nonsense. This idea that the secret to high performance is getting up insanely early is nonsense. Here's what we know is this; so it begins with exactly what you're talking about, which is what's called a chronotype. Chronotype is our propensity; do we wake up early and go to sleep early, or are we like you? Do we wake up late and go to sleep late?

Here's what the distribution looks like; about 15% of us are very strong morning people, larks. About 20% of us, people like you are very strong evening people, owls. About two-thirds of us are in the middle. What we know is that we tend to move through the day in three stages; a peak, a trough, a recovery. A peak, a trough, a recovery.

Peak is when we're most vigilant; we're able to bat away distractions. The trough is usually in the middle of the day when there's a big, big drops in performance. Recovery is for most of us later in the day or late afternoon and early evening when we're better at doing creative kinds of work, okay? About 80% of us, people who aren't owls move through the day; peak, trough, recovery. For them, the peak often occurs in the morning. It occurs at different times in the morning. It doesn't mean that everybody should get up before dawn, but in general 80% of us reach our peak early in the day rather than late.

However, 20% of us, people like you are very, very different. Owls reach their peak, their cognitive peak much later in the day; evening, well into the evening. What we should be doing whether we're a lark or an owl is we should be doing our analytic heads-down work during our peak whenever it is. We should be doing our more creative work during our recovery period, which for again 80% of us is late afternoon into early evening. For owls, it's a little bit more complex.

What we need to do is do the right work at the right time, regardless of our chronotype. As exactly as you say – I mean, I think that the corporate world certainly discriminates marketly against owls.

[0:05:26.5] PF: Yeah, I was going to ask about that next. I'm glad you're going into that territory.

[0:05:30.9] DP: Oh, yeah. I mean, the corporate world in many ways is I think trying explicitly to crush the souls and suck the life out of people like you. I mean, it goes against what the research tells us. What the research tells us is that people should be doing certain kinds of work during their peak. For a lot of us, that peak is the morning. For a fifth of us, including you, that peak is in the evening. We should be doing our creative work much more at different times of day. Also this midday trough between the early to mid-afternoon is there's rampant evidence that performance decline significantly during that period. Significantly during that period.

You see it in education, test scores go down. You see it in health care, hospitals are dangerous places in that part of the afternoon. You see it in jury decision-making, you see it in judicial decision-making, you see it in corporate performance. The main thing we have to do is get synchrony between our type, are we morning or afternoon people? Between our task; is the

work analytic or is it creative? And the time of day. Once we put those things in alignment, we can do more work, we can do better work, we can be a little bit more satisfied.

[0:06:39.8] PF: Now what I love about your book is it guides people through this so they can figure out like, “Oh, this is why I'm not doing well in my job, because I'm trying to do this at this point in time, or in my overall life I'm not doing the timing right.” Then you can adjust it so it fits you, instead of you're fitting into the schedules around you.

[0:07:00.2] DP: Perfectly said. That's exactly the takeaway from this is that, especially when we have things like chronotypes, the goal is not to – we can't have some magical conversion therapy to convert you from an owl into a lark, okay? It doesn't work that way.

[0:07:14.8] PF: I tried.

[0:07:16.6] DP: It doesn't work. It doesn't work that way, because that's part of your – it's part of your biology, all right? It's like complaining that somebody, “Oh, they're so frustrating to me because they're short.” It's like, “Okay, what are you going to do about that?” Or, “He's so frustrating to me, because he's tall.” “Okay. He's tall. What are you going to do about that?” What do you do about when someone is short or tall is you adjust the environment to them. You don't try to elongate them, or shrink them, you adjust the environment to them and that's what we should be doing.

For people like you and owls are very, very interesting population, because there are actually a personality differences between – in the aggregate between owls and larks. Larks tend to be very conscientious, extroverted. Owls actually tend to have more problems, things like depression and addiction, but owls also test higher on intelligence tests, they test higher on creativity. You have a lot of corporate structures that are missing out on 1/5 of the talent pool, because they say to work here, you have to be at an 8:30 a.m. staff meeting, which is a great way to basically say to the talented owls, “Oh, man. I don't want to work there.”

[0:08:21.0] PF: Right. You're going to weed all those out immediately.

[0:08:23.7] DP: You're going to lose 1/5 of the talent pool, which seems like a stupid idea to me.

