



Achieve Your Goals Podcast #110 - Listen to this Neuroscientist share "6 Tips to Improve FOCUS"

Nick Palkowski: Welcome to the Achieve Your Goals podcast with Hal Elrod. I'm your host, Nick Palkowski, and you're listening to the show that is guaranteed to help you take your life to the next level faster than you've ever thought possible. In each episode, you will learn from someone who has achieved extraordinary goals that most haven't. He's the author of the number 1, best-selling book, *The Miracle Morning*, a Hall of Fame business achiever, an international keynote speaker, ultra-marathon runner, and the founder of BIPSuccessCoaching.com, Mr. Hal Elrod.

Hal: All right, welcome to the Achieve Your Goals podcast. This is your host, Hal Elrod. Today's episode is different. I'm excited about this. In fact, I was telling our guest a couple of minutes ago that doing research on him, it actually, it might have changed the format of the podcast moving forward. So, which is kind of exciting, and maybe we'll get into that a little bit more. But, today's podcast is probably the deepest we're going to be diving into the science behind goal achievement. The science behind goal achievement, and specifically the science around focus, because obviously, right? That your ability to focus, and to the ... your ability, your capacity, and the consistency, and your focus, determines really the consistency in your results, and in your ability to achieve your goals.

Our guest today is Dr. Andrew Hill. He holds a PhD in Cognitive Neuroscience from UCLA's Department of Psychology, and he continues to do research on attention and the brain. I'm excited for this as a ... someone who's been diagnosed with ADHD, I can imagine this is an episode that is tailor made for me. But, Dr. Hill is the lead neuroscientist for TruBrain. He is the co-founder of alternative addiction treatment, and Dr. Hill lectures at UCLA covering courses in psychology, neuroscience, and gerontology Did I say that right, Dr. Hill?

Dr. Hill: Yeah, gerontology.

Hal: Gerontology, I got it right. And, he's recently opened the Peak Brain Institute, a brain performance center in Los Angeles. So, I'm really excited and I actually, I found an article that Dr. Hill published called "Dr. Hill's 6 Tips for a More Focused 2016," and this is really what I want to dive into is these 6 tips. How you can apply these to help you really make this year ever, and achieve your goals this year, and of course, beyond. Yeah, that's it, man. Dr. Hill, you ready to go?

Dr. Hill: Sure, sounds good, Hal.

Hal: Thanks for being here, man. I really appreciate this.

Dr. Hill: Yeah, my pleasure.

Hal: Cool. So, I'm going to start out by, I will read your productivity algorithm, and that is "sleep, plus diet, plus work outs, plus meditation, minus stress, minus distractions, equals productivity," essentially. Did I get that right?

Dr. Hill: Sounds good to me.

Hal: So, let's dive in. So, these 6 tips that you have to really improve focus for 2016. What's the first one?

Dr. Hill: So, you know sleep is very important because it effectively influences every one of our resources. Not only from a perspective of having enough energy, you know if you aren't rested, you don't have enough energy, that's sort of obvious. But, it looks like sleep, the actual sort of regulation of sleep, your brain's ability to transition in and out of sleep, to go through the different stages of sleep when you are asleep, that is really key in brain health, and it helps long term improvements of resources. It looks like that sleep and attention management are inextricably linked in some way.

So, almost all people that have ADHD, for instance, have some sort of sleep regulation problem. If you affect your sleep, if you hack your sleep to improve it, meaning you're able to fall asleep, roughly at will, and sleep deeply for several hours and wake up cleanly, then everything else improves. If you have issues with stress, or learning, or memory, or performance, or focus, and you don't sleep well, that is often the sort of low hanging fruit for improving performance very easily. It's typically fairly straightforward to hack sleep, unless your sleep is profoundly dis-regulated. There's lots of things you can do, sort of good sleep hygiene, or sleep hacking things, to optimize your sleep. We can into them, or we can start going through other aspects of the algorithm, if you want.

Hal: Well, yeah, no I'd love to go into them a little bit. But first, I want to ask you a question. There's something that I talked about in my book, The Miracle Morning, when I addressed sleep, and I took a little bit of flak for it.

Dr. Hill: Oh, okay.

Hal: A couple of negative reviews on Amazon that said, "how dare he advocate sleep deprivation!" I went back into the book, and I read that part, and you know, I didn't advocate it. I said, "this is my experience," so I really, I'd love to hear your scientific

opinion on this. I guess the question ... so, first of all, I'll explain my take on this, and then I'll fall to the question.

