

EPISODE 201

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.7] PF: Welcome to episode 201 of Live Happy Now, brought to you this week by the Happy Child Summit. I'm Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us today to talk about something that I think most of us spend a lot of time thinking about and all of us want more of. No, I'm not even talking about sleep. This week, it's all about time, as designer Jake Knapp joins us.

Jake spent 10 years at Google, where he helped build products like Gmail and Google Hangouts, but perhaps his greatest accomplishment is that he figured out how we can design our days to get more out of them. Today, he's talking with us about his new book, *Make Time: How to Focus on what Matters Every Day*. He's going to tell us how we can learn to do our days differently.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:46.3] PF: Jake, welcome to the show. Thank you so much for sitting down and talking with us today.

[0:00:50.6] JK: Well, thank you for having me. It's great to be here.

[0:00:53.7] PF: This is a really relevant book, because I don't know a single person who says they have too much time on their hands anymore.

[0:01:00.9] JK: Yeah, that's true. That's not a common conversation starter. What would I do with all my free time?

[0:01:06.6] PF: Exactly. I mean, we hear this all the time; people are too busy and people say, "I just don't have time." Are we busier than we used to be, or is it the way we're structuring our time? What's going on with us in time?

[0:01:21.6] JK: I don't know. I think there's probably some element of the human experience, at least in modern industrial age that has probably always felt really busy and there's always been

a lot of stress, I think. There is definitely something going on with our technology and the rate at which we're improving our ability to be distracted these days. Also, I think our culture more and more accepts busyness and expects busyness, especially in the United States. If you're in the United States, think you're used to asking people how they are and hearing, "I'm busy," and that can be good or bad or whatever, but that's the standard answer.

[0:02:03.5] PF: Yeah, it is. We wear that as our little badge or as an excuse like, "I can't do it. I'm just too busy to do that." Then yeah, we can find time to get on Instagram for 30 – Maybe it's a priority thing. You talk about the difference between redesigning your day and time management. This is what really I think sets your book apart is that you're not talking about time management.

[0:02:29.3] JK: That's right.

[0:02:30.9] PF: Yeah, can you explain that to us, because it really is pretty fascinating.

[0:02:33.7] JK: Yeah. My background is as a designer and I think a lot about how to try to design things, so they'll be easy for people to do and work well for what people want to accomplish, which is how we get into this fix where technology is so compelling and so distracting. It's also a way to take control of things.

With time management where I think often what the word that people associate with it is being productive. How can I get the most things done in the least amount of time? The way that I'm talking about it is actually about being purposeful, instead of productive. It's picking that one thing that really excites you each day, one thing that you want to have bring your full attention to and then making a time for it on your calendar, defending some space for it.

Then everything's designed around that. It becomes the focal point. We call it the highlight of your day and everything builds off of that, that one central design piece. It's almost like in Instagram, the highlight of Instagram are probably the photos and the highlight of your inbox maybe is each e-mail. For us, the in the make time process, the highlight is that one thing that's the most exciting for you each day.

[0:03:57.3] PF: You say it's the thing that's most exciting. For a lot of us, the thing that's most exciting is not the thing that dominates our day. How do you balance those two things?

[0:04:09.5] JK: Yeah, and I should probably say it can't always be the most exciting thing. Sometimes it's going to be the thing that's most satisfying, and maybe your day realistically is going to be dominated by some big project at work. Perhaps you're a bit stressed about it. I can't tell you how many times in my past I've talked to people, or I've had this experience myself where I know I have to do something. It's really important and it's the most important thing for the day at work. Yet at the end of the day, I haven't done it somehow. I look back and I think, "Gosh, I was answering e-mails and I was talking to people," but somehow I kept putting off that hard, big project that I knew was really important.

Sometimes it'll be really satisfying to do that thing that you've got to do, but whenever possible I want to encourage people to prioritize something that they might not otherwise get to. When you start off the day by saying if the day was over and I was looking back on it, what would I like to say was the highlight of my day? Occasionally, will be that work project, but sometimes it's going to be that thing that was really fun, that hobby you wanted to get to, or spending time with your kids. That's really the promise of it is when you start to be able to harness this idea of highlighting to do those things that otherwise get deprioritized.