[0:08:27.7] PF: Well and then you also – and I laughed out loud when I read this. You said that afternoons are the Bermuda Triangles of the day. You alluded to that just a little bit ago, talking about how bad afternoons are. I was shocked by what you wrote. Can you explain what you mean by them being the Bermuda Triangle and what they do to us?

[0:08:46.1] DP: I'm glad you were shocked, because that's the appropriate response. Let's take healthcare for instance. Your listeners learn nothing else from this conversation. I hope that they learn to avoid if they can, going into the hospital or going to an important doctor appointment in the afternoon. The evidence is overwhelming. We know that anesthesia errors are four times more likely at 3 p.m. than at 9 a.m. We know that in colonoscopies, doctors find half as many polyps in afternoon exams as they do in morning exams. Hand-washing in hospitals diminishes incredibly in the afternoon. We know that doctors are more likely to prescribe unnecessary antibiotics in the afternoon. It's really, really bad.

That's because as I said before, people's brain power, our brain power, other people's brain power doesn't remain static over the course of the day. It changes. You see it also especially in education, where that kids tend to be pretty larky. With kids, if you have – there's some important research out of Denmark showing that if you have kids who are randomly assigned to take a standardized test, some take it early in the day, some take it in the afternoon. Kids who take the test in the afternoon score as if they've missed two weeks of school. Kids who take elementary school students, again very larky population, elementary school students do better in math if they take math in the morning. They have learned more, they have higher grades, they have better test scores. Unfortunately, when in schools and other institutions we just don't take this question of when seriously enough, but it matters. It matters a lot well.

[0:10:24.0] PF: Well and now knowing that, say as a parent, what is their appropriate response? Because you can't say, "Quit testing my child in the afternoon." How do we work around knowing that this is our problem area, how do we work around that both at work, at home and school?

[0:10:39.1] DP: Well, here's the thing, let's go back to schools for a second, because maybe we should say stop testing my kid in the afternoon. Maybe instead of having one day of testing, you should have two mornings of testing so everybody is on an even playing field. The other thing though – there's another remedy, which I'll talk about in a moment, or let's talk about math.

When schools schedule classes, they think of it merely as a logistical exercise and it's not. Certain things are better taught in the morning and we're better off having things like math in the morning, especially for elementary school students.

It requires taking these when questions as strategic questions, not merely logistical questions. There are other remedies too, because you can't create a perfect situation. In the Denmark example that I gave you, one of the remedies and it was very effective was breaks. If you give those afternoon test takers a 20 to 30-minute break to have a snack, run around a little bit on the playground, they actually get their scores back up. This is part of a larger body of research on breaks as a performance enhancer. We have totally under-sold the importance of breaks as a way to maintain our mood, maintain our mental acuity. Breaks are much more important than realize.

[0:11:48.3] PF: Yeah, because we tend to think, "Well, I've got to power through this workday." What you find and what you tell us is if you'll take a break and walk away from it for a bit, you're going to actually get more done in less time.

[0:12:00.4] DP: Precisely, precisely. We think that the way to get – That's our goal is to get more done. Get more work done and better work done. Somehow we've been seduced by the belief that the way to do that is to power through, that powering through is the pathway for getting more work done and better work done and the morning people – morning people, this idea that early risers are morally superior, also pervades them –

The same thing is true with powering through is morally superior than taking a break. Both of those notions are nonsense. Absolutely nonsense. A lot of people believe that amateurs take breaks and professionals don't, when in fact it's precisely 100% the opposite; professionals take break, amateurs don't take breaks.

[0:12:50.3] PF: Can you tell us what impact that has? What results did you see between people who took breaks and people who didn't?

[0:12:57.0] DP: Oh, it's massive. We know that evidence from the standardized tests that taking tests in the afternoon brings those scores back up. We know that in medicine for instance that having these intentional vigilance breaks can dramatically reduce a number of medical errors.

We know in hospitals where I mentioned there was this big decline in hand-washing inside of hospitals in the afternoon.

One of the remedies for that was to give, especially the nurses more breaks, but also particular kinds of breaks; social breaks, breaks with other nurses. Because we know that the research is telling us that breaks with other people are more restorative than breaks on our own. We know that breaks outside are better than breaks inside. We know that breaks where we're moving are more effective than breaks where we're stationary.