My take is that to a degree, we need as much sleep as we believe that we need. Again, I don't have scientific data. This is via experience of the ... well, a little bit of research, and experience around the mind-body connection, and the idea that if we believe that we need 8 hours of sleep function, and we're getting to bed later than normal, or we have to wake up earlier than normal, and we're thinking, "oh man, I'm only going to get 6 hours tonight. Well, I need 8! I need 8, so I'm going to be tired in the morning!" I believe it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Alarm goes off, and you go, "AWW! I only got 6 hours of sleep. I'm exhausted." Right?

Dr. Hill: Yeah.

Hal: So, there's this ... I have this kind of take on we need as much sleep as we believe that we need to an extent. Or, at least that we can influence how we feel in the morning, how rejuvenated our body is, based around just our beliefs about sleep, and believing the sleep that we're getting whether it's 6, 7, 8 hours, depending on circumstances, is going to rejuvenate us, and recharge us. So, I'd love your take on that whole theory of mine, and then specifically, how much sleep you believe that we need, or if it varies from person to person.

Dr. Hill: Yeah, I think the last thing you said is probably pretty telling for all the questions. Sleep is pretty variable across individuals and the amount you need. Some people can sleep for 5 or 6 hours and it's plenty. Other folks might need 8 or 9. I think maybe the subjective assessment on how much sleep you need is probably informed by experiencing different amounts of sleep. So, you might believe you need 7 because you have some experience that demonstrates you actually do fine with 7. I don't

think that, honestly a belief about the amount of rest you need will have all that much influence on the rest you received.

Hal: Okay.

Dr. Hill: Sort of post-hack. Going into your sleep, if it's 1 a.m. and you have to be up at 6 a.m., and you're like, "oh my god. I only have 5 hours left. I'm not going to get enough sleep." That will affect your sleep adversely. You know, stressing out about the amount of sleep you can get. But, after you've slept, "oh my god. I only got 6 hours. I'm going to have a crappy day." I think that's probably less real. It's less of an impact, subjectively. Now, if you do it day-in, day-out, you will be operating in sort of a deficit and you'll be performing less well, and you'll know that. I think that's probably a valid self-assessment.

But, my guess is it's more bound by what you usually get, and what you know you need for sleep hours. And, when you get less, you have a subjective and accurate assessment that, an hour and a half, 2 hours less sleep than typical is not good. That's not necessarily torpedoing your day through the psychology, through the [know-cebo 00:07:53] effect, if you will. It's probably really a function of you accurately assessing that you're in a slight deficit.

Hal: Got it. So, I'm curious, how many hours of sleep do you engage in every night?

Dr. Hill: You know; I try to get 7. It doesn't always happen that way. I have a new start up, you know Peak Brain, in Los Angeles, and in a new start-up, you're working 6, 7 days a week, long days. I also teach a couple courses at UCLA, and I'm still involved of course with TruBrain, and even a little bit with alternatives addiction treatment, still. So, I've got essentially 4 jobs and not much life besides that. So, I have a fairly rigorous morning

routine that keeps me sane, and keeps me productive. I rely on that as the sort of touch stone.

One thing to sort talk about the sleep hacking strategies, it's much more important to control when you get up in the morning than when you go to bed at night. If you're having issues with sleep.

Hal: Talk about that, yeah.

Dr. Hill: The entrainment, or the brain's ability to synchronize your own circadian rhythm with the earth's 24-hour cycle. This is really key in both sleep architecture as well as general brain health. You know, if your sleep cycle, your circadian rhythm is sort of sliding past the earth's 24-hour rhythm and not synchronized, all kinds of negative things happen. Mental health things, inflammation, sleep deprivation, depression, faster aging. So, keeping your own circadian rhythm synchronized with the earth's photo period is fairly important. The environmental signals that do this, which are mostly sunlight, are strongest in the first hour after dawn. So, if you're having really erratic sleep, to help your brain understand what time of day it is, it's critical to get up at the same time every day, or roughly.

Hal: Yeah.

Dr. Hill: So, you shouldn't be ... if you're wondering, "well, I can never ... I can't predict my sleep. I have a busy job, a busy life. Who is this guy saying I should get 7, 8 hours sleep at night?" If you can't do that, it's okay, but the place to be rigid is in your rising time. You know, pick a time where you can get up the same time every day, and do that with some consistency. That will re-regulate your sleep even if you're not getting enough. It won't ... staying up late at night won't necessarily de-entrain you, it won't mess up your circadian rhythms to the same degree if you're still getting up in the morning at roughly the same time.

