

Ep #213: Productivity and Physiology with Neill Willams



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Susi Hately

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Male Announcer: You're listening to *From Pain to Possibility* with Susi Hately. You will hear Susi's best ideas on how to reduce or even eradicate your pain and learn how to listen to your body when it whispers so you don't have to hear it scream. And now here's your host, Susi Hately.

Susi Hately: Welcome and welcome back. I'm super excited that you're here because I have a really special guest. And this is somebody who, what she's doing for people who like to be productive is totally game changing. I know, that sounds like what a lot of people would say. Woo-hoo, it's totally game changing. But really, I'm really glad that you're here and that you're listening to this episode because I think you're going to get quite a lot of fun stuff out of it.

We're talking productivity, but we're talking about productivity in a way that's relaxed and at ease. And so with me today I have Neill Williams. And Neill and I have a bit of a history together. I think the most recent part that I really, really cherish is we meet on a weekly basis. And we just say, hey, you know what? This is kind of what's working for me in my work and this is what's not working for me in my work.

And we ask each other a bunch of questions, no judgment, no harm, no nothing and we just kind of help each other continue to grow and expand and rest and be at ease. And as a result, both of us have actually grown our businesses tremendously this year and in a way that is probably more restful, I think, than either of us have ever had, which is so much fun and I really, really enjoy that.

So really welcome, Neill, I'm glad that you're here.

Neill Williams: Thank you so much, Susi, that introduction was so amazing and so kind. Thank you.

Susi: You're welcome. So we're going to give an opportunity for you to share more about who you are and what you do, but I want to first let everyone know that Neill runs a business around productivity. Productivity,

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but in a way like how can you get a 40 hour workweek done in 10 hours? And she's going to talk more about how that works, but the piece that I mentioned earlier, it's like how about doing that productivity in 10 hours, that is easy? That is not in a stressed out state, that is not like trying to get her done and putting the time blocks in place.

And before we started recording this, it was actually sort of a joke, I said eat the frog first, which we all sort of, in the productivity world say, yeah, do the hard thing first. Which I've never quite understood, who wants to eat a frog? I get the essence of it, but still, especially me, I'm in a business of helping people get out of pain and I'm in a business that I'm supporting people in creating ease. So then let's foster that within the structure of our business.

So Neill is tremendous at actually facilitating this and helping you and helping me really root this idea into my life. So without further ado, Neill, do you want to share more about how you got here doing this and how you do it?

Neill: Yeah. Well, thank you so much for the introduction. It's been a long road, I've actually been doing this productivity thing for 12 years. When I look back I think, oh my goodness, it's been a long journey. But I think where I'm at now is the result of a lot of health things that have happened this year.

And it's less about the focus of white knuckling through your day or super strict time blocking than it is really blending physiology and psychology. There's this powerful, it almost feels magical, way when you blend those two, that the stuff just gets done. But it's not in a way like you're so depleted and so just hanging on trying to make it through the end of your day. It's in a more restful, easeful, enjoyable way.

So I started, like I said, 12 years ago. I was a mom working in a corporate job. I was actually a partner in a firm and I had a little, I had a two year old. And I was working 60, 70, 80 hours a week and it wasn't what I wanted. I

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wasn't able to be with my son, at least not the time that I wanted to. But also, I just couldn't even turn off all of the mental stuff that was happening at the end of when I wasn't even working.

So I wasn't even able to be present with him, even when I wasn't in the office. It was just this miserable cycle that I was in. So I figured out how to use scheduling to compress my work week down to 30 hours, which was super amazing. And that worked for a while until I was diagnosed with multiple autoimmune disorders. And then the scheduling just didn't work quite so well anymore.

It was like, okay, that got me part of the way, but I really had to dive into the physiological aspect of how we work, our biology and our psychology, in order to really figure out how do I create a schedule that works for me instead of against me, which is what it was feeling like before. And that's where I came up with the work that I do now.

Susi: See, this is interesting. What do you mean by working for you versus working against you? Because there's so many scheduling and productivity things out there, yeah.