You see also some interesting research. You might have covered some of the work of Anders Ericsson and deliberate practice, which has been adjacent to some of the work in positive psychology. One of the things that he did in his study of high performers in this particular case, violinist is that the elite violinist took more breaks and longer breaks than the non-elite violinists.

There's a lot of evidence. We have to start thinking of breaks differently. We have to start thinking of breaks as part of our performance, rather than a deviation from our performance. That's what professional athletes do. Professional athletes, high-level musicians understand this. The rest of us need to start following their sterling example.

[0:14:25.5] PF: Is that something you should schedule in at the beginning of your day? Like go ahead – as you're planning out your day say, "I'm going to take this break," or at least until you get used to taking a break, so that you make yourself do it?

[0:14:36.8] DP: I think so. I think that's a very good idea. In fact, that's what I do myself. Because again, as we were talking about before, we don't have a culture of break-taking, and so people will just neglect it. One way to not neglect something is to schedule it. I've actually done that myself, in that each afternoon I try to include one specific break. It'll be 3:30, take a walk. We're not talking about crazy four-hour long breaks or anything like that. We're talking about a 10-minute break, to take a walk outside with someone you like talking about something other than work.

That small step alone has been shown to improve the sharpness of our thinking, restore our mood, give us a little bit more physical energy. Even really, really – There's another line of

research on what are called micro-breaks, which are really, really short breaks; even those are helpful.

One micro-break that I like is the 20-20-20 exercise, which is good for people who are working at a computer. All it is, it's very simple; every 20 minutes, look at something 20 feet away for 20 seconds. Even that can restore mental energy.

[0:15:49.3] PF: Oh, my. We can all do that. It's not that hard.

[0:15:53.3] DP: Every 20 minutes, look at something 20 feet away for 20 seconds. Yeah, we can all do that. Even that, these micro-breaks matter – these micro-breaks better as well. What we have is these kinds of conventional wisdom that is just wrong that powering through is better. Nope. That larks are morally superior to owls. Nope. This is why we have science, so we can take these things that we have intuition about, that we have folklore about and say which of these are true and which of these are not true.

[0:16:22.6] PF: Yeah, you do a great job of upending a lot of our conventional wisdom that's not so wise. The thing that I also loved is that you talked about napping.

[0:16:32.0] DP: Oh, there's a lot of research on napping too and naps are pretty good for us. Except, the ideal nap is remarkably short, shorter than I ever would have imagined would be effective. The ideal nap is between 10 and 20 minutes long. After 20 minutes or so, you begin to develop what's called sleep inertia, which is that groggy, boggy feeling you get. Super short naps are incredibly effective.

[0:16:52.2] PF: I know some people have gotten on that bandwagon. There's even certain companies that have nap pods and things like that. If you work at a place where that's not supported, how can you still do that? Because I know people who – they're really tired during the day. They could really get that 10 minutes and benefit from it. How do they work that in?

[0:17:11.5] DP: It's tough to do. It's tough to do especially in an open office. If there's any space available where you can just squirrel away for 25 minutes, it might be worth doing. Now I happen to work in a small office by myself, so it's easy for me to do. What I do, the way I approach this is I put on noise-cancelling headphones, I sit in a comfortable chair and I set my

phone timer for 25 minutes. If I fall asleep in say 10 minutes and the alarm having 25, I've got a 15-minute nap that's right in that sweet spot of nap length time.

[0:17:48.8] PF: What difference does it make in you before and after a nap?

[0:17:52.7] DP: As silly as it sounds, as obvious as it sounds, I feel more awake. I don't have that groggy period. Here's the thing, our brain power doesn't stay the same throughout the day. It's really important. You're in Nashville, right?

[0:18:07.2] PF: I am.

[0:18:07.8] DP: Okay, so let's talk about the Predators, all right? Your hockey team, okay? Here's what naps are like, all right? The Predators play the first period against whoever, the Washington Capitals, or the Toronto Maple Leafs or whatever, okay? Then if you look at the ice after the first period, all right? What does the ice look like? It's all scuffed up. It's chipped. It's messed up, all right? Then what happens? Some dude comes out in a Zamboni and smooths out the ice, all right? Naps are like that Zamboni, right? We get all these nicks and scuffs over the course of a day, a nap comes in and smooths that out.