Hal: Well, I feel better, because I did ... we're on the same page with that, at least.

Dr. Hill: Okay.

Hal: I said, yeah, the importance of waking up at the same time and training your body, and training your brain for that, I'm a big advocate for. So, that's great. Now, you mentioned, we can't skip over this, because you mentioned you're huge into your morning routine, and that's my whole wheelhouse. "The Miracle Morning" is my book, and that's really my focus. So, I've got to know. Can you briefly walk us through your morning ritual?

Dr. Hill: Sure.

Hal: From the time you wake up until the time you go to work?

Dr. Hill: Yeah, sure. So, I get up about 6 or 6:15., usually by 6:00 a.m., I'm awake. I putter for 20 minutes, half an hour, around the house. I use the restroom, brush my teeth, do that kind of stuff, you know? Then, this new company I started, Peak Brain, happens to be right next door to my Ashtanga Yoga Studio.

If you don't know what Ashtanga, the flavor of yoga is, it's this style of yoga where no one's talking to you, typically. Ashtanga is done in more sort of Western style, which is a lead class. It's also done in what's called mysore style ashtanga, and mysore style ashtanga, you show up in the morning and you start your practice, and then the people are walking around, gently adjusting you, or sitting on top of you, or giving you some gentle pointers; but there's nobody at the front of the room saying "do this, do this, do this," most mornings. It's self-driven, and because of that, there's not a lot of verbal information coming at you.

I used to get up in the morning and spend half an hour meditating before I did anything else, take a shower, go to work. Now, I actually end up doing my meditation while doing the yoga, because it's about ... I do about an hour and a quarter, hour and a half of ashtanga every morning, but it's an hour and a quarter or so of moving fluidly with synchronized movement and breathing from one pose to another pose, to another pose, to another pose, and there's no one talking to me. So, that ability to move without language, and to move through sort of synchronized breathing, and body postures, very quickly drops you into a meditation space where your mind is spacious and open, less cluttered.

So, I use the physical exercise of yoga also as a meditation, and ashtanga's a fairly rigorous form of yoga. You know, you drop pounds of sweat of every day when doing it. It gives you one of these really muscle bound, long bodies. It's about the most muscle-building form of yoga I found. It's sort of what hot yoga and other forms of really intense yoga were derived from, so it's classically somewhat intense, but very self-driven practice.

I show up about 6:30, and I'm usually practicing for about 45 minutes before the instructor even shows up, then he walks around, you know sits on people, pulls their arm around, points at their ... has them move their knee a little bit, a few degrees here and there, just adjusting people. Then, I continue my workout, and as I get deeper into my sequence of poses, there's things I'm less comfortable with, or less good at, and the instructor will come around and sort of adjust and guide. Then, I literally just walk next door to my office, take a shower, and by about 8:15, I'm seeing clients.

So, it's a little compressed into sort of one event, this yoga. It used to be that I would get up, meditate, have breakfast, took a shower, go to work. It would take about 2, 2 and a half hours.

Now, I'm sort of 2 hours after getting out of bed, I'm at work having already spent a good solid hour, hour and a half exercising and meditating. Then, I typically have a couple cups of really, really, nice pour-over coffee, low, small batch, organic kind of coffee. I'm a big coffee snob, and I drink probably a little too much coffee. But, I have a couple cups of coffee with some sort of high fat dairy in it, in the morning, butter or whole cream usually.

Hal: So, essentially what I would call bulletproof coffee. Is that?

Dr. Hill: Yeah, I don't bulletproof it. I mean, I definitely don't put those products in. I don't use refined MCT oils.

Hal: Sure.

Dr. Hill: Every so often I will sort of bulletproof it, but I use less fat than [aspsey(?) 00:14:53] would suggest in a big 10, 12-ounce cup of coffee. I'll use like a teaspoon and a half of butter, and like less than a teaspoon of coconut oil. I'm such a coffee aficionado that when you add too much fat to these things, it masks the flavor.

Hal: Yeah.

Dr. Hill: I'm just not willing to give up the flavor for the fats. So, I hedge, and I put a little bit of fat, and usually that means just raw cream, or whole cream, and I don't typically go for the full blown butter and coconut oil.

Hal: Sure.