Neill: I know, I totally get it. It's like, when I say it was working against me, it's not that it wasn't – Like I was getting stuff done, yes. But the expense that I was paying with my lack of energy and the depletion was the part that felt against me. It felt like, yeah, I could do all of this, but then I basically couldn't do the rest of my life because I was in bed at the end of the day, trying to recover from this ridiculous schedule that I had created for myself.

And once my health stuff was diagnosed, I realized, okay, that's just no longer an option. I have to figure out how to do this in a different way. And that's when I really started diving into the physiology aspect of it. And that really changed everything.

So now what I notice is when I go to work, I go to work but I'm not in that dreadful, like really burning myself out kind of energy. I'm just going to work

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and it's more of a flow. It's like I flow in and out of my days and my weeks and it feels very natural and organic.

You know how we have this like, I can't wait till the weekend and TGIF and all of that? I just don't experience that anymore. I don't really have this big disconnect and separation between my work week and my weekend because everything just flows together.

Susi: So there are a couple of things you said there that I want to make mention of and then I want to share a bit about my experience working with you. So there's the piece around depletion, and you hear it a lot from people and from a lot of women who do their work during the day and then they finish their work. Whatever that is, whether they're running a business or whether they are working a job, they come back and then they go right into the task of taking care of their kids.

And then what they start to feel is they can't get any rest time and switching from work mode into family mode can be tricky. And so there's that depletion part that can come from how you did your job, but it's also shifting from doing the job and how you did the job into then being in family mode, right? Being in mum mode, yeah?

So we're going to unpack this a little bit, because let's say more about the physiology of it. Like give us a bit more detail on how you went from that depleted state of doing the job and then shifting into mum mode into really something entirely different. I mean, to a fly on the wall you're still doing the same thing, you're doing your work and you're in mum mode, right?

Neill: Right, it looks the same.

Susi: And so you're doing that, but how you do it is different.

Neill: Yeah, my experience of it is 100% different. You're right, if you were a fly on the wall, you would see me getting the same amount of stuff done, running a half a million dollar business, doing all these things, being a

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mom, being a wife, taking care of my health, which is priority number one. But my experience of that is very different.

So what I started to learn was, I mean, I'm naturally very curious and I'm also very analytical. So when I got my autoimmune diagnosis, I started to just dive into science to figure out, okay, how do I actually recover? How do I heal here? And I learned so much about the biology of the body and how we work. And some of the things that I learned, I started realizing they're transferable to how we schedule and how we do work.

So, for example, I learned that we have a 24-hour cycle, that's our circadian rhythm. Probably everybody who's listening knows about that. But what's cool about that 24-hour cycle is we can break it down kind of into three buckets. And we'd call it like bucket number one, we call phase one in the program that we do together. And phase one is where there are specific combinations of brain chemicals at work that just naturally make you better at doing certain types of work, certain types of tasks.

And then in the second eight hours of your day, your brain chemicals kind of shift and they change and there's other ones that are dominant. And in that state, that is where you're naturally primed for some other types of work and tasks, more creative type work. Maybe that is engaging with your family, things like that.

But there's a reason why. Like you mentioned the eat the frog first thing in the morning, the biology behind the reason why that works, it intuitively makes sense and it's true, is that you have brain chemicals, chemicals in your body and in your brain, that make you naturally able to handle the more challenging things first thing in the morning.

In the first eight hours of your day versus like, think about if something happens in your business that's really challenging to you. If you're well rested in the morning, you're just better able to handle that, than if you're at the end of the day and you're feeling more tired, you wouldn't handle that

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necessarily in the same way. Your biology is a little bit different, we're shifting throughout the day.

And understanding that flow and that shift really helps us schedule our time in a way that works with that flow and that shift, instead of against it and where we're feeling like we're battling ourselves in trying to get things done.

Susi: So something that I noticed for myself is that before, like I was pregnant with my kids and I was moving towards this new life of being a mum. And I'm a morning person naturally. And I sort of had my fingers crossed, hoping that the temperament of my kids would be like, yeah, you can work first thing in the morning, right?