Again, it's not these long naps. It's not the nap that a six-month-old child takes. These 10 to 20-minute naps can be enormously effective. You're right though that in many cases, many companies really, really, really, really look down on that. If you're thinking about doing it, at least at the beginning be discreet about it.

[0:19:00.9] PF: You're saying don't curl up under your desk and just have at it?

[0:19:04.7] DP: No. Certainly don't curl up on your desk. That's probably even worse.

[0:19:09.0] PF: Well, one thing I do want to get to and we're getting near the end of our time, so this was absolutely perfect. I loved where you talked about the effect that endings have on our memories and our behavior. Can you spend a few minutes talking about why the way something ends is so important?

[0:19:25.7] DP: Yeah. I mean, the why of it is actually complicated. I'm not sure we know precisely, but what we do know is that endings have a big effect on our behavior. Endings can help energize us, so when we see the end of something, it actually can enhance our motivation. We can kick a little bit harder. There's some really interesting research showing that the age at which people run marathons, their first marathon, the age of people run their first marathon, the most common age is age 29. Another common age 39, 49, 59, that there's something about coming to the end of that decade that gets people moving.

Endings can help energize us. Endings have a big effect in how we encode experiences, how we evaluate experiences, how we remember them. In any encounter, whether it's in a meeting, or in a school setting, or in a customer transaction, how that experience ends has a disproportionate weight on people's evaluation of the whole experience. It's true, even in how people evaluate entire lives. Someone who's led an exemplary life in the last year turns out to – does something bad, versus somebody who has led a pretty scandalous life and in the last year did something good. Those people, the research shows are generally evaluated about equal, because goodness in the last year of life, people think reflects the overall character. Badness in the last year of life, people say reflects their own – that people's overall character, because endings have this disproportionate effect on how we evaluate things.

[0:20:58.8] PF: Knowing that, how do we apply that in our own situations whether it's the end of a day, it's the end of a relationship, it's the end of a meeting?

[0:21:08.2] DP: Yeah. I think, one of the things is to be intentional about it. Let's take the end of the day; a positive psychology has some very interesting things on this as well. The end of a day, we should be intentional about the end of a day. We should have some small ritual at the end of the day. What I do and it's consistent with a lot of the work of Teresa Amabile at Harvard Business School, is at the end of every day I actually write down what I got done. I write down my progress.

We know that progress is the single biggest motivator on the job. By ending the day by marking my progress, I have a sense of satisfaction and a little bit more motivation the next day. Another thing that people can do at the end of the day is thank somebody, express gratitude at the end of the day. That'll leave you, that'll boost your mood and encode the entire day in a more positive light.

[0:22:00.0] PF: This is such a fantastic book. There are so many things to talk about with it. It's too bad we only have 30 minutes to do this. What is the one thing though that you hope readers will take away from reading this book?

[0:22:13.1] DP: I hope that they'll be conscious of time, that you and I are temporal creatures, right? We talk about a biological clock. We have biological clocks in every cell in our body. We're always moving through time, right? Yesterday was the past, tomorrow is the future. If we're aware of that and if we're intentional about what we do, when we do stuff in the course of a day, if we're intentional as we were talking about before about constructing meaningful endings, if we're aware of the effect of midpoints on our lives, we're just going to feel better and do better. The first step is really awareness.

[0:22:47.3] PF: Perfect. Well Dan, we're going to tell people in just a couple minutes how they can get your book, where they can learn more about it, give them some links to get more familiar with what you're doing. Thank you for coming on and I thank you for writing this book.

[0:22:59.6] DP: Well, thanks for having me. I really enjoyed talking to you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:23:06.8] PF: That was Daniel Pink, the author of *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing*. You can find out more about Daniel and where to buy his book by visiting us at livehappynow.com.

We hope you're already a subscriber to Live Happy Now. If you're not, you can find us on the Pandora Podcast Network, as well as Spotify, iHeartRadio and on iTunes and Google Play. Just find us on your favorite platform and hit subscribe so you'll never miss an episode. That is all we have time for this week, so we'll meet you back here again next week for an all new episode. Until then, this is Paula Felps reminding you to make every day a happy one.

[END]