

The Primal Connection: Follow Your Genetic Blueprint to Health and Happiness Study Guide

The Primal Connection: Follow Your Genetic Blueprint to Health and Happiness by Mark Sisson

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Plot Summary

The Primal Connection: Follow Your Genetic Blueprint to Health and Happiness by Mark Sisson is a self-help non-fiction book published in 2013. It is 253 pages long, and is the second of the author's books on living a "paleo" lifestyle for one's health and fitness. The Primal Connection attempts to take a more holistic approach to paleo living, rather than simply focusing on diet and exercise. The book's author makes an effort to address mental health and explains methods to attain a fully paleo-oriented life, with issues laid out in a simple, accessible fashion.

The author's main point—continuing that of his first book—is that human beings have a genetic blueprint that is designed for a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, not the modern sedentary, comfortable lives most people live now. For most of human history, people lived in small groups, eating non-processed, foraged foods and got plenty of exercise. They lived simply, with fundamental needs, and didn't get all bound up in doubt, existential worries or over-schedule themselves. The modern lifestyle is antithetical to that genetic blueprint, and ignoring the negative impact of that disconnect is harmful both mentally and physically. If people would learn to recognize ways to reconnect with their paleolithic ancestors, they would be both happier and healthier.

The first section lists the "Ten Habits of Highly Successful Hunter-Gatherers," specifically focusing on what goes on inside the average modern human's psyche, as opposed to how "Grok" (the typical paleolithic man) might have thought. "The Inner Dialogue Connection" is about taking responsibility for one's life and getting insight and control over one's mental health. Modern superficial concerns and negativity had no place in a paleolithic man's life, and are only hurtful in one's modern life as well.

The second section is "The Body Connection." The author focuses on the power of human touch, and recommends barefoot living or minimal footwear as a way to better one's physical posture and biomechanics. He especially recommends regular activity throughout the day, rather than a sustained heavy workout that overtaxes the body.

The third section, "The Nature Connection," points out that the modern disconnect from the natural world is also damaging to one's mental health. Since most modern people live in urban areas, they need to go out of their way to incorporate nature into their lives for their well-being. This can be done through simple lifestyle changes, simulations, gardening, or playing outside with one's children.

The fourth section is "The Daily Rhythm Connection." The author spends a great deal of time discussing the ways modern people have lost track of the daily rhythms of life, from the sunrise and sunset to sleep hygiene. The modern attachment to electronics and light must be mitigated and managed so that people can get back into a less distorted reality. Slowing down to a more manageable speed is necessary.

"The Social Connection" addresses the social needs that have been neglected in the modern age, and how to get and maintain meaningful relationships with our "tribe."



Finally, the author defines "The Play Connection," pointing out that people need to keep play in their lives long past childhood. Modern leisure time activities are either about chores or vegetative time-fillers like media consumption, and adult playtime needs to be reinvigorated in order to re-awaken our sense of fun.



Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

The author, Mark Sisson, is a former professional athlete who found himself getting repeatedly injured and sick, and wanted to find a better way to address his health needs. After doing 30 years of research, he settled on the idea of following the guide of human ancestry, eating and moving like them, which led him to write his first book, *The Primal Blueprint*.

Summary. He begins by writing that this is not a book about becoming "more gracious," but about getting one's hands dirty in life. People, many of whom are very successful, still have the sense that they are missing something. They might try to fix this problem with all kinds of activities or pills or diets. However, while these things might help somewhat, they aren't addressing the core problem. Even when people do all these things—schedule themselves into exercise routines or other self-help regimens—something still isn't working.

So what makes a meaningful, healthy life? The main thesis is that modern humans are not living the lives they are designed to live. The foods people are most adapted to eat are the kinds they have eaten for the longest time. The ways human beings are best adapted to move are also those which they've done the longest. The author briefly summarizes the diet and fitness ideas of his first book and that of his blog, *Mark's Daily Apple*.

The Primal Connection is a follow-up, addressing the full lifestyle, and is more all-encompassing, including psychological health.

The more people live like their "evolutionary ancestors," the healthier they will be, in both mind and body. Human genetics expect people to do certain things, and when they don't, those same genes take action to protect them from harm. Type 2 Diabetes, for example, is an effort by human genes to protect the body from too much sugar.

Modern people have much abundance in things they don't need, like sugars, passive entertainments, conveniences and excesses, and what human bodies need they don't get much of, like sun and nature. People have to go out of their way to access these things. Sometimes people get their endorphins from the wrong things, and to excess.

Sisson isn't advocating a return to caves and wearing skins for clothes and abandoning modern society, but only that there are certain actions people can take to make living better.

In a box section at the end of his introduction, the author summarizes "The Primal Blueprint Diet and Exercise." First, that people should eat the foods their prehistoric ancestors ate, like meat and vegetables, fruits and nuts. People should not eat modern foods, because they are toxic. They should not eat processed sweets or sweetened



drinks, grains, vegetable oils, or processed and packaged foods. Exercise should be increased overall, but instead of lengthy heavy workouts, intense but brief exercise periods.

Analysis. Sisson begins with a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche, "There is more wisdom in your body than in your deepest philosophies." This quotation reflects the main thesis of "paleo" living—that the human body is full of genetic information that should dictate the human lifestyle. The further people get from answering those paleolithic lifestyle needs, the further they get from health and well-being.

It should be noted that Sisson's dietary regimen (which he isn't the first to advocate) is somewhat controversial. It has been criticized as being a fad diet. There is some argument over whether or not it actually mimics a truly paleolithic diet, considering that it is full of agriculturally developed meats, fruits and vegetables. It is also debated among scientists whether or not humans have further adapted to a modern agrarian diet, and whether the short lives of paleolithic humans would demonstrate the full consequences of a meat-based, non-grain diet, not to mention the question of when early humans began to eat grains. There is scientific debate over the idea of gene-centered evolution, the basis of Sisson's thesis.