So I pared my work way, way, way, way down. But when I did do some work, it often was in the early morning. What I mean by early, I mean 4:00 am. And the reality is, I was also up regularly enough feeding and so there was a bit of a cycle that was happening. I found that if I was focusing on one thing, if I had to get one thing done, which was what my mantra was in those early little bits of time when they were first born, it was done at that time.

And then I just kept that cycle going. I was just a morning person. But interestingly, over the past year, I was still getting up at four but I was doing my practice, I was doing my yoga, I was doing meditation, I was doing my Pranayama. That was what I was filling it up with. And then I found myself later in the day, doing more of the stuff that I may have done earlier in the day. And you kind of brought me to, hmm, maybe I have to switch this up.

Because what I was feeling and what got me interested in your program is I wasn't feeling right about it all. Like even though I was getting stuff done, but I just innately was like – And I don't want to say I wasn't fulfilled. I mean, it was that, but it was just like there was something not sitting right, is really what it was.

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And so you brought up this idea of how biology works. And I'm like, huh, I mean I already get up at four, huh. And so I swapped my sort of time blocks. So instead of waking up and doing my practice, I would wake up, do a short little practice, like maybe 20,30 minutes and then would move into work. And I started to produce, like immediately, more work. Like not having to do more work, it was like my task list got completed a lot faster.

And big tasks like different planning projects or creating some of the structural things within my business, which I would rather create courses and I would rather teach people. So some of this other stuff that isn't as much of a strong suit, that's what I started doing first thing in the morning. And I would have like an hour block or a 90 minute block, and boom, it got done. Whereas I would struggle and pull my hair out a little bit near the end of the day trying to get it done.

So it was interesting to see how profound the change happened. But here's the part that was even cooler for me. Because I can get stuff done. Like I can get it done. But that part around that I initially was sort of unfulfilled, something wasn't sitting right, because I was getting it done it was, A, getting it done. I was utilizing my resources so much more effectively that when I was reaching the top of my day – And when I say end of my working day, my working day typically ends between one and two in the afternoon.

And I would finish and I was done. I would be like, I'd close my proverbial door and then be able to drop into being with my kids so much more easily, to the point where I'm still somewhat amazed by it. And so then I'd go into my weekend with them and we've been spending a little bit – With my husband doing some other work, the kids and I have been spending more time together on the weekends alone. And I'm just with them, like I'm not even thinking about my work.

Neill: Right.

Susi: I'm still stunned as I'm talking with you about this right now.

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Neill: It's these minor things, but once you understand them and you play around with them and you figure out how to move your schedule in the way where you're using your resources the most efficiently, everything just kind of clicks into place.

I just want to point out for everybody who's listening why this works so well for Susi. So we naturally have this little bump that we get about 30 minutes after we wake up, there is something called cortisol which I know gets a bad rap. But cortisol does help us perform and we get a bump of it about 30 minutes after we wake up.

So I can see you being super productive in that time block right about 4:00 am. And there are other little chunks of time throughout our day where we just have these natural kinds of increases in our rhythm and in our brain chemistry that help us really tackle those things.

And so what you're experiencing is being able to put into those selected spots throughout your day where naturally just the work that you're doing and your ability to show up to it, match. It just clicks into place, you get it done. And I'm the same as you, my workday is usually done around one or two, I get up very early as well. I'm an early morning girl.

And I agree with you 100%. Because you've been so productive, it's not that you spent a ton of time, but you have knocked so many things off, you just feel complete. I don't know if that's the right word. But, for me, it feels complete. And it's like, great, now I can go on and do the rest of whatever it is I want to do with my life. And it's an amazing feeling.

Susi: The other interesting thing I've found is that if I do a – Depending on if I start closer towards 4:00 or closer to 4:30, if I get that block of time, like usually ending around about 10 to 6:00-ish, I'm now able, like clearly and cleanly than to take a rest break. My kids are getting up about half an hour after that, so I'm doing my morning routine. They get up, we have breakfast together and I'm not even thinking about my work.

