

Digital Minimalism: Choosing Life in a Hyperconnected World | Cal Newport

February 4th, 2019

INTRODUCTION

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; — Henry David Thoreau

Cal Newport is an associate professor of computer science at Georgetown University. He started blogging at calnewport.com in 2007 while a graduate student at MIT and has authored six books, including *Deep Work* and *So Good They Can't Ignore You*. In recent years, he's been primarily writing about the intersection of technology and society. He is particularly interested in the impact of new technologies on our ability to perform productive work, as well as on our ability to lead interesting and satisfying lives. You won't find him on Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, but you can often find him at home with his family in Washington, DC, or writing essays for his popular website calnewport.com.

"Less is more." — Robert Browning, The Faultless Painter

WHY DO I CARE?

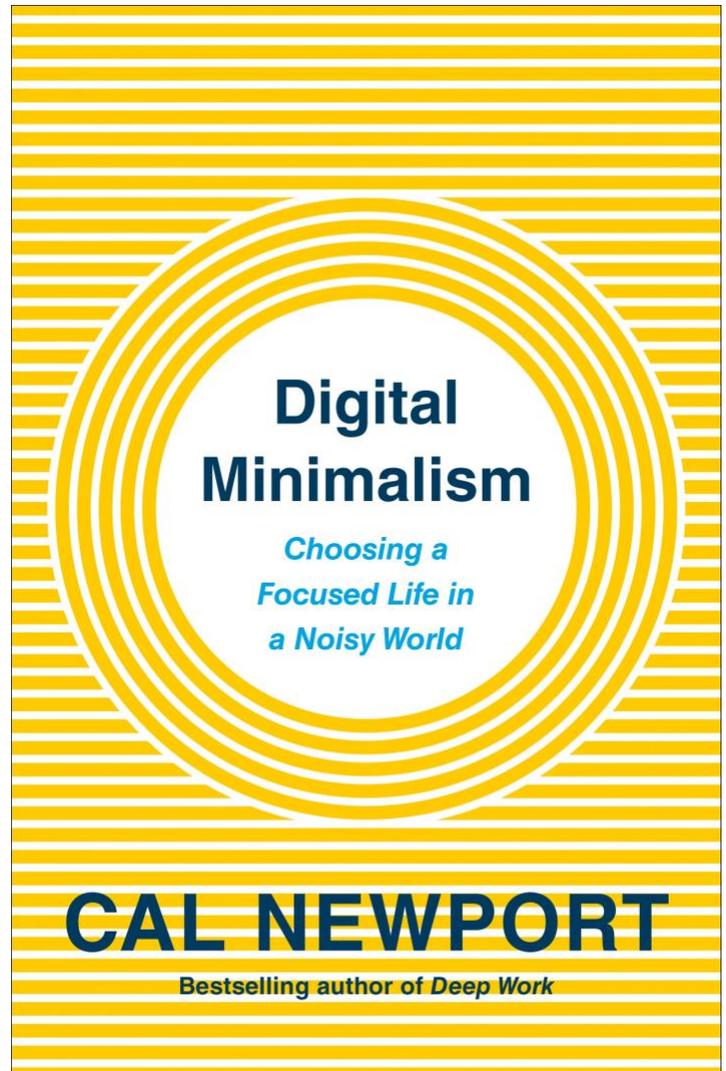
Early Exposure. Then, No Exposure.

I was one of the first kids in my high-school to have broadband, home Internet access, spending countless nights alone in my room, on AOL Instant Messenger, chatting with friends and flirting with girls. Facebook did not come onto the college scene until after I had graduated, however, and with the exception of music sharing applications and online pornography, my early 20's were spent in a fairly analogue way. I read countless books in physical, hardcopy. I chronicled my years living and working in Italy by writing in leather bound journals, collecting receipts, and snapping pictures in film using my 35-80mm Canon SLR. It was not until I started working that I bought my first iPod, having gotten by just fine in college with a Sony Discman.