[0:05:29.4] PF: How do you stay with it? Because for a lot of us, we start out Sunday night like, "Okay, here's what my week is going to look like." We're all, "Yeah, let's go get this." The minute Monday starts, you feel you lose all control.

[0:05:41.4] JK: Yeah, totally.

[0:05:43.2] PF: What you schedule does not in any way resemble what actually happens during your day. How do you use this concept to regain control and get back on track with your day?

[0:05:55.5] JK: Well, one of the most important things about this concept is that it is day-by-day. There is no week-long plan, or month – It's not a big master plan. It's like look, let's look at today and see what's possible today. I think that already helps a lot. Not feeling you're building a big suspension bridge and if one piece falls apart, the whole thing collapses. Rather, you're just saying like, "For today, what's workable and what's doable?"

Also, I think it's important to be realistic during the day. A lot of times for me, the thing I set out to have – be my highlight at the beginning of the day is something happens, things come up. Life is like that. At the end of the day, then when I reflect back on what's happened I'll say, “Oh, yeah. This this other thing took its place, but that thing was really important, really urgent. My kid got sick, or last week it was our puppy who got sick.”

Okay, it makes sense that I put that thing off. Part of what happens there is that you at least for me, I stopped feeling guilty about not doing the things that were important. I start having a better relationship with my own attention, because I've said this is the thing that's most important to me today. If I do it, great. If I don't, I can at least look back and say, “Well, I know why because there was this clear headline.”

[0:07:15.8] PF: You have a really interesting story in the sense of how you came about looking at this. Can you tell us that?

[0:07:22.5] JK: Yeah. Well, I think the moment for me that changed the way I was thinking about how I spent my time is it's all related to me to being a dad. I have two kids and they're two boys, age 15 and 8. When my oldest son was born, I got really into productivity; the first thing we talked about, trying to get as much done in the least amount of time possible.

I felt by the time my younger son was born that I had really gotten – I was really good at that, that I was very efficient. I was constantly getting my inbox to empty and I was working at Google which is a very fast-paced environment. It's actually working on the Gmail team, and so I felt I was this e-mail expert. There's this evening, this moment. It's a few years back. I was on the floor with my younger son was a baby at the time and where my older son, we're playing with wooden trains and building a train track. All of a sudden, my older son says, “Hey, dad. Why are you looking at your phone?”

I was defensive at first. I was like, “I'm busy. I've got work to do. I have to check my work e-mail.” I realized even as I was saying it, I saw what was going on from his perspective. He was like, “We're playing wooden trains on the floor. This is the coolest thing we could possibly be doing.” If there's something on your phone – he wasn't trying to call me out. He was just like,

“God, there must be something really cool on my dad's phone if it's cooler than this. It must be amazing.”

I thought, “God, he's right. This should be what I'm trying to pay attention to. This should be what I'm working towards.” Instead in order to feel like I have time, I'm actually taking all my time away. I'm constantly partly attentive to the phone in my pocket, or the e-mail on my computer, whatever. I thought, “I've got to focus that energy that I've been spending on trying to get productive.” I've got to find a different way to solve it, because this is not right. At that moment, I deleted all the apps on my phone, including e-mail and even Safari.

[0:09:26.6] PF: I could just hear people clenching right then. It's like, how can you even do that? You're a Google guy. How did you do that?

[0:09:36.3] JK: At the moment, I wasn't really thinking about it. I was just so angry at myself and frustrated situation and I took it out on the apps on the phone and I deleted them. As soon as I did it I was like, “Oh, God.” I got stressed out. It's funny, because really it's very easy to reinstall apps. They make it easy for you. At the moment I was like, “Oh, my God. I'm going to be totally cut off from everything and this is going to be even – this is going to make my stress even worse.”

It was remarkable. That was six years ago, almost probably six and a half and I still don't have all those – I continue to get new iPhones, but I've kept off most of the apps. There's a lot of stuff besides e-mail and Instagram and Facebook that you can use on your phone. For me, it turned out that I had better attention. The weird thing was it actually made me better at my work. I wasn't constantly responding, so my response time went down, but I got better at solving big problems, at focusing on bigger things and a writing blog posts, or starting new projects at the office. All those things, I just had more mental space for them.