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Whereas in the past, I would have done my lovely yoga practice, my lovely meditation, and I would have had that lovely time, which I still like. I would have done my morning routine, but I would be thinking about my work. It would sort of be gnawing in the back of my brain while I was having breakfast with the kids, sort of like wanting to get out there. Whereas that's just not present anymore.

So it's like it kind of puts into mind this notion of productivity. I don't even love that word, honestly.

Neill: I don't either.

Susi: Because I see so many people, as we mentioned and you mentioned about yourself before, around you were getting your day done, you were knocking it all off, but you were depleted at the end of it. To me, that's not productive. That's like, I don't know what the word would be. I'll let the people listening put the word to that. That's just, I don't know what that is, but I know that it doesn't feel right.

And I think there will be other people who are listening to this and probably kind of resonating with that. So here's two questions I have for you. The first one is, we are people who wake up early, what about people who are more like the 6:30 or 7:00, or even 8:00 am risers? How does this play into their day?

Neill: Well, this is what's so cool about it, which is why it was so mind-blowing when I learned the science behind it. It doesn't really matter, it's based on when you wake up. It's not based on the whole idea of the 5:00 am club and you have to be up early in order to be productive, blah, blah, blah. That's not true, it depends on your wake up time.

So you want to be thinking about I'm going to give you like three little buckets of time in your day where if you really were like, okay, this is a challenging thing for me to do and I want to make it easier on myself to get through this or to get this kind of work done, it would be like 30 minutes

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after you wake up there's a little pulse in cortisol. And so you're able to just like get into work pretty easily.

The next bucket of time would be two hours after you wake up. So there's a two-hour block of time, I call it the productivity sweet spot. But it's from two hours after you wake up to four hours after you wake up. So in our example, getting up at four, that would be like from 6:00 am to 8:00 am, another natural little bump in our chemistry. And so we are able to really tackle work well, or anything that is more challenging for us, we have the extra little bit of chemistry behind us to support us in doing that work.

And then beyond that, the first eight hours of your day when you wake up. So even if you wake up at 6:00 am or 8:00 am, it doesn't matter. Yeah, your bucket of time looks different in terms of the actual times, it's still the eight hours after you wake up. So this is available to everyone. It doesn't matter if you naturally get up early or get up a little bit later, this principle still applies, which is one of the reasons why I love it.

Susi: So what about people who are saying that's all great, but I'm the one taking care of the kids in the morning. So I get up, in 30 minutes the kids are getting up and then I've got to get them out to school. And that two-hour initial block is taken up with that. What's your response to that?

Neill: Yeah, it happens, right? Because we don't always have ownership of 100% of our time. I would say if you're running a business or you're a mom, you have much less ownership of your time, right?

So even though that's naturally how we're primed for those blocks of time, the other thing you can do is once you understand the biology behind it, it's really cool because then there's tools that you can give yourself to support yourself to simulate those bumps in your natural chemistry so that you can feel that way anytime that it makes sense for you to show up to a block of time or to a specific tasks in the way that you want.

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So there's ways to get yourself there that are pretty easy to do if you can't use those natural blocks.

Susi: What would be an example?

Neill: So for instance, in order to be productive, this is what I define as a productive state. You're focused, you're motivated and you're energized. So let's say as women running businesses or doing jobs, you have a business or you're doing work and you're managing your family. Maybe you're working from home, like Susi and I do, right? It's easy to get distracted. And so one thing that we do, and especially with our phones, is we tend to distract or we feel scattered.

In order to bring ourselves back to focus, there's a really simple little meditation that you can do. And what's cool when you learn about the nervous system is that your mental focus follows your visual focus. And so just getting yourself centered on your visual focus will make your brain focus naturally on what's in front of you.