Sisson's audience is clearly male, Western, and affluent; and the book addresses their lifestyle problems exclusively. This is not to say that his ideas cannot be adapted for all genders and backgrounds, but it is obvious that his primary focus is the middle-to-upper-class male professional, a successful man who has a busy urban or suburban life.



A Recipe for Success

A Recipe for Success Summary and Analysis

Summary. "Feel good" hormones are the hard-wired reward humans get for doing things that are good for their well-being. Doing what's healthy advances evolution. Modern humans are genetically identical to their hunter-gatherer ancestors, so this behavior is universal. However, the environment has changed. The scarcity that marked human ancestors' lives has been replaced with overabundance. So instead of risking being eaten by animals or starving, people are faced with getting "feel good" hormones by doing things that are artificial or excessive.

Humans are wired to seek pleasure, which can be acquired by eating good food, having sex, going out in nature, sleeping well and having healthy relationships. Actions that help survival also cause happy hormone boosts and neuro-chemicals.

Humans bear millions of years of evolutionary design. Much of human psychology has its root in evolutionary history. But people are not just a product of their genes; what they do or come in contact with impacts how those genes get expressed. Behavior and lifestyle have an impact on gene expression.

There are two modes of thinking, "top down" and "bottom up." The first comes from the frontal lobe/the neocortex—higher level thinking like predicting the future or being rational. The latter is from the cerebellum, sometimes called the "lizard brain," and humans work best when they use both of these types of thinking together. People should not let higher thinking skills predominate. Allowing themselves to meet the world with their senses is good for them.

Too much comfort will lead to one's hormones losing their purpose, one of which is to respond to stimuli. Not enough of different kinds of stimuli will lead to atrophy not just physically but also hormonally. So people need to address any systems in their bodies that are being neglected.

For our ancestors, there were long periods of rest punctuated by brief moments of fear. Today, one can get those adrenaline rushes in other ways. However, many people spend too much time in their lives experiencing fight-or-flight situations, which leads to exhaustion.

Hominids split from apes seven million years ago. Then *Homo erectus* organized the first hunter-gatherer societies. They branched out, and one branch became *Homo sapiens*, who came out of East Africa 160,000 years ago. Approximately 60,000 years ago, there was a mutation that created the move toward full modern potentials. Some say that this was at basis a linguistic capacity change. The group that survived in Africa and left were small in number, but out of that came an innovative elite group. This group expanded all over the world.



In 28,000 BCE more humans got old, and there was a population expansion. Family bonds and multi-generation knowledge was passed on. People are hard-wired to be part of this history, passing on knowledge to the future. Today people are not bound by location oriented culture, but can join the culture that inspires them. Accumulated knowledge is the only thing that's really different about modern humans compared to their ancestors. This also contributed to much progress in technology.

People's genetic need for culture and interest in knowledge has become both their greatest strength but also a weakness that hurts their health. Modern society would be nearly unrecognizable to a paleo-human.

Modern humans are no different than their ancestors; they are still apes. People's hard-wiring will stay the same for the foreseeable future. So it makes sense to use the acquired and accumulated knowledge of these millions of years to create a more healthy and happy self.

The lack of selection pressure has led to a paradox: people's innate behaviors are about survival, but they are no longer in survival mode. This leads to the seeking of those biochemical rewards in destructive ways, like through drug abuse, overeating and compulsive sex.

The aim, then, is balancing one's primal urges with common sense. The primal man (Grok) was living in a world where scarcity was a given. Today one has too much and an ease of survival. One has to learn to find pleasure while also taking responsibility for one's actions; i.e. using one's higher brain function.

People must seek pleasure, but there are reasons why playing in dirt or providing for one's family makes one happier than closing million dollar business deals or winning golf tournaments. People need to make fulfilling moments part of their lives, rather than just moments grabbed at in busy mode. People will become happier if they make healthy and simple activities a priority.

Analysis. This chapter, which falls outside the six main sections of the book, contains author Mark Sisson's basic thesis. Human hormones and brain chemicals are guided by human history and evolution. In the modern world, these boosts of hormones and neuro-chemicals are all too often sought after in inappropriate and unhealthy ways, because people have become disconnected from the ways their ancestors received them. Modern humans are disconnected from nature, which stimulates their immune systems and serotonin. Stress hormones are reduced by physical human contact, for example, and yet people are more alienated from touch than ever before in human history. The skin cancer scare and the general avoidance of the outdoors have caused Vitamin D deficiencies, when moderate contact with sunlight actually stimulates bone strength and natural cancer-fighting abilities.

In general, people have been disconnected from their ancestral way of life, and therefore need to reconnect with it for their own well-being. Thus, the author titles all the

following chapters with "connections" the reader should pursue in order to become more healthy in both mind and body.



The Inner Dialogue Connection

The Inner Dialogue Connection Summary and Analysis

Summary. Predictable internal chatter can be destructive. Overanalyzing and obsessing about the past and the future leads people into questions that don't have answers. They need to relearn our ancestral habits. Thinking from the perspective of a hunter-gatherer can help modern people see their choices for what they are. There is an adaptive benefit to being able to reason out various future scenarios or evaluate past actions. But this ability formed in a simpler time, when people could see clearly what was real and what wasn't. People obsess about how they look in the mirror or their virtual social circles. They relive the past in their minds. They also act against their own better interests.

How does one get control of these impulses? One should put them in the context of how one's paleolithic ancestors would view them, realizing that most of them would see the typical modern inner dialogue as silly.

This chapter is structured around the "Ten Habits of Highly Successful Hunter-Gatherers": Take Responsibility, Be Selfish, Build a Tribe, Be Present, Be Curious, Trust Your Gut, Pick Your Battles, Get Over It, Sharpen Your Spear, and Be Affluent.

