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The Science of Living: 219 Reasons to Rethink Your Daily Routine

Made by Blinkist

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Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

What's in it for me? Structure your day around science.

Throughout the day, most people are presented with a myriad of seemingly mundane questions: Why do I feel so sluggish this morning? Can I skip breakfast today? Why do I find it difficult to sleep after looking at a screen? Although they may seem trivial, taken together, these questions get at something much bigger – the way you live your life. How you answer them can determine whether or not you're healthy, happy, and productive.

In these blinks, you'll learn how science can help you arrive at the best possible answers for many questions like these. From how to dress for cold weather to overcoming insomnia, modern scientific knowledge can guide the way. It also helps you avoid habits based in pseudoscience and hearsay. By turning to objective facts, you'll be able fine-tune your days and get the most out of your precious time.

In these blinks, you'll find out

- why waking in non-REM sleep can leave you feeling groggy;

- that smoothies are better than fruit juice; and
- how much of your time is productive time.

Mornings can be tough, but there are some tricks that can help.

Beep-beep-beep-beep! It's morning, and that sound you hear? It's the dreaded and familiar racket of your alarm clock going off. You reach out and hit snooze before it can drill any further into your sleepy head.

It's a familiar scenario to many. After all, it's hard to wake up in the morning. When you do finally pull yourself out of bed, you likely feel as if you've gone a few rounds with a heavyweight

boxer. Why is it so difficult to feel fresh and sprightly first thing? And what can you do differently?

The key message here is: Mornings can be tough, but there are some tricks that can help.

Feeling a bit groggy in the morning is natural. That's because many of your bodily systems, like the digestive tract and parts of your brain, fall into deep sleep at night. Getting them all going again can be like starting a car on a frosty morning; it takes a bit of time.

Also, the precise timing of *when* you wake determines how you feel. At night, your body passes through different stages of sleep. The lighter ones are REM phases – that's when you dream – while the rest are deep and dreamless. If you wake during REM sleep, you'll often feel refreshed. But waking from deep, dreamless sleep can leave you in a fog, as the frontal, thinking parts of your brain aren't ready yet.

So what can you do when this happens? Well, getting out into daylight can help, as it increases levels of special "wake-up" hormones. You could also try

stretching, gentle exercise, or yoga, as this will increase your heart rate and get blood flow to the regions of your brain that are still “asleep.”

But while these techniques can help shake off *some* morning inertia, part of it’s simply biological. Everyone has a different body clock, or *chronotype*. Your chronotype determines whether or not you’re a morning person, a night owl, or something in between.

For instance, if you *always* feel sluggish in the morning and alert at night, you’re a night owl. Your natural rhythm is set and

there’s little you can do to change it. If that’s the case, your best career choice is one that allows flexible working – a workday tailored to your own personal body clock.

Breakfast isn't quite as important as you think.

In the Western world, many people consider breakfast the most important meal of the day. There are cafes dedicated to breakfasting, takeaway breakfasts for commuters, and whole supermarket aisles full of breakfast cereals.

But it wasn't always like this. The Romans snacked very lightly in the morning and ate their main meal in the middle of the day. Breakfast has become *such* an institution as a result of a concerted effort by business –

namely, profit-hungry breakfast cereal manufacturers.

But if that's the case, could you go without it?

The key message here is: Breakfast isn't quite as important as you think.

The truth is, there's no hard evidence that eating breakfast makes you healthier. Recent studies have shown that, contrary to popular belief, it doesn't fire up your metabolism and help you shed calories, either. There's a small increase in the metabolic rate at

breakfast time, but it's no bigger than with any other meal.

Just as with sleep, your body clock determines whether you need breakfast or not. Some people crave it, but if you don't, it's no big deal. If you're diabetic, sick, or do heavy manual work, then you should eat breakfast to keep energized. If you *don't* fall into one of those categories, breakfast isn't exactly a necessity. With that said, many people *do* eat breakfast to get themselves going. And it's important to make the first meal of the day part of a healthy, balanced diet. So what makes a good breakfast?

To provide the body with fuel, nothing beats a bowl of whole grain porridge. It releases energy slowly throughout the morning, and keeps you fuller for longer. In general, it's best to choose whole grain food over convenience food. Highly-processed breakfast cereals are best avoided, as they're packed with sugar.

And rather than drinking sugary fruit juice, go for a smoothie – the smoothie pulp retains the fruit's fibre, which is lost through juicing. That fibre is necessary to maintain good gut health, which is vital to your all-around health.

And what about vitamin supplements? Although they can be important for people with deficiencies, they're unnecessary for most people if they eat well. Unless you've got a special medical requirement, you can get everything you need from a balanced, varied diet.

“The significance of breakfast is down to an individual’s preference, lifestyle, and body clock.”

Dressing for the weather really is an exact science.

