



# A Season of Happiness



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HL18

## **Doing What Comes Naturally**

### **a healthy routine for humans**

Whenever something new comes along that needs to be done, a certain amount of reorganisation takes place in order to squeeze it into the normal routine. If every single moment of the day is already allocated, one of the regulars has to be dumped or a number of the others compressed to make room; and if neither of these is practical, the intrusive element has to be dismissed altogether. Whatever the solution, consideration has been given to a most important part of human life that is often taken for granted. Without routine we would run ourselves ragged trying to cope with everything unless some aspects could be handled on auto-pilot. It is relied on to start the day with a minimum of fuss, performing each task as a matter of course, getting ourselves and others ready, breakfasted and off to wherever on time. There's no list on the fridge reminding us what needs doing - well, maybe for the kids, but they never read it anyway! We simply follow a pattern tried and tested over a period that works well. Its constant repetition means we don't even have to think about it. Whether at home, on the road, at work or school, exercising or relaxing, an enormous part of everything we manage to achieve is thanks in part to routine of some kind. Without it, we couldn't function as well as we do; disrupt it, even in a small way, and we are out of our comfort zone.

Imagine trying to integrate an extra twenty minutes of exercise into a normal day. It may be necessary for health reasons, but the disruption to the normal routine in order to fit it in will add yet more problems and will probably increase stress-levels into the bargain. One way to avoid a major re-shuffling of everything else that needs to be done is either to get up earlier, or go to bed later. This may not seem a big deal, but it is arguably worse than any of the other choices because it interferes with that extremely important balance between waking and sleeping. Most humans require around eight hours of uninterrupted sleep in a twenty-four hour period, preferably at night. That leaves two-thirds of each day for conscious employment of some kind. Included in this will be meal breaks and additional rest periods at suitable intervals. It is said that humans also benefit from a sleep often referred to as a nanna-nap some time part-way through. If this benchmark pattern or something close to it can be achieved, a person will be giving themselves the best chance of a healthy lifestyle, always assuming it can be continued on a regular basis. Messing with that routine can have far-reaching and adverse consequences.

It could be argued that there are exceptions as with shift workers who may claim they have adapted to working at night and sleeping during the day. I don't doubt some believe it is doing them no harm, but I've heard of many cases where the stress and strain of it has been detrimental to their health and that of families and partners who find it awkward trying to integrate it into their own relatively normal routine. Then there are the night-owls, quite often teenagers living a reverse life-cycle to the rest of us. When they aren't partying all night, they'll be on Facebook or snap-chatting until the early hours, completely ignorant of the fact that their health is suffering because of it. Trying to convince them of that is an exercise in futility. Use the argument that humans aren't traditionally nocturnal creatures and can't see in the dark and they'll point out smugly that their iPhone has an illuminated panel!

This waking:sleeping ratio, each portion in its desirable time-slot, is so essential to whatever else we do. When it's out of kilter we find it harder to cope. In the previous issue I mentioned series television programmes and these contribute greatly to the disruption of a healthy routine. Many households will re-arrange their evenings around them. Conscientious parents mindful of the health of their children will insist on a specific time for bed, and no amount of pleading will sway

them because they know kids need their sleep. Typical of the do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do philosophy, they will then stay up all hours to watch the latest episode of their favourite drama *and* the following movie that doesn't finish till gone midnight! Don't they think they need *their* sleep too - all of it and at the right time? Unless it's the weekend, they won't try to catch up on what they've missed: it's impossible anyway with all that has to be done during the day. So, they soldier on, cranky, forgetful, unable to give their undivided attention to important tasks. You'd think the way they feel would tell them something but, like the night-owl teenagers, they repeat the mistake that same night, and again the next evening. Before they realise it, they've changed the ratio and are having to manage on six hours of sleep instead of the eight their bodies need; all courtesy of a TV they can switch off whenever they want. If they bought themselves a digital recorder, or used the one they already have to advantage, they could watch everything they fancied, but at a time better suited to their health - and the programmes wouldn't have to last as long if they fast-forwarded through the commercials.

A healthy routine is about repetition and consistency, doing the same things in the same order, over and again. The body gets used to it, telling us when it is tiring and especially when it needs feeding. Having the right type of food at designated times not only fits conveniently into the rest of the day, but also provides essential fuel to keep going. That feeling of satisfaction following a meal is an extra boost, confirmation that, so far, the routine is working well. Change the established pattern and the body will complain, producing anything from a growling stomach to irritability and stress. If the change is temporary it can usually be tolerated, just briefly; made permanent, however, there will need to be a settling-in period before the new regime is accepted. On occasions, for one reason or another it won't be. Dieting can have this effect. It may seem to be the healthy alternative, but the metabolism won't think so and is likely to rebel, demanding its old routine back - cakes and cookies mid-morning, pie and chips for tea. For this reason, a sudden drastic switch in eating habits can result in physical discomfort and mental anguish that frequently sound the death knell on the new diet. This is unfortunate, especially when individuals really must change their eating habits. Then, the wisest choice is to persist until the amended routine is finally taken on board as part of the new day that simply has to be.

The patterns of daily living are established early on in the piece. Children have no option but to fall in with the routines of parents and carers, which can be good or bad, depending how they are brought up. Getting them used to doing certain things at specific times may cause a fair bit of whingeing to start with, but once they've realised that's the way it's going to be, they generally concede and, nine times out of ten are better for it. So is the rest of the family and society in general, provided they continue to adapt and fit in with others as they grow. Adults are just bigger versions of ankle-biters and really are no different. Although every person is a unique individual, most seem happier and more comfortable going with the flow. Civilisation thrives on routine as do those who embrace it. And if repetition and regularity seem a bit of a bore at times, just be happy doing what comes naturally – at least you won't have to think about it.

**Next issue: Your Goals, or Someone Else's? - discover who you truly are**

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