Take Responsibility. Getting caught up in self-pity or doubt is a luxury. Grok didn't get depressed when he didn't catch his prey or a water source was unusable. He might have been disappointed, but getting caught up in these feelings would be a way to die. Facing unfavorable circumstances didn't lead to rumination, but to moving on to the next challenge. One has to own one's life and own one's problems. But that doesn't mean one should get caught up in the blame game, either toward oneself or others. One merely has to accept each situation, realizing only the circumstances can be changed. Humans are unique amongst animals for their ability to respond rather than merely react. They can overcome the fight-or-flight lizard brain reactions. One might suffer an accident, but there is a choice on how to respond. The author asks the reader to get in touch with what it is that stands in his way. He suggests setting up a "WTF Fund" for unexpected situations.

Be Selfish. Human beings need altruism to survive, but they also need to be selfish. Being a martyr isn't helpful. Being selfish does not mean to value oneself above others, but to give oneself equal value. Self-nurturance is the best kind. One needs to honor what it is one wants. While being a parent is demanding and should be selfless on some level, sacrifice of one's wellbeing for the wants (rather than needs) of a child is a mistake. To "feed this habit," one should treat oneself to some time, nurturance, and kindness.



Build a Tribe. Humans need strong social bonds. In the modern world people often live far away from their families and hometowns, and move often. This causes social disconnection. But people still need to build tribes. Ironically, there are more people around than ever. One may have hundreds of social media "friends" but few real relationships. The author recommends that if one doesn't have a family, creating one should be a priority. This requires going out and finding people one can connect with, but bringing something to offer. Fostering better relations with those one already knows is one way. One should join social organizations, or organize one.

Be Present. Prehistoric people had to be present to survive, to observe what was directly in front of them, and be vigilant. Today's people walk through life being distracted. Calling it "multitasking" doesn't make it any less problematic. People need to fully experience what is in front of them. Instead of getting onto their phones, they should watch their children play. Look them in the eyes. Look around the neighborhood. Meditate. Be mindful.

Be Curious. Curiosity is not just for children. People stay youthful by staying curious about the world around them, and never stop learning or exploring. Being a lifelong learner, connecting with other lifelong learners, and pushing boundaries throughout one's life is important.

Trust Your Gut. What feels like a gut instinct is actually based on very subtle cues gained from one's senses. One should honor them. Better decisions are actually made by using one's intuition rather than one's reasoning, because one's reasoning is more burdened by bias. It is best to pay attention to where one's inner voices are coming from, and taking a break and letting one's subconscious look at a decision.

Pick Your Battles. Going after priorities is important. There are costs and benefits to every decision, but one should also take into consideration the emotional and social considerations as well. One should consider what the consequences will be if one takes on unnecessary battles. Identifying one's core priorities is how one decides which battles are important. Only one should be allowed per day.

Get Over It. The ability to forgive is an essential evolutionary skill. A member of the tribe who holds onto grudges causes problem in the group. It doesn't serve people to be thin-skinned. Modern people wallow in their perceived wrongs too much. Satisfaction is found when people let things go. When one finds oneself replaying negative history, one should learn to interrupt the thought, and redirect it. Rituals can help one leave the past behind and live in the present.

Sharpen Your Spear. Homo sapiens outlasted the Neanderthals because they had both better weapons and better skills. This adaptation to conditions must not stop in the modern age. This means self-development. Having a career that provides for oneself and one's family is something to celebrate, but a bigger paycheck isn't everything. Being satisfied in one's job might sometimes mean branching out and taking different paths and developing new skills. This might mean taking a class, volunteering or taking a side job.



Be Affluent. Prehistoric people had lots of leisure time full of family nurturing and social time and intimacy. One doesn't need to quit one's career and do nothing to experience the wealth in having health, creative freedom and a satisfying job. The ultimate primal commodity is the gift of time, and people fritter it away with high-end careers, undesirable chores and social obligations. Over-scheduling is a problem, and people should spend, ideally, 50 percent of their waking time indulging in leisurely pleasure. Gratitude is key. Tribal peoples thank their gods, and so can anyone, though having religion isn't necessary. One can also make gratitude a daily practice involving something as simple as providing one's family with a home-cooked meal or recognizing the beauty in simple things. The more one feels gratitude, the more aware one becomes of life's gifts. This involves keeping things simple, and not accumulating too much stuff. Being affluent isn't about having lots of things. There is luxury in time. More is not better. Being weighed down by stuff that doesn't bring one happiness is not good. Affordable luxuries are a good thing. Keeping track of what one is thankful for will help. Take time to thank people who deserve it.

Analysis. This chapter addresses ways the modern human's inner self is plagued with distractions and unhappiness. It gives practical ways to combat modern mindsets. In some ways, it echoes the "mindfulness" approach of Eastern philosophies and religions, where one focuses on the present moment, allowing oneself to let go of "monkey mind." Much of what the author puts forward is basic common sense, but common sense that appears to be lost in a modern world.

Sisson portrays "Grok" as a man with an internal dialogue that is no-nonsense and focused on survival, with an understanding that survival isn't just about food, shelter and clothing. Basically, one is to focus on simplicity, and stay focused on what is important in a good life. Being wealthy has another meaning than how much money one has. Good relationships are made when one brings something to the table, and picks one's battles carefully. Evolving new skills is important in a fast-moving world. Instead of having one's head down checking texts while the children play, one should pay attention to them. All these suggestions foster the idea of paying attention to one's real-world surroundings.

One criticism that can be leveled is how Sisson assumes that paleolithic people did not get depressed or mope about. Obviously, there is no way to know whether they did or not. However, he is bringing to life an Ideal Paleolithic Man, the one who is successful and survives well.



The Body Connection

The Body Connection Summary and Analysis

Summary. While diet and exercise are key (as covered in the author's previous book), here Sisson focuses on human touch, barefoot living, and body consciousness.