Dr. Hill: But, when I do want a little bit more energy or a little more sustained fuel, maybe I have a bunch of podcasts to do in the morning or something, then I will add some more fat. But, usually my brain support is coffee and [nootropics 00:15:36]. So, of course I'm one of the founders of TruBrain, I help design the TruBrain products, and so I typically start off with a capsule

pouch of TruBrain with my coffee. Then, have some sort of high protein food in the first couple of hours after I worked out. You know, high protein, not too many carbs, and if I'm going to have some carbs that day, I typically have them within an hour of working out aggressively. But, I'm also one of these people that keeps the carb count down a little bit. I have a high fat, low carb diet, essentially.

Hal: Yeah.

Dr. Hill: That means no sugar, no refined starches, and no grains. I keep all grains out of my diet. So, you know I'm having eggs, and vegetables, and things like that, for my morning typically. So by 9 a.m., 10 a.m., I will have already started seeing clients. I've got a pint or 2 of lovely nice high end coffee in me. I've got a little bit of protein, some fat, and I've already worked out for a couple of hours, essentially, and I'm usually in this fairly peaceful, meditative state. The sort of state-shift you can get from meditation, and that tends to last for several hours into my day as long as I've been doing it relatively regularly.

Hal: I love it. I mean, that's ... you win the morning, you win the day, and you're a living example of that. Let's dive into the second tip here. You mentioned you probably ... a minute ago, said, "I probably indulge in the coffee a little bit too much, I'm such a coffee aficionado, snob," et cetera. Tip number 2 is improve your diet and watch the caffeine, so talk about that.

Dr. Hill: Yeah. I mean, people have a lot of different individual variability in how they metabolize caffeine. There's at least 3 different genetics, sort of flavors of the enzymes you can have to break down caffeine. So, you don't really know unless you've done some genetics if you're a fast, or slow, or medium metabolizer. But, regardless, the range of half-life, the elimination half-life for coffee is between 3 and 6 hours. What

this means is the amount of caffeine you take in has dropped by half, about 3 hours in if you're a fast metabolizer.

So, pounding coffee all day long, every day, very quickly increases your dosages, and caffeine is not all together without some drawbacks. It's not what I would call a [nootropic(?) 00:17:59] because it has side effects, it's habit forming. For me, I drink a lot of coffee. I used to be in high tech which may have something to do with it. I went to grad school, which has something to do with it. I have to be careful to keep my caffeine consumption under about 1 gram per day, or I start getting heart palpitations and things, and anxious.

Hal: Sure.

Dr. Hill: But, that's potentially 5, 6 cups of really, really high end coffee. I encourage most of my clients to do a 2 to 3 cup coffee regimen a day. I think that's ... the literature would suggest that ... and it's not the caffeine per say that's causing these benefits, but it looks like 2 to 4 cups seems to improve brain health long term, decrease inflammation, decrease depression, decrease markers of aging, and potentially be neuro-protective against things like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, as well as maybe even diabetes. So, as long as you're not putting sugar in the coffee, you're getting all these benefits and somewhere in the neighborhood of 2 to 4 cups a day seems to be where the benefits accrue.

Much beyond that, there's no more benefits, and there may be some drawbacks. The increased cortisol you get from the caffeine, the increased acids from the coffee, those can be sort of a problem if you overdo it. So, probably 2 to 3 cups a day is really the sweet spot, which depending on how strong you brew your coffee, might be something in the neighborhood of half a gram, you know 500 milligrams, if it's 3 sort of big cups of strong coffee. Not Starbucks, I mean a single Starbucks venti

might have 300 milligrams caffeine in it. Those are fairly extreme.

Hal: Yeah.

Dr. Hill: But, a 10, 12-ounce cup of coffee you make yourself is probably 100 milligrams, 150 milligrams of caffeine if it's strong, and I'll have 3 or 4 of those. Probably by lunch time, and my clients who I'm coaching about brain health, I encourage to ... if they like the flavor of coffee, I encourage them to have 2 cups a day, just for the health benefits. If they find that they're very sensitive to caffeine, or they're having too much coffee, I give them sort of the trick of keeping some L-Theanine around in supplement form, because if you over-caffeinate, you can pop an L-Theanine and just bring everything right down. All the jitter, all the stress, just vanishes within half an hour.

Hal: So, L-Theanine and that's a supplement you can buy on Amazon, or wherever?

