

Good Timing: Using Your Body's Natural Rhythms to Help Your Brain

Are You a “Morning Person” or an “Evening Person”?

Your brain's ability to solve problems, make decisions and, in general, think clearly is influenced by one of your body's internal systems called circadian rhythm, or chronotype. Your chronotype is not a personality trait. It is a biological characteristic, governed by a part of your brain that works like a clock to time many of your body's internal systems.

The chronotype most of us are familiar with refers to the time of day when we feel most alert and energetic. If that time for you is in the morning, then you are a “morning person” (also known as a “Lark.”) If your high alert time is in the evening, then you are an “Owl”, an “evening person.”

Few of us, however, are either pure morning people or pure evening people. Instead, most of us fall somewhere in between the two extremes. You're probably already aware, through a lifetime of living in your body, of the times when you naturally feel more alert, more aware, and more able to concentrate. If you are unsure, there are resources – questionnaires, checklists, etc. – available online or in local bookstores that can help you zero in on your brain's natural preference – that is, your chronotype.

You can use awareness of your chronotype to boost your effectiveness by matching it with the type of work your brain is doing.

Two Types of Brain Work

Research shows that we use our brain in essentially two ways. We are most familiar with using our brain to think logically. For example, we use logical thinking to organize facts and figures, write reports and emails, and to prepare for meetings and presentations.

The other way we use our brains is “outside the logic box” – that is, for creative work. Creative thinking involves letting your brain go into soft focus, looking for new connections between ideas and new patterns in what you know. For example, suppose you have to explain your current project's status to a senior manager who doesn't know much about the project. How will you explain it so that he or she will understand the

most important points? In addition to the facts & figures, you ought to think about how this person likes to hear about things. Does he or she prefer to hear about the big picture first or to dig into details right away? You need to take this, and other preferences for how this person likes to digest new information, into consideration. This will require you to think creatively.

Logical thinking requires concentration and mental alertness. Creative thinking requires that we relax our logical mind and allow new ways of looking at things to float to the top of our awareness.

Whether your work requires you to primarily use logical thinking or creative thinking, there are times and circumstances that require careful and critical thinking. Research shows that logical thinking is more effective when your brain is alert – that is, when you are at your most mentally energetic.

Knowing Your Chronotype Helps You Work Efficiently

If your chronotype tends toward “morning person,” then morning is the best time of day to deal with issues that require logical thinking. For example, before you get lost in alerts on your news feed, deal with the items that require an immediate response and then set email, etc. aside and then use this optimal time for planning or making decisions.

On the other hand, if your chronotype means that you are at your most alert and focused in the afternoon, use that time to address complex tasks and to make important decisions. Use this time also to prepare carefully for any task or meeting that will take place in the morning when your brain is less alert.

Here’s a Hint: Type, Task and Time

Use these three “T”s to help your brain work most effectively.

TYPE – Know your brain’s type. Are you a lark, an owl, or somewhere in between?

TASK – Understand the task. Does it require logical or creative thinking?

TIME – Whenever possible match your brain’s high-alert time with complex or demanding tasks and your brain’s low-alert time with more mundane tasks.

You Can’t Control Circumstances, So Control What You Can

Let's be realistic about this: few people have complete control over their work schedules. There will be times when it's impossible for you to sync your brain's high alert times with the demands of your job. Here are two suggestions that can help when circumstances work against your chronotype.

1. Be Aware and Prepare

Use your awareness of when your brain is at its best, and when it isn't, to help you be at your best.

2. Start Small

Find small ways to build in habits that match your brain's strengths with your work. Look for ways to make the most of the control you have over your schedule.

Every Ten Thousand Mile Journey....

Professional musicians begin every practice playing scales. Baseball players make batting practice a regular part of their daily training routine. Getting better at anything is a matter of practice. And practice is a matter of taking small steps, learning from mistakes, and taking the next small steps.

Make it a habit to look for opportunities to match a task with your chronotype. Linking a task, even a minor one, to the way your brain works is another step on the path to getting more done, and more done better.