Stay in Touch. One's sense of touch is the most fundamental of the five senses, being the first one developed. It reinforces social bonds, and is crucial to one's well-being. The modern world encourages people to have personal bubbles, even in a crowd, and being "touchy-feely" is seen as a negative. There is a chemical necessity to human touch, from infancy, as has been proven with science. It helps people relax and boosts their immunity, and relieves pain. One should hug loved ones and friends and pet animals. Subtle and appropriate touch in social interactions is a good thing to cultivate, if done naturally. Sex is also important for chemical reasons. Getting a massage is another good way to get physical contact.

Go Barefoot! People should be barefoot most of the time. While shoes are considered essential, wearing them all the time causes physiological problems like back pain, bad posture, hip problems, and muscle atrophy. While it sounds counterintuitive, it is important to free one's feet from shoes. One's feet need to feel the ground, and are evolved to adjust what they do in contact with the ground. Wearing shoes is like wearing a cast, causing the same disconnection from the rest of one's body and the world. Doing this after so long in shoes means doing it gradually, for safety's sake, and of course there are social rules one has to abide by some of the time. Most shoes hurt one's natural ability to walk. Going barefoot improves one's muscles. Running barefoot requires less energy, and encourages more efficient, comfortable strides. When barefoot is not possible, minimalist footwear is an option. The author provides some suggestions as to what brands and types of shoes fit the minimalist prescription, the key being no elevation between toe and heel. Achilles tendon pain is caused by bad shoes. However, going whole hog without caution can cause problems too. Stretching may help improve flexibility, but simply easing into barefoot walking slowly will do the same. Also, one should be mindful about walking form. Strengthening one's feet is important, and there are foot exercises that can help.

The Power of Posture. Poor posture is made worse by a modern sedentary lifestyle and modern comforts. The most common posture problem is when the head juts forward, which leads to many issues. The author advocates the Gokhale Method to prevent the chronic pain associated with the modern way of life. Pain medication doesn't prevent the damaging activity, and so things get worse. The point is to cultivate a straight and elongated spine, which should ideally be J-shaped. This can be encouraged with specific exercises. It is also beneficial to defecate in the squatting position, for both musculature and digestive health. Sitting down on the toilet leads to too much straining and time, leading to all sorts of health risks, some quite serious.



Made to Move. Exercise is crucial to a good life, but it doesn't have to be miserable or a duty. This means all kinds of movement. Activity is not just about weight or endurance, but also creativity and inspiration. It should be a pleasure. Exercise is important for the brain's health. Moving frequently or standing at one's desk is a way to do this. Sitting too much weakens the parts of one's body that are most crucial to all activity. A sedentary lifestyle—sitting for more than 23 hours a week—is a recipe for all sorts of illnesses and early death. But this doesn't just mean going for a run forty minutes a day. We need a variety of physical activity to be healthy, and to interrupt sitting with moving. Standing burns three times the calories of sitting. Transitioning to a standing desk is one important way to improve this.

Analysis. This chapter encourages the reader to think about the ways his body has become disconnected from the Earth, from other humans, and even from himself. People need to touch and be touched. They need to sit and stand correctly in order to avoid injury. They need to exercise regularly, but not in the way most modern urban people do—by going to the gym and doing an hour of heavy exercise. Rather, they should spend lots of time standing, walking, and moving in short bursts.

Sisson recommends some things that are unique to affluent urban life: getting massages for instance, and buying or creating a standing desk. It might be argued that a person of the working class isn't served well by these suggestions, since many people in the service or blue collar professions stand all day as it is. Also, while a massage might have been available in paleolithic times, it is hard to imagine that Grok spent a lot of time standing up in one place, like a standing desk calls for.

The most controversial recommendation Sisson makes is to live one's life mostly barefooted, which is easy to say if one doesn't have a professional job to go to or doesn't live in a cold or urban place. He also recommends the purchase of specific brands of minimalist shoes, which, it can be argued, are expensive and wear out quickly compared to more formidable footwear. Another criticism that can be leveled here is that many people have jobs that require regulation and protective footwear, which cannot be answered by a minimalist prescription.

In any case, Sisson's aim is for optimal body health, and his recommendations have the backing of cited scientific analysis. He repeatedly writes that one should take what one can, adhere to safety and common sense, and fit whatever suggestions he gives into one's unique life as possible.



The Nature Connection

The Nature Connection Summary and Analysis

Summary. People need to reconnect to the natural world, for their own mental and physical health. Biology demands it.

The Wild Within. Being in the natural world enhances one's senses. In the modern urban world, one encounters a lot of noise, but it is of the type that isn't nourishing. Artificial smells also are not the same as natural smells. The primal brain is stressed by modern noise; it is calmed by natural sounds. Being in natural surroundings restores one's ability to pay attention and improves one's immune system. Looking at a body of water is very relaxing, possibly because one can't map it, making it like closing one's eyes. Floating on water is also calming. There is some science that supports the idea that people need to be in regular contact with the Earth. They need regular contact with negative ions, which appear more regularly in natural environments. These negative ions energize one at the cellular level. In the case of not being able to go outside, even a shower or houseplants can help. Indoor environments and electronics generate positive ions, leading to fatigue, poor sleep, a poor immune system and other problems. The author recommends buying a filter/ionizer. When one has a bit of free time, one should get outside to a natural area, and he lists a number of possible activities.

Reclaiming the Outdoors. One should take coffee breaks and lunches outside. Also, one should enforce a balance on one's kids' screen time with outdoor play. Sleep outside when one can. Look at the stars. Go camping. Use the yard. Don't be intimidated by the weather. Even cities have natural places and parks. Make sure to have houseplants. Art depicting nature helps too, as well as recorded natural sound. Pets or fish are helpful. There is a biological benefit to having a dog; it will also help one get out into nature more frequently and engagingly. The author also suggests creating a yard that attracts animals and taking walks in the neighborhood daily. Get a hobby involving the outdoors. Reconnect with one's inner child. It is important to become familiar with one's surroundings. The ancestors were intimately connected with their habitat. Walking instead of driving assists in making one more present and engaged in the world.