So, you've managed to get up, make a healthy breakfast, and have just taken a look outside to check the weather. Snow flurries are drifting along the street and there are foot-long icicles hanging off the windowsills. In some places, the snow is so deep it would come up to your knees.

It looks *cold*. What should you wear to stay toasty? Just a big coat and a wool sweater, or lots of layers? A hat? No hat?

Thankfully science can lend a hand here.

The key message here is: Dressing for the weather really is an exact science.

If it's really cold outside, the best thing to do is wear lots of layers. That's because it's not the fabric itself that keeps you warm, but the air that's trapped by the fabric. A big wool sweater on its own is unlikely to trap as much air as three lighter layers on top of each other. That static air, trapped between you and your clothes, is the best insulator, especially as it's warm and close to your body. There's

a similar logic at play in keeping houses warm, too – there's a little gap between double-glazed windows.

What about a wool hat to ward off the cold? In cold weather, a hat can really help, and especially in very cold weather, under -4°C, where you can lose up to half your body heat through your head.

Another thing to bear in mind about dressing for cold weather: generally, women feel the cold more than men. And no, this isn't because men are especially hardy. It's down to the higher levels of estrogen that women

produce – this hormone thickens the blood, which reduces the flow of warmth to the body's outer parts.

Now, if you look outside and see scorching sun, science can still help you choose your attire. When it's hot, you cool down through sweating. The sweat then evaporates, removing heat from your skin.

So when it comes to dressing for hot weather, you should look for clothes that aid this process. That means loose clothing. And best of all, loose, specialist clothing, like certain kinds of sportswear, that are

manufactured with microscopic gaps between the fibers. These *wicking fibers* pull the sweat from your skin, helping your body regulate its temperature. That should be enough to keep you cool when everyone else is fainting in the heat!

Science can help you structure your days.

It's Monday morning. You wake up, eat breakfast, and begin work. For a few hours, you're able to power through a complex task you were too exhausted to finish on Friday afternoon. Then, after lunch, you unexpectedly run out of steam.

What happened? Again, science can clear things up. By learning how energy levels fluctuate throughout the day, you can make sure that you maximize

your productivity, know when to exercise, and take time to relax.

The key message here is: Science can help you structure your days.

For most people, the period immediately after waking is the best time for working on complex tasks. During these hours, your mental focus is strongest, so it's best to reserve this time for important things like working out a complicated budget, writing a detailed report, or operating heavy machinery.

This is prime productive time. It lasts for only about 80 minutes, so it's wise to clear your desk of distractions and try to optimize your workspace. Turn off any distracting notifications and make sure you're not scrolling through social media.

By the time lunch comes around, your most productive hour and a half is gone. Your laser focus has dissipated, and it won't return until tomorrow. So how do you use the post-lunch period well? This time is best for less-demanding tasks, like mundane paperwork, routine catch-ups, conference calls, and

bouncing ideas around with your colleagues.

It's also important to take a break – to disengage from work entirely for a short period. It's only when you enter a wandering, daydreamy state of mind that your brain can recover from its morning exertions. That way, when you go back to work in the afternoon, you'll go back refreshed.

But, if you're a night owl, you'll be running a little behind this timetable. *Your* mental peak will be during the afternoon and ebb away after that.

Unlike your mind, your body takes a little longer to warm up. This means that serious exercise is best saved for the afternoon – so if you're planning a real workout, do it sometime after lunch, after you've digested your meal. That's not to say you can't exercise in the morning. Morning exercise is a good way to get your circulation going and to wake yourself up, but it's best to keep it light.

There are ways to manage post-lunch tiredness.

It's lunchtime. Depending on your work culture, perhaps you'll scoff a few sandwiches down by the water cooler, grab a quick bite on the go, or even sit down with colleagues for a restaurant meal. Then it's time to return to the daily grind.

But if you're like most people, you probably have a slump in your energy level following lunch. Drowsiness comes on, and you suddenly find it hard to stay sharp and focused. This can

kill your afternoon productivity – but it doesn't have to.

The key message here is: There are ways to manage post-lunch tiredness.

First off, it's natural to feel sleepy after lunch. Following a meal, your arteries widen so that there's a ready supply of blood to your stomach as you begin to digest your food. Your stomach then squeezes your meal to extract its nutrients. This is all hard work, and naturally, it tires you out quickly. By this point, you could probably just nod off, wherever you might be.

The bigger the meal, the harder your gut has to work, and the drowsier you feel. With a big meal, sleepiness can come on in about 20 minutes and then last for hours!

So, if you have complex tasks planned for the afternoon, you're best eating a much lighter snack for your midday meal. It's also a good idea to stay off the roads after a big lunch, or at least to be extra vigilant when driving. There's a sudden increase in motor accidents during this time, thanks to all the drowsy drivers on the road.