So picking something on your screen, picking something in your visual environment and just directing your attention to that visually for 60 to 90 seconds will train your visual focus. So that's one of the tools that you can use, super simple. And again, in those pockets of time I mentioned earlier, you're naturally primed for more focus. But if you can't use those, this will be a tool to get you into focus if you need it. That's one example.

Susi: Can you give us one more?

Neill: Yep. So let's say that you are feeling demotivated. This happens for a lot of us, right, who have kind of a lot on our plates and we feel like we're having to be motivated to do 100 different things. And so one way to really take care of your motivation, I like to think about this, I know we talk about self-care, but for me, I really think about managing my motivation as part of my self-care.

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And the best way to do that is to make sure that you have a replenished pool of motivation every day. And when I say that, the chemistry behind that really is dopamine. So make sure you have a replenished pool of dopamine every single day and that your dopamine is operating within you biologically the way that it's meant to because dopamine is actually the chemical of motivation and pursuit.

And so one way to make sure that you're replenishing yourself with dopamine and you have enough of a pool of it to draw from every day, is to get sunlight or bright light in your eyes in the first one to three hours after you wake up. It sounds really odd, but that's what sets that circadian rhythm, that 24-hour rhythm. And it's also, once you set that rhythm, then your body and your biology and your brain chemistry are naturally primed for those three buckets of time that I was talking about.

So in phase one, you're naturally going to have elevated levels of dopamine when you get the sunlight in your eyes first thing in the morning. And that's going to give you the ability to show up and be motivated, even if it isn't in that first 30 minutes after you wake up or the two-hour period, the productivity sweet spot. You'll still have, within that first eight-ish to 10 hours, plenty of dopamine within your system, if you do that.

Susi: So that's super cool. I live in Canada.

Neill: Yep, we're both northern girls.

Susi: And when I wake up, with the time change as well, it's a little dark.

Neill: Yep.

Susi: And it stays dark for a while. And we're not even near December 21st yet, right?

Neill: That's right.

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Susi: So in those circumstances like, how does that work for someone? Like what are some tools out there that can simulate the sunlight in your eyes?

Neill: Yeah. So I just use, it's called a sad light. Many of your people, if they're in the northern hemisphere, have probably heard about sad because we're all plagued with that, it seems like. That's the seasonal affective disorder. And so on Amazon you can just put in sad light, there's these little \$20 lights that you can get. And I just plug it in after I get up and I do my morning thing.

If I'm learning or I'm getting something done or whatever, it's just shining in my face. And it's cool, because it's very bright, you can put it up at 10,000 lumens, it mimics the sun. And so you would need like 10 to 15 minutes of that.

Susi: What I think is so cool about this is that when I'm working with people with pain, there are elements of physiology and psychology that I'm working with, right? Like there are anatomical and physiological realities of helping people to move better, helping them to down regulate the system in some cases, up regulate in some cases, but generally to down regulate. And so there's this anatomical and physiological piece to it.

The psychological piece would be their beliefs, their thoughts and their opinions about the scenario. And really blending these pieces together to support someone in getting out of pain and then staying out of pain.

And it's interesting because when we look at our days, so much when I think about that productivity world – And back when I was younger, I was all over it. Like I was all over wanting to make my days more productive. And then as I got older, I'm like, I don't know, this isn't resonating so much with me. I think there's a better way. And you're doing this idea of blending physiology and psychology, right?

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Whereas I think there's a lot of other productivity processes around time blocking that don't really keep in mind the uniqueness of the person, right? Like eat the frog first, just put it on the top of the schedule, get it done and you'll feel so much better and you'll carry on with your day. There's really no speaking about rest or rest is something that happens at the end of the day. But it's like, okay, right, but at the end of the day then you're going to pick up the kids and then you're going to go home. Okay, now it's bed, now what, right?

So what I'm really loving about what you're doing, and we haven't spoken about it in this episode, and I think it would be a good topic for another episode is just this ability to add in rest and this ability to add in a down regulation. And how that actually bolsters up how you then go into the next time block, right? Because it's understanding and weaving through the whole flow of your day.