Play Dirty. One needs dirt in order to get beneficial bacteria into one's body. Over-sanitizing isn't good, and hurts one's immune system. The immune system needs to be used in order to be in top shape. As much as six pounds of one's body is microbial, and one is fully adapted to the environment. Infections have been reduced in the modern environment, and that is good. However, attempting germ-free living is going too far. The result is an increase in allergies, asthma, and many other disorders. People who have exposure to pets or farms or large families have fewer incidences of these diseases. When small children put all manner of organic things in their mouths, they are boosting their immune systems. Getting sick from lessening hygiene might improve the immune system for later encounters, especially in childhood. Excessive hygiene can also make one's immune system over-react to things like pollen or grass, or cause an



autoimmune disorder. One should not use anti-bacterial cleansers at all. Friendly bacteria especially must be encouraged. Practically speaking, people need dirt not only for their immune systems but also to reduce stress and develop their brains. People should walk through creeks, grow indoor plants, lie on the ground once in a while, and take mud baths and mud runs. Gardening is therapeutic, because of the contact with the soil, getting outdoors, and exercising one's creativity, among other benefits. Gardening is known to boost one's mood.

Analysis. Sisson makes a good case for getting out into nature as a major way to restore our mental and physical health. The all-encompassing artificiality of a modern environment isn't nurturing, while being outside can be. He mentions that some people have an aversion to a certain outdoor place or outdoor activity, and should therefore adapt his suggestions in whatever way they can. Obviously, people who live in rural environments have no problem getting to natural areas on a regular basis, but someone who lives in an inner-city area might be hard-pressed to find access to the kinds of nature he suggests. Not everyone, after all, has a yard to garden in. However, he makes a variety of suggestions, including the simple idea of having houseplants, and nearly everyone can go outside and find whatever nature exists in their immediate neighborhood. His suggestions for how to alter indoor areas to be more conducive to a "paleo mind" are all generally accessible, including having pets or relaxing music.

The modern world has been obsessed with hygiene, even to the point of sterility, and Sisson cites recent studies that show Western society at least has gone too far, leading to immune disorders and allergies that are not present in less "clean" societies. He presses the point that parents who sanitize their children's worlds are setting them up for health problems later on. He also cites studies that show regular contact with actual organic soil boosts immune systems, rather than causing disease. (He does make the point that he's not talking about soil poisoned with metals or toxins, though he makes no mention of how to know the quality of the soil in your particular environment.)



The Daily Rhythm Connection

The Daily Rhythm Connection Summary and Analysis

Summary. One can have a daily rhythm or a daily grind, depending on one's efforts to be connected. The modern world takes people away from a positive connection with daily changes, but there are things they can do to mitigate this.

Honoring the Sun. People are impacted by the rising and setting of the sun, whether they adhere to its rhythms in their lives or not. People sleep best when they honor this cycle. If one doesn't, it negatively impacts the aging process and the brain. Seventy-five percent of Americans have sleep problems. Forty percent are sleep deprived, which causes many health problems, both physical and mental. Not only are people also deprived of deep darkness, but they are inundated with artificial light that is far brighter than candlelight and sometimes even sunlight. This elevates stress, prevents good sleep, and also causes sugar cravings and raises insulin levels. Basically, artificial light causes one to feel hungry and get fatter. This tendency comes from the fattening up the ancestors did in the summer, in preparation for the lean dark winters. Exposure to artificial light also causes eye problems. Reducing exposure to artificial light is therefore important. Sisson lists some ways to deal with jet lag. He also describes the optimal bedroom, which should be fairly cool and very dark. Following proper sleep hygiene will enable one to wake at sunrise naturally. The stages of sleep are necessary to one's brain and learning. Sisson mentions recent research that suggests people are evolved for phases of sleep, with perhaps one or two interruptions. Some modern sleep problems are caused by staying up too late, and insisting on uninterrupted sleep. This shouldn't be confused with insomniac conditions, where one can't get back to sleep after waking. But quiet activities in the middle of the night, if one goes to bed early enough, are fine. Also, sleeping more in the winter and less in the summer is healthy. Using an alarm clock that jolts one out of sleep isn't good for one's stress level. Using sleep masks to reduce light exposure while sleeping, using noise canceling machines, taking naps or using light reducing computer programs can also help. Vitamin D gained from sun exposure is essential. People have gone too far in the skin cancer scare, without acknowledging that moderate sun exposure is beneficial. Those with darker skin can handle more sun exposure (and should get it) more than lighter skinned people, but both need to get some mid-day sun on their bodies. Maintaining a slight tan is healthy. If one can't get regular sun exposure on one's body, one can take supplements or get it by eating certain foods, though this is vastly insufficient.

Finding Focus. The distractions of modern technology are overwhelming people's natural talent for solving problems. People need more downtime, without being constantly distracted by their gadgets. The average American is expected to process far more information in the present day than in the past, and children get far too much screen time at the expense of outdoor play. There is nothing wrong with using technology to make life easier, but people shouldn't let it dominate their lives. It contributes greatly to their stress levels. It is easy to let an attachment to the digital