Dr. Hill: Yeah, it's over-the-counter. It's very innocuous, very safe, very, very cheap. It's a few dollars for a bottle. L-Theanine is an amino acid, it's called a non-essential amino acid, you don't need it, but it's fairly typical, sort of natural compound found in nature. It's also found in tea leaves, and this is one of the reasons why tea does not produce the same pushy jitter that caffeine by itself can produce. I like to mix a L-Theanine source with my caffeine and not only get the push, the increased beta brain waves, but gets some [gabba(?), 00:20:59] some increased alpha, some flow state from the caffeine sources that I take.

So, we actually ended up putting L-Theanine into the TruBrain formats of course, but we're also about to release a TruBrain coffee. We have these little dosing sticks that contain L-Theanine and a form of [coline(?) 00:21:15] called alpha GPC

because I sort of think coffee by itself can be a little too stimulating, little too activating, and buffering it with some L-Theanine and a little bit of [coline(?) 00:21:27] seems to make the effects hang out in a sweet spot of stimulation but not jitter, focused but not distraction. So, I think optimizing your caffeine so that you sit in that sweet spot of arousal versus performance is important.

If folks aren't familiar, there's an inverted U curve, an upside down U curve of stress versus performance. Any kind of physiological arousal or stress potentially can increase performance. A little bit of stress, performance goes up. A little bit more, it goes up even more. At some point, you start increasing stressors and performance plateaus, and then when you increase stressors even more, performance degrades.

Hal: [inaudible 00:22:09].

Dr. Hill: This is for complex tasks. Simple tasks, the more stressful they are, the better you do. But, complex things like driving a car, making decisions, living your life, as stress goes up, performance can start to degrade. So, it's important you recognize if you are under-engaged with the environment. You don't have enough stress. Or, if you're overwhelmed by the environment. Neither of those is optimal for keeping yourself in the high productivity, high focus mode. So, when you're manipulating your brain chemistry and your body chemistry with caffeine, it's important to notice that "okay, I've overdone it. I've gone one cup too many, and I'm no longer moving forward with my intention. Now I'm bouncing off of things. I'm stressed, I'm jittery." That's a sign you've probably gone a little too heavy in the caffeine. That's a sign you should back off by about one cup, and make that your daily dose.

Hal: Got it, and the ... so do you the L-Theanine which is an amino acid, that's something that you typically always pair that with your caffeine with your coffee?

Dr. Hill: I don't always because we also put L-Theanine in the TruBrain product.

Hal: Got it, so you've already got your...

Dr. Hill: The capsules and the drinks. So, I typically down a pouch of the capsule product early in the day, and then mid-day, I either have another pouch of the capsules or I have the TruBrain drink. Both the capsules and the drinks have L-Theanine in them. So, I get some just along with it. I only keep a bottle of L-Theanine around in case I find myself drinking the 5th or 6th cup a day and realize that I've overdone it a little bit, and I'll reach for some extra L-Theanine. But, clients of mine that are anxious and who use caffeine routinely, I encourage them to simply add in L-Theanine now as a modifier for the caffeine they're already taking in.

I'm not averse to caffeine, but again, cardiovascular risks, jittery stuff, mental anxiety, that can be problematic. It can cause some stomach clenching, some appetite suppression, so you got to be a little cautious for the drawbacks. But, on the upside, as I mentioned earlier, potentially protective against diseases of aging, and it also looks like coffee especially is a profoundly important antioxidant source in the diet of Westerners. It looks like that Westerners may drink ... may consume more antioxidants from coffee in the diet than all other sources combined.

Roasted coffee beans are incredibly good antioxidants, incredibly high antioxidants profile. So, I think that dietary antioxidants are incredibly useful to take. I don't mean supplemental antioxidants. I actually think that it's taking

supplements that are antioxidants is often dangerous, it is often anti-health. It can be very problematic to remove the oxidant stress in your body that aggressively with a supplement.

Hal: [Oh yeah(?) 00:25:11]

Dr. Hill: Just as a departure, there's a concept in health called [hormesis 00:25:14] and [hormesis 00:25:15] is a useful stress. So, if your body encounters a virus, it mounts a response to that virus, that's sort of a useful stress. If your body experiences wear and tear, it notices the wear and tear, and goes to make a repair activity start happening. If you swallow a huge amounts of supplemental antioxidants, your body does not perceive the stress marker.

Specifically, there's evidence that broken mitochondria that are pumping out reactive oxygen species, or free radicals, if you're taking huge amounts of dietary supplemental, not food, but supplement antioxidants, you eliminate the body's tendency to clean house and remove these reactive oxygen generating mitochondria. So, you actually prolong the negative sort of harsh environment with these reactive oxygen species, free radicals, breaking down DNA if you take too many supplemental antioxidants. So, you're removing one of the signals the body uses for repair and you actually deteriorate health status.