And that's really what enables someone, a parent, who has a job and is doing all the things and is managing the house and all the things there, really making the way that we live our life so much simpler and easier, right? Because there's an honoring of what makes you tick, not only psychologically, but also physiologically.

Neill: Yeah. And that's why I think there are some principles through which this works. But everybody needs to be kind of their own little mini experiment, just like you did in the program. You were like, okay, I'm going to take this idea and then I'm just going to play around with it. I'm going to see what works here. And you figured out the way that it makes sense for you, the way that feels aligned. To use your words, like the round peg, round hole situation.

Susi: Yeah, and it just makes a lot of sense. Okay, so what I'd love for you to do is just where can people find out about this? I know you're currently running this program, your next program is not going to run for a little bit of time. But where can people find out about you? You've got a podcast, how

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can they learn more just about the ideas that you're sharing, so they can start to implement some of this stuff on their own?

Neill: Yeah, so multiple ways. I think the podcast will be great, a lot of this I discuss on the podcast. So it's called the *Success Genius*, and we can probably link up to that in the show notes, I'm guessing.

And then the other thing is, we are just rolling out a brand new version of the website, which I'm really excited about. And so there's a whole resources page with all kinds of resources related to this on scheduling, on your biology and how to make your biology match your schedule so that you feel like you're flowing in and out and you're not feeling like you're working against yourself. And then also additional information on my programs.

And I have a workshop series that I'm doing in 2024. Depending on when you're listening to this, you can sign up for one of those. It's going to be a different productivity topic every single month. So lots and lots of free resources out there.

I really do just want to change the way that we view productivity. Most people, they hear that word and they just want to throw up a little bit in their mouths probably, like you and I. But I do want to change the way that we're thinking about it and how we're approaching it because it can be so powerful. You've experienced that, I've experienced that.

Susi: Yeah, I know, for sure. I mean, it's game changing. And the fact that in the short time that I've specifically done this work with you, that I go into my weekends rested and clear, before I even go into my weekend. I didn't even know I wasn't doing that before, right?

Neill: It's awesome.

Susi: So it's like then it's like, oh, this is novel.

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Neill: This is kind of cool, yeah.

Susi: Yeah, I was still enjoying my weekends, but it's a totally different game when it's like, wow, I'm really present. Like really present. And I'm calmer and I'm clearer. And then I come out of the weekend kind of ready to go. Like I'm ready to get to work again. And so there's rest happening on multiple levels and just the quality of my work is so much better.

Neill: Yeah, and I think this is really, when we talk about wanting work/life balance, I actually think this is what we mean. And it is not necessarily, oh, I have 40 hours for my family and I have 40 hours for work. That doesn't matter. It's really irrelevant to the conversation.

What really matters is how you're feeling, the state that you're in and flowing in and out of that state in a way that feels really good. And that's achieved through blending the biology with the psychology.

Susi: So good. So good. Okay, so can you give me a website that people can quickly access now if they want to?

Neill: Yeah, they can just go to my homepage, neillwilliams.com. So, www.N-E-I-L-L-williams.com. And then the podcast name is?

Neill: *Success Genius*.

Susi: *Success Genius*.

Neill: Yeah.

Susi: Brilliant. Okay, you guys go check it out because it's really, really interesting around blending this physiology and psychology and just what's possible for you. If you even take a minuscule of this, from my own experience, I think you're going to see a real game change in how you feel about your own schedule and how you do your work, how you do your family and how you do all the things that happen in between those things.

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And it can make for just a state that is not depleted and just so much more buoyant and juicy.

Neill: More fulfilled.

Susi: Thank you so much, Neill.

Neill: Yeah, thank you so much, Susi.

Susi: Take care.

Neill: Bye.

If this episode has resonated and you're looking to deepen this idea of getting your body back on board, of listening deeply to your symptoms, of listening to the whispers so you don't have to hear the screams, and you're looking for one to one support or professional training, then reach out to us at health@functionalsynergy.com where we can customize your learning path. That's health@functionalsynergy.com. Looking forward to hearing from you.