lifestyle become an addiction to the instant gratification of constant compulsive yet inane communication. There is also some concern that people are stimulating the part of their brains that go for instant gratification rather than concentration and real information, also possibly causing a reduction in empathy. It is critical for people's brains to get regular breaks from it in order to develop a real sense of self, especially for the young. It is important to create balance. The habit of procrastination may be coming from natural impulsiveness. Hunter-gatherer people lived a life of immediacy and daily needs. Long term projects and goals are difficult especially when there aren't tangible rewards. Breaking projects into smaller steps helps, along with giving oneself tangible rewards or penalties. Being properly productive also means recognizing that sustained attention can't go on for longer than about 20 minutes. One needs regular breaks. Challenging oneself with real disconnects from the gadgets is important for one's ability to keep going. Be mindful of where one is. One shouldn't bring one's work home. Use technology to manage technology, like with a DVR or RSS feeds. It's important to find a balance between being a good global citizen and allowing oneself to be overwhelmed by the weight of the world's crises. One needs to evaluate and determine which things require and can be impacted by one's actions. It is more important to deal with the real suffering of those nearby, and deal with the lessons of global news directly in one's community. One should edit how much time is devoted to information technology as opposed to other more pleasurable pursuits. Limiting the time we spend reading the news won't negatively impact one's ability to know what's going on. Recording the duration of what one reads and how long it takes might give some perspective. Limiting the length of one's emails helps everyone. "Multi-tasking" causes jumbled and scattered thinking, which causes brain fatigue and is counterproductive. While Grok might have done several tasks at once, he was still mindful of when and where he was. Multi-tasking harms one's ability to sustain attention when needed. Thinking one is good at multi-tasking is a delusion. A recommendation is to experiment with technology fasting. Learning to focus can be very gratifying. Start small by being mindful when doing simple things like raking leaves or walking the dog. It will help to see the beauty in things, but it will also aid in focusing.

Slowing Down. Modern people live in a world of speed, which is totally different from what their prehistoric ancestors experienced. As a result, people miss a lot, and harm their relationships and health. One thing one can do is create a place of solitude in one's home to visit each day. A quiet hobby can also help. Taking vacations where one only visits a single destination is a good idea. The author advocates Slow Living, and advocates daily rituals and routines to improve mindfulness. Sometimes, one can even experience "flow," which happens when one experiences a healthy challenge that has been practiced for. Flow is about losing oneself in an activity. Finding a place of silence and solitude will help in that. Sometimes a retreat is necessary, and can be life-changing.

Analysis. This chapter is the longest, and focuses strongly on the idea of adhering to a slower lifestyle more attuned to the natural cycles of life. The author cites recent studies about electronic screen light and how it negatively impacts sleep patterns, offering some technological solutions. He cites some of the research pointing to sleep patterns that are characterized by getting to bed early, perhaps being wakeful for a bit of time in the



middle of the night, and then back to sleep until dawn. Sisson makes the case that modern humans are not only sleep deprived because they go to bed too late, surrounded by too much electric light, but also that there is a prevailing belief that it's medically problematic to wake up in the night, while some researchers have claimed this is humankind's historic sleep pattern. Common sense says a healthy person who gets enough sleep doesn't need an alarm clock to rise, though Sisson doesn't much address the possibility that people in the modern world might need to rise significantly before dawn for their commute to work or for shift work.

Sisson spends a great deal of print discussing the modern obsession with social media, and the belief that multi-tasking is not only necessary but a well-earned skill. He refutes this with several citations, and it doesn't take much reflection to see that he has a point. He makes many practical suggestions on how to limit or control gadgets with other gadgets. One might question what this has to do with Grok's paleolithic existence, but Sisson once again might argue that his readers must deal with life as it is. People can't just toss all their electronics out the window and live like their ancestors, after all. But there are ways to limit their "virtual lives" and make more of an effort to be in tune with the real world. Once again, he advocates a mindful, one-at-a-time method of dealing with daily tasks. Balancing media, and even turning it off when one is doing simple real world tasks will certainly make one more attentive.



The Social Connection

The Social Connection Summary and Analysis

Summary. Social bonds are necessary for one's psychological health.

The Inner Circle. Social bonds were essential to paleolithic people for their well-being. The best metaphor for it is the fire circle, a community. Having strong social bonds, in person rather than on the internet, is essential to one's health and longevity. The modern world is moving people in the opposite direction. Being isolated can be just as dangerous to one's health as smoking or drinking alcohol. However, having a social circle that is too large can cause stress as well. Paying more attention to social media than the social possibilities immediately available is damaging. One needs to make sure the social media one uses is of service rather than the other way around. Being fully present is important to one's loved ones and to the quality of those relationships. It is also important to stay connected only to those people who foster one's well-being. Fostering an inner circle of good people should be one's goal. People also need to keep connected to their community by having relationships with their local business community and neighbors.

Filling the Social Wellbeing. Reconnecting can be done with planned family activities, using social media for real connection, using snail mail, going out to live entertainment, getting out in the neighborhood, inviting people over for dinner, and having real fire circles. One should go on real adventures and volunteer or simply be generous to others. These all relieve loneliness and isolation.

Analysis. Once again, Sisson argues for real world connections rather than the shallow connections inherent in social media. He is not simply advocating for a symbolic fire circle, but a real one, perhaps in the back yard, where one can gather with one's "tribe" on a regular basis. In this case, the author shows himself as a California man with access to a warm climate, beach and a private back yard, somewhat missing the idea that in many places, fires are not only forbidden but impossible. He doesn't linger on this idea, however, perhaps recognizing it is an ideal rather than practical. He talks at length about fostering positive social connections with like-minded, supportive people. He even mentions the recent study that shows that having too many obese friends might lead to one's own obesity, which might give a reader pause. Does one consciously put out a quota of how many fat friends will be allowed? At any rate, the basic idea of fostering positive friendships with a more narrow group than a Facebook friends-list might make sense. He also makes a strong case for developing community consciousness. His concrete and practical suggestions for how to accomplish this are clear.



The Play Connection

The Play Connection Summary and Analysis

Summary. People should take the time to play.

Primal Play. It is important to play, even as adults. In prehistoric times, it helped people experiment and process, and also blow off steam. It creates new brain patterns and helps one deal with one's emotions. People know that children need play, even roughhousing, but neglecting to play as adults reduces intelligence as well. Some of the most innovative workplaces encourage play. Play has no attachment to outcome. It is not a distraction, but an end in itself. It helps one's relationships and a sense of connection to others. However, treating it as a chore—as something one ought to do—misses the point. In the modern workaday world, even an hour of play is a start.