Hal: Got it. So, moderate caffeine.

Dr. Hill: Right, right.

Hal: I think that's the lesson, everybody, and mix it with fats. I think that's one of the things you talked about with your diet is the high fats. Our brain feeds off fat, correct?

Dr. Hill: Brain is fat, pretty much. It's mostly fat, so yeah.

Hal: Your brain is fat, so, yeah. There was the craze for so many decades, if you will, 80s, 90s, and probably even today, over the whole fat free movement. I think it's really...

Dr. Hill: Yeah, such a problem.

Hal: Yeah, it's hurt a lot of people as they went for these fat free foods, and it sucked the fuel out of their brains. All right, so tip number 3. This is an obvious one. This is one that everybody's going to go, "yeah, yeah. Got it, got it, got it." So, let's just touch on this real quick and I've love to know the frequency or the time that you recommend. So, tip 3 to improve your focus is exercise more frequently. Couldn't agree more, I exercise in the morning, and then I take a lunch break and I exercise in the middle of the day to kind of re-energize if you will.

Dr. Hill: Yup, yup.

Hal: So, I'd love to hear when you say exercise more frequently, what's the ideal frequency? You know, so a few things: when do you exercise, how often do you exercise, not necessarily you but what's your recommendation?

Dr. Hill: Yes.

Hal: So, when, how often, and for how long? If you could answer those 3 real quick and we'll get to the point number 4.

Dr. Hill: Yup. I think moderate exercise is the key and regular exercise is the key. Within that is a lot of variability that's probably healthy. I tell my clients to shoot for about 2 hours of cumulative exercise per week as a minimum, and to break it apart into 3 segments as a minimum. That ends up being three 40-minute exercise bouts as sort of a target for people. I personally do about an hour, hour and a quarter, 6 mornings a week.

Hal: Got it.

Dr. Hill: So, for me, it's 5, 6 days a week, and I'm doing an hour, an hour plus. I think the regularity of it is more important. You know, the body develops lots of issues when you sit still for too long. In fact, being sedentary day in, day out, is as large a health risk as smoking 2 packs of cigarettes a day on cardiovascular risk. So, it's very important to keep the system moving. I think it's much less important in terms of if you're doing your hour, or 2 hours in a cross fit box, or playing Frisbee on the beach, or hiking a mountain, or doing yoga. I don't think it's really that critical if you're getting routine regular exercise, and you're enjoying it, and you're sweating, then it's probably sufficient.

Hal: Just regularly move your body. That's the key.

Dr. Hill: Yup, yup.

Hal: Okay.

Dr. Hill: Move often.

Hal: Move often. Your 4th tip on staying focused, and this is one that I've really in the last few years come to appreciate and engage in more, which is, you said grow your meditation practice, and I love what you said. You said, "think about meditating as a workout for the brain. The more you do it, the more you'll be able to see the results of improved focus." So, for someone that's never meditated before, let's start there. If someone's a ... if they're a mindfulness aficionado and they do it every day, let's not address them.

If somebody is listening and the meditation hasn't worked for them, maybe they tried it, they did it for a week. I like what you said, "the more you do it, kind of the longer you do it, the more you see benefits." So, what would you say to someone that

around meditating? Again, when should they do it? How often should they do it?

Dr. Hill: Well, I mean it doesn't matter when you do it. If you only have 10 or 15 minutes to do it, do it in the morning, because as you say, "win your morning, win your whole day." And, you will change your state. You're less stressed, less reactive, more spacious thoughts. Even if you sort of squeeze time and grab 10 or 15, or 20 minutes in the morning, you get that time back later on that day because you're less reactive, less being pushed by your experiences. So, you're much more efficient. So, take the time, make the time. You will get it back.

Hal: Yup.

Dr. Hill: But, in terms of what it is, it's not blanking your mind. People who haven't meditated, or sort of concerned about their ability to do it, often tell me something to the effect of "I won't be any good at it. I can't shut my mind off." I want to emphasize to new people who are novice meditators, that's not meditation, shutting your mind off. The act of meditation is concentration or an anchor. You pick a focus for the attention, and then you attend, in a specific way, on purpose, to the present moment.