There's this very alluring misconception that I think we're all under that. If we're replying as quickly as possible, if we're reacting to others as fast as we possibly can, then we're being the best colleague possible. We're really doing everybody else a favor, because we're answering their questions as quickly as we can, we're up to date on everything. If we're looking at our Instagram, or Facebook, whatever, if we're looking at those feeds and responding to people's posts as quickly as possible, we're being a good friend.

This is very, very alluring and very deceptive, because actually if you can give people less frequent time, but higher quality time, you're doing everyone a favor; yourself, your co-workers, your friends, your family, your loved ones, everyone. If you give them less frequency but more quality and that's the shift that I tried to make and the small step that you can start to take towards that is starting to delete some apps off of the phone, because the phone is all about sprinkling lots of very high-frequency, low-quality interactions into your day.

[0:11:51.4] PF: We get so caught up in the apps and so caught up – like, “I'm going to use this for my productivity. I'm going to use this to track my steps. I'm going to do all these things.” We start feeling like, “Okay, if I don't have all these apps, I'm going to be like Tom Hanks in Castaway and I'm two steps away from playing with a volleyball for a best friend.” It's completely changed how we think. What do people will do when you start talking about making time? I can't imagine that they're like, “Oh, we could do that.”

[0:12:21.4] JK: Yeah, it is not – If you're listening to this right now and you're like, “This guy is nuts. This guy is – I'll never do this,” you're not alone. That is the first reaction I think is like, “That's crazy. I don't want to do that.” I have had many people, including my wife also first reaction, you're crazy. It took two years before she tried it then she got into it.

I have a friend, I do a podcast with this friend and we've been doing it for about a year. He's way into Instagram and he refused to do it for a year. Then without telling me, he actually deleted Instagram off his phone and he got an old phone and put just Instagram on the other phone, so he doesn't always have it with him. He said, it's amazing what it's done for my brain, just separating that from being constantly with me.

That's the whole idea I think that usually makes people feel better about it is if they can check that stuff, but on the computer, or on another device, but it's just not with them all the time, then you're just starting to design your attention. You're saying, “Most of the time, I want my attention to be on the people I'm with or the place I am.” Then in these few – I'll make these exceptions when I'm at my desk, or when I have this other device and that's when I'll be on for this other stuff. I think it's not about saying, “I'm going to the desert island for good.” It's just saying, “I'm going to spend a bit of my time at the beach and then occasionally I'll go to the office.”

[0:13:45.7] PF: What does that do for us mentally? You talked about how it's good for your mind. What really does it do when we are able to distance ourselves and quit looking at our phones all the time, quit living in with apps and quit living come scheduled by these outside influences?

[0:14:01.5] JK: There are all kinds of studies about attention and about the negative effects of technology. I think those things are out there. People can find them in here. I think what's maybe more interesting to hear is just my qualitative experience is that professionally, I had this weird job for several years where I was working at Google Ventures with startups who we had invested in. I would take the teams through one week where during the day they had to shut their laptops and phones and just focus on solving the most pressing problem for that company; working with teams like Slack and Uber and different companies.

It was remarkable. I have seen all kinds of different teams go through this experience and get much better results day to day in their quality of work and how much they're able to accomplish, because they weren't on e-mail, they weren't constantly checking stuff. They were just talking to each other, solving the problem, maybe even working on paper individually quietly. That stuff, I've seen happen and be extremely effective in the office.

For myself, it's allowed me to write books and have the mental space to do bigger things. The most powerful thing I think is that it feels it slows time down in a good way. If you've ever had the feeling of coming to the end of the week and thinking, "My God. What happened this week? I don't even know." This doesn't a 100% solve it. Those things can still happen, but it does slow those moments down. I feel I have more slow high-quality moments with my kids, which is what I really wanted.

[0:15:35.2] PF: One thing that you do that is crucial to being able to make time is to start identifying the things in our lives that are worth making time for. How do people start that process?

[0:15:47.9] JK: That is so important because if you're going to do – me saying like, "Hey, consider deleting e-mail off of your phone, or consider –" One of the things we suggest is turning down the lights in your house at night, so it just gets easier to fall asleep, then there's a million little things like that. Doing these things is not in and of itself, we all know how could

probably sleep a little bit better. Or gosh, I could probably be on my phone a little bit less. Feeling guilty about it is not really a great motivator. Instead, I think it's much better if you're excited about something and you're like, "Gosh, well if I'm less distracted by my e-mail, or if I've taken a walk this morning, I'm going to have more fun or get more out of that highlight."