Immersed in Online Worlds

This all began to change around the time that I started my first company. The video game industry demanded that I embed myself in online worlds, adopting their cultural practices and interfacing with their inhabitants through digital headsets and vibrant LCD screens. I played an endless number of hours of Call of Duty 2, Halo 2, Resistance: Fall of Man, NBA 2K7, and Motor Storm. Still, my immersion into technology did not really begin until after the release of the Apple iPhone. I was one of the very first people I knew who owned one, and as with others, it was the combination of the iPod with the ability to make calls that made the device so attractive to me. Steve Jobs' promise of putting the 'Internet in the palm of your hand' was not even a secondary concern.

In the years since, I have experimented with permitting varying degrees of connectivity into my life. I found that it was never really a question



of technology so much as of connectivity. It is the experience of being “[Alone Together](#),” as Sherry Turkle describes that feeling of loneliness arising from the intense, “always on” connectivity of the digital age that I have found to be the limiting factor in my adoption of new technologies. In some cases, [life-long passions died young when repackaged as online services or social networks](#). A long-time photographer, my obsession with Instagram stopped me from taking pictures altogether. The value was no longer in the picture but in how many likes it could garner. I recently saw a disposable camera in the window of a vintage shop and almost stopped to buy it.

It was not until the summer of 2016 that I realized what the solution was: [disconnecting my phone from the Internet](#). That revelation came to me unexpectedly, as a result of a cracked iPhone 6 screen. As an interim solution, I put my SIM card into my old iPhone 5, only I decided *not* to synch the phone to iCloud (i.e. not to install all my mobile apps, social media, or email). [The phone was technically connected to the Internet in the sense that I could access a browser, but there was no way for the Internet to access me](#). I had regained control over when and how I was to communicate. If I wanted to access social media or to check my email, I needed to be seated in front of my computer, plain and simple. I turned my general purpose computer into an application-specific machine, and [I was fully in charge of what applications could and would run in the background](#).



I only ran this experiment for a few weeks, long enough to appreciate the freedom that untethering myself from the Internet (from being “always on”) allowed. [I learned that I didn’t need to respond to people the moment I got their email or the instant that I read their tweet](#). This behavior filtered through to my use of the telephone and text messages as well. I learned an important lesson about agency, and that I have control over my technology. [But I also learned a more important and ultimately, more durable lesson, that not responding right away or not being “always on” was not the end of the world, and that in fact, it freed me to live my life more authentically](#). [I felt like I had regained a part of myself that had been lost in all the excitement that the smart phone revolution had delivered](#).

My initial reaction to Cal’s book was one of indifference. “Duh,” I thought, “who doesn’t recognize that we should spend less time on our devices? The last thing we need is *another* self-help book!” But as I read on, [I realized that Digital Minimalism is anything but self-help. It is a thoughtful attempt to provide a philosophical foundation for thinking about what matters most \(eudaimonia\) by bringing insights from moral philosophy into the 21st century](#).

My goal in this episode is to illuminate the need for such a philosophy and to [help my listeners gain the tools they need to regain control of their relationship with technology, so that they can learn to focus on what matters most to them](#).



THREE IDEAS ABOUT TECHNOLOGY & SOCIETY

The Deep Work Hypothesis: [The ability to concentrate without distraction on a demanding task is becoming more rare at the same time that it’s becoming more valuable in the knowledge sector](#). As a result, [those individuals and organizations who put in the hard work to cultivate this skill will thrive](#). ([Deep Work by Cal Newport](#))

Digital Minimalism: [The services delivered through your devices have become so alluring and addictive that they can significantly erode the quality of your life and your sense of autonomy](#). Cal Newport’s solution is a philosophy he calls *digital minimalism*. He argues that [you should radically reduce the time you spend online, focusing on a small number of activities chosen because they](#)

Ability to Focus is More Valuable Now Than Ever

support things you deeply value, and then happily miss out on everything else. (*Digital Minimalism* by Cal Newport)

Attention Capital Theory: In knowledge work, the primary capital resource is human brains; or, more specifically, these brains' ability to create new value through sustained attention. At the moment, most organizations and individuals are terrible at optimizing this resource, prioritizing instead the convenience and flexibility of persistent, unstructured messaging (e.g., email and IM). Cal predicts that as this sector evolves, we'll get better at optimizing attention capital, and accordingly leave behind our current culture of communication overload. (Coming soon: "A World Without Email")