The scientific name for this phenomenon is *postprandial drowsiness*. With so much of it going on, wouldn't it be best just to take a siesta? Well, yes, it would. It would be the natural thing to do, and in many places, from the Mediterranean to mainland China, that's exactly what happens. It's only in Western Europe and the US, where a vestige of the strict Protestant work ethic remains, that napping after lunch is frowned on.

The truth is, like most mammals, humans are programmed for two sleeps a day. Just as chimpanzees and dolphins sleep

for two periods, you should too. And refreshed, you'd be able to work with more focus and energy. So, if your job allows it, try to squeeze in a nap – even if it's just for 20 minutes. It'll do you a world of good.

Socializing is vital for your mental and physical health.

With the workday finished, you're invited out for a few drinks with friends. After all the focus and exertion of the day, it's a relief to sit down and gossip, make each other laugh, and reflect a little on your lives.

Human beings have socialized ever since they began to gather in groups, from hunter-gatherers around an open fire to you and your friends in a city bar. It's proven to be the glue that holds societies together and also, on an individual level, a

way to feel good. And what's more, socializing is good *for* you, too.

The key message here is: Socializing is vital for your mental and physical health.

Our need to socialize stems from our ancient past. Around 2 million years ago, humans lost their fur. As a result, our faces also became more visible, revealing a wider array of facial expressions and blushing responses. Also, the protein that had once gone into keeping our fur healthy went into developing our brains.

Because of these changes, we became much more expressive social animals. This helped us to form deeper bonds with each other and build large, cooperative societies. It goes without saying that without our complex social interactions, we wouldn't have become the successful species that we have.

Along with being part of our success as a species, socializing has individual benefits. As you sit and talk with others, certain areas of your brain light up, which makes socializing feel good. Your brain releases hormones – dopamine, which makes you feel good, and

oxytocin, which helps you form attachments.

Socializing has lasting health benefits too. Regular bursts of these hormones relieves anxiety and lowers stress, which in turn improves your general health. Research shows that regular socializing with friends and family is an important part of maintaining physical *and* mental health, while exercising caring and empathy can help balance your emotions.

Conversely, a life of solitude can leave you mentally and physically worse off. In fact, the symptoms of isolation and

rejection can be *so* acute that they can actually be relieved with painkillers. The lesson here? Hold your friends close and cherish your family.

When it comes to getting to sleep, there are three key factors.

You've turned off all the lights, pulled the covers up, and closed your eyes. But however hard you try, you just can't drop off.

You begin to think about a job you left half-finished. And then you worry you've forgotten a friend's birthday. And did you remember to pay the rent?

Sometimes, it's just impossible to enter the land of nod. So what can you do? Counting sheep won't help – this will just

switch on your brain's "watching" network, which will keep you awake even longer. Instead, there are a few things you should look at to get a good night's sleep.

The key message here is: When it comes to getting to sleep, there are three key factors.

The first thing that's key to good sleep is the temperature of your bedroom. By studying the routines of hunter-gatherer societies, which haven't changed in thousands of years, researchers have found that humans fall asleep naturally when the temperature drops. If

your bedroom is too hot, you won't be sleeping anytime soon. So open the window, even just a little.

The second factor that's key to falling asleep is darkness. Combined with the falling temperature, total darkness signals to your internal body clock that it's time to sleep. It's worked this way for millions of years, sending your long-ago ancestors into a doze as night came on. It's nature's own sleep aid.

Often, though, you're probably surrounded by bright light, which confuses your brain and

keeps you awake. A good idea, then, is turn off *half* the lights in your home to convince your brain that it's approaching sleep time. Tellingly, if you go camping, you'll find that you fall into this natural rhythm within a couple of days. This goes to show how bright indoor environments have conditioned you away from your natural sleep patterns.

Thirdly, and most importantly, you need to establish a routine. This means keeping consistent bedtimes and also following a kind of bedtime ritual. This could mean brushing your teeth, dimming the lights, meditating a

little, or taking a warm bath. By doing this, you'll train your mind to expect rest.

And one more thing: there's no point lying in bed if you can't sleep. This will train your brain to link bed with being alert. In that case, it's best to get up and go and read or listen to music quietly in another room, until you feel tired again. You'll get there!

“It has taken Mother Nature 3.6 million years to teach us how to sleep...”

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

Science can help fine-tune our daily routines. For instance, it tells us that we all have different kinds of body clocks, which determine when we sleep and wake up, whether or not we need breakfast, and the time of our productive peak. By paying attention to science, we can better adapt to our biology, and avoid harmful or just plain unnecessary habits.

Actionable advice:

It’s okay to put a coat on before you go out in the cold.

The next time someone warns you that you won’t feel the benefit of your coat if you wear it too long before you go out, you can politely inform them that that’s not true. The warm air that builds up under your layers *while* you’re indoors will serve you well when you face the cold!

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