Knowing what the highlight is is really important. For me, a great exercise to start off with is making a list of the projects that you have in your life, just in any order. Anything could be a project. For me, being a dad is a project and writing a book is a project. I often have one or two work-related projects going on at a time. There might be something else going on at home and you can just list out all of those. Then make yourself put them in priority order. At this moment, like it doesn't have to be for your whole life. Just saying right now, this week, or today, what's the top priority of these projects? Just make a numbered list and draw a circle around that top thing and really – I really encourage people when they're doing this to think about that thing that you feel you've put off, that you've been like, "Gosh, some day it would be really great if I could get back to painting, or get back to practicing the saxophone, or someday if I could spend more time with my kids, it would be so great."

Well, put that thing at the top of the list. Then every chance you get, every day when you choose to highlight, see if there's a way to make time for that thing, that top priority. Even if it's something that usually gets put off. I think that's a really powerful way to start. Then day-to-day, I usually suggest people look for whatever's going to be the most satisfying at the end of the day. Something that will probably take 60 to 90 minutes usually makes a good highlight.

[0:17:56.0] PF: Excellent. What happens when you have competing priorities? Because sometimes you can't – it's like having children, you can't choose your favorite. Well sometimes you can, but you always say you can't. What happens when you've got two things and they're both priorities?

[0:18:10.7] JK: Well, the reality is that on any given day, you're going to do more than one thing. This is not meant to be a grand unifying theory of your whole day. There's going to be other stuff that comes up. Yeah, you're going to have plenty of times when I'm like, "Gosh, I think there's really one peak focus to each day." That we have a peak level of energy once and we ought to try to spend that on the most important thing, and choosing where to spend that can be tough.

I say that when you're starting off, you just go for the thing that maybe is the most pressing. I think everybody has a sense of like, "Yeah. This is a thing I need to do for work, or this is a thing that has a deadline, or maybe my kid needs help with homework and it's a really big –" You usually have a sense of what's the most urgent, or pressing thing each day. That's a good way to start off and just get the feel of what does it feel like to write down the most big, pressing thing for each day?

Then hopefully get in the habit of getting it accomplished, or at least spending time on it each day and being really focused when you do. Getting into that habit usually builds this muscle memory of what it feels like to pick a focal point. Then I think you can grow from urgency to joy. What would bring me more joy, or what would bring me more satisfaction? Then sometimes, those are the really exciting things. Those are the things that are – those hobbies that get put off, or that time with friends and family. Those things that can usually get pushed aside in our busy world.

[0:19:41.0] PF: You've given us so much to think about. Your book is excellent. It gives us so many entry points of being able to restructure our days and make more time. As we're leaving today, what's one thing that you really want everyone to take with them?

[0:19:56.0] JK: I think that the thing that's really key is that whether you try the experiments in the book, or pick it up or not, it is extremely important in our world to look at the default settings. Look at the way that things are set up, the ways that you handle e-mail, the ways that you interact with social media, the ways you spend your time and ask which of those things really have to be the way that they are. Because all of us, this definitely includes me gets stuck in patterns. Things are set up in a certain way. We get a smartphone, it comes with e-mail on it and everybody of course, has every social media service that they use on their phone. Of course, you'd have, of course you have YouTube on there.

If you start to question some of those default settings, you really can take control of your time. Time is – it's your life, so you should take control of it. Whatever experiment you do, try some experiment.

[0:20:55.9] PF: Jake, great advice. Like I said, very insightful book. Thank you so much for writing that. Thank you for talking with us today.

[0:21:03.1] JK: Well, thank you for having me on, Paula.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:21:09.3] PF: That was Jake Knapp, author of the book *Make Time: How to Focus on what Matters Every Day*. This week's episode was brought to you by the Happy Child Summit, a free online event that's happening April 8th through 11th. The Happy Child Summit brings together 20 different experts, who will talk about everything from how to motivate your kids even if they're teenagers, to ways to tackle technology, to how to instill your child with grit and resilience. You'll learn ways to set goals, nurture your child's character strengths and so much more.

You can visit us at livehappynow.com to learn more about how to register for the Happy Child Summit and also to learn more about today's guest, Jake Knapp. That is all we have time for this week. 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]