The Play of Art. Art can be a form of play, and allowing oneself the unstructured time to figure out what sort of arts or crafts bring that out must be allowed. Play is not routine chores or fixing things that need fixing around the house, though doing them might be fun in the right frame of mind. This is about enjoying something that doesn't necessarily have to be done. Allowing one's imagination to run wild is part of this. Writing out a list of possibilities might get one started. Do some decorating. Listen to music or create music. Incorporate play into one's workday.

Primal Thrills. Every once in a while, our primal ancestors experienced something that scared them, and one should have the same thing in one's modern life. Extreme experiences, safely pursued, are healthy. It helps one recognize one's mortality. If people don't actively include it in their lives, they can sometimes express their boredom in unhealthy pursuits. Facing true challenges helps one feel a sense of accomplishment. This does not mean putting one's life in danger, but it does mean pushing the boundaries. Done right, one can get to the place of flow. There are many possible activities that can fill the bill. The point is to get outside one's comfort zone.

Analysis. Adults need play just as often as children do, but the author seems to be cautious about making this just another thing on the reader's To Do List, since this will diminish the enjoyment. Whether it's completely unstructured, artistic, or thrill-oriented, one should make more effort to take the time to do it. Sisson points to dream workplaces like Google where people are expected as part of their jobs to "play," though it's possible that falls outside his stricture that it should be both required and spontaneous. The fact that he includes modern pursuits like roller coasters as a possible way to get our adrenaline jump is surprising in the light of paleolithic lifestyle advocacy. It seems like a thrill ride might give Grok a fatal heart attack, but apparently that kind of modern artificiality is okay in light of modern limitations.



Characters

The only person mentioned in *The Primal Connection* is "Grok," an idealized character meant to represent paleolithic man. He is the Ideal Man, having full connection with all aspects of his world and himself. He is fully self-actualized because he stays in the present, maintains good relationships with his tribal members, and develops skills necessary to his survival. He maintains an appropriate connection to the natural world, and is fully cognizant of his surroundings. He is meant to exist purely in the imagination of the reader, as an aspirational figure, one modern people should make an effort to be more like. He eats good natural food, exercises his body, and knows how to survive. He lives a life of short bursts of physical effort with a whole lot of leisure time, in which he partakes in cultural crafts. He doesn't wear shoes, and he listens to the natural world. If modern humans would be more like him, they would be happier and healthier.



Objects/Places

Minimalist Footwear

While the author prescribes barefoot living as optimal, he also advocates for the use of minimalist footwear, offering several brand names and the ideal way shoes should be structured. One example is the Vibram Five Fingers "toe shoes."

The Outdoors

Modern people don't get enough exposure to the natural world, and must make a major effort to get reconnected to it in whatever way possible. Whether it's having pets, houseplants or a garden, taking hikes in the wilderness or extended camping—people need to incorporate the outdoors into their lives.

The Standing Desk

For those who must work in sedentary type jobs, creating a standing desk is a way to improve one's overall health. Not only does it burn calories, it improves posture.

Dirt

Rather than seeing dirt as a negative thing, the author pushes forth the idea that one should seek out dirt as a gardener, and in play. He advocates getting muddy as a matter of course, citing studies that it improves the immune system and psychic well-being.

Light

Electric light is bad for health, and one should maximize one's exposure to natural sunlight, in the interest of health and wellness. Following the rhythms of the sun, both daily and seasonally, is a way to gain back a connection to the primal world.

Modern Technology

Being surrounded by modern technology is a curse of today's existence, and should be limited to its bare minimum, in whatever way possible. Alternatively, it should be used to foment real life relationships, to streamline the use of gadgets, and to save time.

The Fire Circle

The Fire Circle is both symbolic and literal. Not only should one limit one's close social circle to the number that can comfortably be seated around a fire, one should also build one in literal terms, for one's "tribe" to meet at. It is a place of cultural knowledge and exchange, and a place to express ourselves socially. It is a place of music and song, and simple crafts.

The Paleo Diet

The ideal diet of a paleolithic lifestyle is one of no processed foods, emphasizing organic meats, nuts, seeds, fruits and vegetables. One should avoid grains altogether.



Themes

The Modern World vs. The Paleolithic World

The author posits that the Modern World is fundamentally disconnected in many ways from a healthy way of life, and that in order to reconnect, the reader must look at the ways paleolithic peoples might have lived and viewed their surroundings. By incorporating these supposedly paleolithic ways of life, people will become more happy and healthy. The paleolithic way of life is more connected to nature, the immediate present, and the tribe. The paleolithic person does not worry about the past or future too much, and is mindful of what is going on around him. He eats healthy, natural food that is not agriculturally based. He gets regular exercise, and mental and physical stimulation.

The modern way of life is overrun with technological gadgets that keep people from moving around and getting involved in face-to-face relationships. The typical modern person is overwhelmed with emotions about the past and future, eats too many processed foods, and doesn't know how to connect with the natural world. He is rushed, too busy, too oblivious to the world around him, and unable to focus because of constant over-stimulation. He spends far too much time sitting down. It is the author's position that answering one's genetic needs will bring modern people back into balance.

The Importance of Nature

The natural world in all its forms, whether a simple houseplant or pet, or the actual wilderness, is a necessary place of peace that modern people don't take the time to connect with. Modern people need to learn to disconnect from the virtual world and passive electronic entertainments and reconnect with the world of green things and fresh air, for their own physical and mental health. Natural sunlight, outdoor air, organic soil and produce, and even the fire circle are all things modern people need to re-incorporate into their lives. This is not just for mental health reasons, but also for neuro-chemical reasons and immune system requirements.

Relationships

Modern relationships are too far-flung and even non-existent because of the alienation inherent in a mobile population and too much focus on social media rather than face to face interactions. Modern people need to focus on creating a "tribe" of a few close friends and family, extending outward in a limited fashion to a community of positive and encouraging folks. Gigantic friends-lists on social media is not a deeply meaningful way of connecting with others, and should be de-emphasized, while simple community togetherness should be fostered.