Since you have a brain, it gets distracted, you get hungry, you think about the cute girl saw, your knee hurts, you're fantasizing, planning, remembering, dreaming wishing, whatever. That happens because you have a mind. So, when you notice you have drifted away from the focus, be it the breath or a sound, or something else you're doing, the act of meditation is simply noticing when you've drifted, putting down the distraction, going back to the anchor again, and again, and again. That's the rep of meditation, and you might do that a 1000 times in 10 minutes. It doesn't really matter.

Hal: Yeah.

Dr. Hill: 20 minute, [inaudible 00:30:58] minutes a morning is my prescription for people, and it's an everyday thing. It's mental floss. It's not, would you skip brushing your teeth one day? No.

Hal: Yeah.

Dr. Hill: No, this is that critical. It also tends to build benefits long term. Even 20 minutes a day, in a long term meditator, your brain appears to be spared the ravages of aging, the cortical thinning that occurs naturally, normal, healthy aging. That does not happen if you're a meditator with years of practice, even 20 minutes a day.

Hal: Well I, oh, go ahead.

Dr. Hill: I was saying, it's not so much about the amount you do or the style you do. It's about doing it with routine, with an everyday sort of practice.

Hal: Yeah, and I love what you mention the time earlier, how long you do it for, and I can't remember who said it. But, they said, if you hear people say all the time, "I don't have time to meditate for 20 minutes a day."

He said, "well, if you don't have time to meditate for 20 minutes a day then you definitely need to meditate for at least an hour a day."

Dr. Hill: Yeah, yeah. That's some classic. I'm not sure if it was Jack Cornfields or somebody.

Hal: Yeah.

Dr. Hill: But, somebody said that years ago. Well, meditating for 20 minutes, if you can, if you have 20 minutes, do it in the morning. If you have 40 minutes, maybe do it morning and

evening. If you don't have 40 minutes, you should be meditating for 2 hours.

Hal: Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Hill: You know, if you don't think you have time, then you really need to meditate, because you're just not living in an efficient way. If you're being pushed and reactive all day long, that's not a very comfortable, or efficient, or productive way to live. You don't have to live that way. Get control over your sensory filtering, executive function, reactivity.

Hal: Yeah.

Dr. Hill: Meditation changes everything long term. So, it's only positive.

Hal: Yeah, to me, it's the time to access the essence of life, right? When you're meditating, you go "this is life. Like, everything else is just BS," you know what I mean?

Dr. Hill: Yeah.

Hal: This is living, like, I'm in the essence of the moment. This is the essence of life. So, for me, once I got my head around, this isn't something that I A) have to do, and B) it's not something that's taking me away from other things. This is actually, shoot if I could meditate all day, and just not be doing things.

Dr. Hill: Yeah.

Hal: But, being.

Dr. Hill: There you go!

Hal: Right? I mean, yeah.

Dr. Hill: One of my old co-founders in a start-up, a guy named [Karash Raseck 00:33:08]. [Karash 00:33:10] is a meditation teacher,

and he always talks about, "okay, it's time to be a human being, not a human doing."

Hal: Yup. Yeah, I love that. All right, so tip number 5. Improve your stress response. We are a stressed out society. They say it's one of the leading causes of disease, if not the leading cause. So, what's your best tip on how to improve your stress response?

Dr. Hill: You know; I sort of touched on it earlier. It's really important to gauge where your stress response is and how it affects your productivity. If you are bored sitting around watching TV, you're not going to rise to the level of using your resources. If you have 10 times as many things coming at you that you can handle, you're not going to be able to use your resources efficiently.

So, figuring out, gauging if you're able to hang out in that sweet spot of engaged enough but not overwhelmed, is really the key. That's so individual. You can't really describe what, you know some people really thrive on full catastrophe living. Other folks really like to be in quiet environments and use a single laser-like focus for every task. It doesn't really matter if one of those is not better or worse. What matters is, are you able to hang out in that sweet spot of continuing to pull resources out, continuing to meet your demands, and use your skills at their peak. If you're too stressed, or not stressed enough, you're not going to be performing well. It's really sort of behooves you to gauge that stress versus performance balance as you live your life.

Hal: The last tip, and I think this is one of the most important. I mean, it's the opposite of focus, right? Which is distraction. So, your 6th tip on improving focus for 2016 is to minimize distractions. So, what are your thoughts? What's your best tip on how we do that? Because again, we are a distracted society.

Dr. Hill:

Yeah, I mean I'm fairly [distractable 00:35:01], I'm a little bit ADHD, even after all the neuro-feedback. I've got multiple start-ups, I teach, I have so many demands on my time, and for me, the strategies ended up becoming scaffolding. You know, using tools like GTD, or getting things done, applications to keep track of categories of tasks, using things like Pomodoro to have sprints of work where I'm not distracted.