Style

Perspective

The author, Mark Sisson, writes in the style of most self-help literature—from the perspective of himself as an authority (with citations of backing documents) to his audience in the second-person ("you") and first person plural ("we"). This is meant to draw the reader in, creating a sense of being included in a group of people being provided with new, transformative knowledge. If the reader follows these prescriptions, then he too will be like the author: enlightened, happy and healthy. There is nearly no mention of women or their perspectives at all in the book, and it quickly becomes fairly obvious that the target audience of Sisson's book is the Western professional, well-off adult male. His advice would be incomprehensible to, for instance, a woman living in sub-Saharan Africa or rural Argentina. Even a person living in the United States who happens to have a blue collar factory job might have trouble relating to his idea of wearing minimalist footwear or the merits of using a standing desk. The overarching idea is that the average modern American is living an unhappy and unhealthy lifestyle, and the author's ideas for how to change that will be life-changing and meaningful.

Tone

The author styles himself as an authority, citing years of research into healthy living and fitness. He offers copious citations of recent research supporting his various prescriptions for a more healthy life, with endnotes of source literature. The language is fairly demanding, and vaguely medicalized, while the ideas themselves tend to be simple. The tone is one of an enlightened person speaking companionably with one who wants to be likewise enlightened.

Structure

The Primal Connection has two beginning sections, an Introduction and a "Recipe for Success," that lay out the primary thesis of the book, with six following chapters called "Connections" offering details on how to achieve the goals of the "paleolithic" lifestyle. There are several pull-out boxed portions within each chapter that address particular problems and solutions. Practical suggestions are offered repeatedly in clear relief. There are End Notes for the author's sources and an alphabetical Index at the end of the book.



Quotes

"It's about getting to the very essence of what makes us human and tapping into our genetic recipe for health, happiness and fulfillment."

(Introduction, p. 10)

"I'm talking about a life of physical challenge but ample leisure. I'm talking about living in smaller groups. I'm talking about play and creativity and getting dirt under our fingernails—a life of the raw senses and an overlapping of the self and the natural environment."

(Introduction, p. 11)

"... the more we live like our evolutionary ancestors, the healthier we are, the more efficient our physiological functioning, the more normalized our hormonal responses, the more health promoting our epigenetic storyline ... and quite likely, the more content, satisfied, and fulfilled we can be."

(Introduction, p. 14)

"Many of the attributes, motivations, and anxieties that characterize our individual lives today have their roots in experiences from thousands, even millions of years ago."

(A Recipe for Success, p. 23)

"In other words, things don't just feel good for no reason. There's always an explanation for it couched in gene expression."

(A Recipe for Success, p. 27)

"When we turn our attention to sensory awareness ... we release the filters and expectations we so often put in the way of living."

(A Recipe for Success, p. 28)

"We worry needlessly over possible future events that exist for now only in our thoughts, and yet they cause us to back off or shut down. In going down these imaginary roads, we entertain thoughts of ingratitude, resentment, self-doubt, depression, and, in some cases, even suicide."

(The Inner Dialogue Connection, p. 42)

"In finally giving up the blame game, we make peace with the complexity and difficulty of life."

(The Inner Dialogue Connection, p. 46)

"Engaging our curiosity is a universal, adaptive human impulse—one that should be encouraged through life."

(The Inner Dialogue Connection, p. 55)

"We evolved to walk, hike, sprint, and even run long distances barefoot."

(The Body Connection, p. 81)

"You connect with your habitat by acting within it, moving within it, and engaging your senses and imagination."

(The Nature Connection, p. 123)

"We are hardwired to solve problems. We aren't, however, hardwired to solve problems amid distractions."

(The Daily Rhythm Connection, p. 158)

"You have a right, and a responsibility, to respect your emotional limits. The relative peace of this moment for one person is as genuine and meaningful as the tragedy befalling another. The world, we must remember, is more than the sum of its crises."

(The Daily Rhythm Connection, p. 166)

"The trick is to turn off your internal autopilot and stay completely present through a succession of mundane activities. Single-tasking, you'll discover, creates space to appreciate nuanced details and find beauty in the moment."

(The Daily Rhythm Connection, p. 174)

"In our attempts to meet the most immediate obligations, we miss filling our most essential needs."

(The Daily Rhythm Connection, p. 177)

"Agriculture no doubt pushed our social limits by forcing us into crowded villages, but it's only recently that our social networks have undergone another, even more drastic shift in size and composition."

(The Social Connection, p. 194)

"In adults, playfulness enhances intimate relationships by encouraging humor, lightheartedness, vulnerability, imagination, and ultimately a sense of connection."

(The Play Connection, p. 215)

Topics for Discussion

What is a "paleolithic" diet? What should it include? What should be eliminated? What is the proper way to exercise "primally"? What is wrong with the typically modern forms of exercise? Explain the connection between human genes, the human brain, and hormones.

What are the "Ten Habits of Highly Effective Hunter-Gatherers"? Give an example of how each habit can be incorporated into a modern life.

What are the three main ways a modern person can get re-acquainted with the primal body? What are some of the benefits of human touch? What are some of the benefits of going barefoot? How can the average modern person improve their posture? What is one method of improving one's workspace?

What are some of the consequences of a modern disconnection from the natural world? Name five practical ways one can reconnect with the natural world, even if one lives in an urban area. Why is it important for people to have regular contact with dirt?

What are some important differences between natural and artificial light? How does light interact with one's sleep patterns? What are some ways to improve our sleep hygiene? What are some ways modern technology impacts our mental and physical health? How can one mitigate those impacts? What are some of the problems with multi-tasking? What is "Slow Living"?

What kinds of relationships are the most meaningful? What are some of the issues inherent in the use of social media? What are five ways one can make more meaningful connections with other people?

Why is play important? What is the difference between play and doing other kinds of tasks? What are some ways modern people can play and get healthy access to thrills?