So, I just hack my time so that I know if I'm in a heads down focus mode, or if I'm in a drink everything in a react mode. It's important to choose if you're in reactive or sort of get things done mode, and move back and forth between those modes. If you are not able to control your responses, you're always going to be reacting.

There's an old joke about, "if the task is killing alligators, and you can't drain the swamp, you're never going to kill alligators." You end up dealing with things that are urgent versus important. It's really bad to be handling things as they present themselves, the urgent things as opposed to the strategically important things. If you're not able to handle or track those distractions into a bucket that you trust, then you're going to be reacting to them in the moment, and getting more, and more stressed as your bandwidth gets sapped.

So, for me, using tools like notepads, like a getting things done application, I use OmniFocus on my Mac, or even notepads keeping little thing in the back pocket, and then jot down things so I don't forget, or audio notes in my phone. I have buckets to catch all these things so I'm not trying to remember what I have to do next. I'm just focusing on what I'm doing right then, and that's really about being present in the moment with a task the same way you would be present in the moment like a meditation practice.

Hal: Yeah, and I find that the morning, that's another powerful component of having a morning ritual. Even if it's not your personal development ritual, but the post-personal development ritual. So, after meditation, after yoga. For me, it's focusing on what's my highest priority? The number 1 thing that I need to do to achieve the most important goal or goals in my life, and I just simply do it in the morning. So, that the rest of the day, the distraction doesn't have such a significant impact, you know a negative impact, on results, right?

Dr. Hill: Absolutely.

Hal: You get the most important thing done first thing in the morning, and then the rest of the day doesn't have to be as perfect. Your execution doesn't have to be as flawless because you know that you've already handled as Stephen [Covey 00:37:29] called it, the big rocks. You got those done first thing, and the rest can kind of work itself out. So, great, great stuff.

I know we're out of time here, Dr. Hill, but if anybody wants to get ahold of you, I know ... I do want to mention, by the way, your blog at TruBrian.com, that you got a bunch of great articles. This one that I found, the 6 tips for a more focused 2016 that we dove deeper into today. But, you've got great ones on the importance of sleep, on [nootropics, 00:37:57] on caffeine, on how to meditate, more on stress, all of these aspects. So, what is the best way for people to connect with you? To get your products, programs, services, et cetera?

Dr. Hill: Sure. Yeah, so the clearing house or the touch point I think is probably Twitter. @AndrewHillPhD on Twitter. Then from there, we have a TruBrain website, TruBrain.com, the blog is there. I think it's actually through Tumblr. Beyond that, people can check me out at PeakBrainLA.com, which is our individualized sort of one-on-one brain training center.

Hal: I love it. I'm wanting to come out there and do a brain scan as soon as possible.

Dr. Hill: Sure, come on down, we'll do a QEEG for you.

Hal: Yeah, I just followed you on Twitter, too. So, there we go.

Dr. Hill: Great, great.

Hal: Cool, well Dr. Hill, again, thank you so much for lending your time and your expertise. I really appreciate you being on the show today.

Dr. Hill: My pleasure. Thanks for having me, Hal.

Hal: Cool. All right, Achieve Your Goals podcast listeners, thank you for tuning in this week. I hope you got as much value as I did. This is an episode that I will personally have to go back and re-listen to, as there were so many nuggets that Dr. Hill shared with us today. So, thank you for being a loyal Achieve Your Goals podcast listener. I love you. I appreciate you, and I will talk to you next week. Take care.

Nick Palkowski: And thank you so much for tuning in this episode of the podcast. So now, we want to know, what were your big take-aways from this episode? What are you actually going to do to help improve your focus here in 2016? How are you actually going to apply Dr. Hill's 6 tips to make sure this year is even better than last year for you? Simply head on over to HalElrod.com/110 for episode number 110, and leave a comment there on the [showing us(?) 00:39:44] page, letting us know what your big take-away was.

Also, if you haven't done so yet, please go subscribe to the podcast on iTunes by going to HalElrod.com/itunes, click on the little subscribe button, and if you would, please leave a rating and review. Because, rating and reviews are truly the best

way for you to show your appreciation for the show, because they help more people find out about the podcast and decide if this is the one for them.

So now, until next week, it's time for you to go out there, take action, and achieve your goals.

Speaker 4:

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