Other Ideas: In addition to the three ideas mentioned above, Cal also developed another theory that he called the "Career Capital Theory," which addressed the dilemma that many young people face: how do I build a meaningful and viable career? Cal writes that telling someone to "follow his/her passion" is bad advice if the goal is to end up loving what you do for a living. A more effective strategy is to work deliberately to develop rare and valuable skills, and then use the resulting "career capital" to shape your career into something that truly resonates. In this framework, passion is something you cultivate through hard work, not the starting point in your quest for a satisfying career. (*So Good They Can't Ignore You*)

"Simplicity, Simplicity, Simplicity,"
— Henry David Thoreau

THE PRINCIPLES OF DIGITAL MINIMALISM

What is Digital Minimalism?

Q: What is digital minimalism? What was your goal in writing this book?

Q: What are some of "the forces that are making people's digital lives increasingly intolerable," as you put it in the book?

Principle #1: Thoreau's New Economics. *Clutter is costly.*

Digital minimalists recognize that cluttering their time and attention with too many devices, apps, and services creates an overall negative cost that can swamp the small benefits that each individual item provides in isolation.

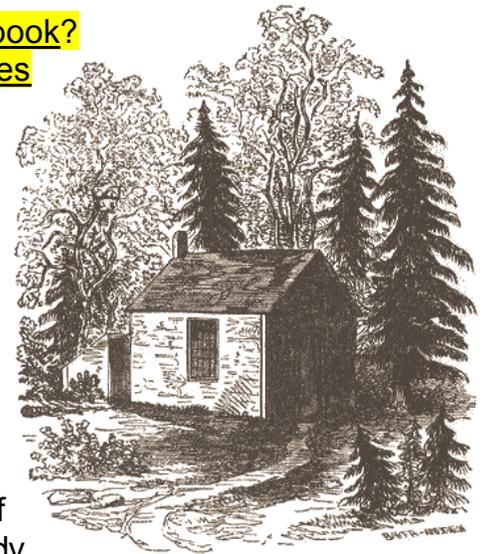
Philosopher Frédéric Gros calls Thoreau's "New Economics," a theory that builds on the following axiom, which Thoreau establishes early in *Walden*: "The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run." Gros writes further, "The striking thing with Thoreau is not the actual content of the argument. After all, sages in earliest Antiquity had already proclaimed their contempt for possessions... what impresses is the form of the argument. For Thoreau's obsession with calculation runs deep... he says: keep calculating, keep weighing. What exactly do I gain, or lose?"

Q: What is an example of this clutter? **Q:** Why did you spend so much time referencing *Walden* and Henry David Thoreau and what is meant by "Thoreau's New Economics?" **Q:** What is meant in Frédéric Gros' point about "weighing" and "calculating?"

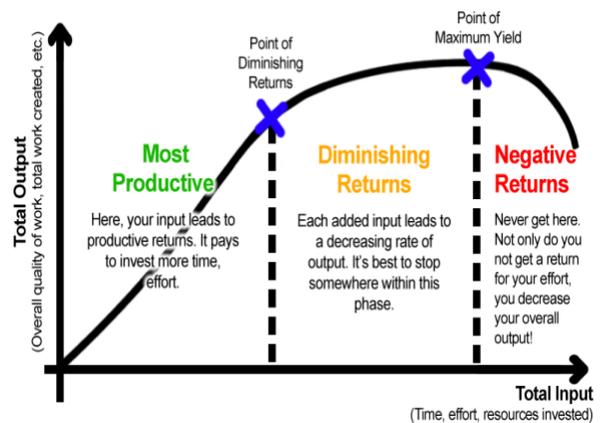
Principle #2: Return Curve. *Optimization is important.*

Digital minimalists believe that deciding that a particular technology supports something they value is only the first step. To truly extract its full potential benefit, it is necessary for them to think carefully about how they will use the technology.

Q: What is 'optimization' and why is it important? **Q:** How does this relate to the concept of



What is the Importance of Weighing and Calculating?



“diminishing returns to scale?” **Q:** What are some examples of optimization in practice? **Q:** How many people have ‘optimized’ and why haven’t more people done this? **Q:** How important is it that these technologies are relatively new (people are only just starting to “get a grip” on them) and that they are marketed as general-use technologies (i.e. they are good for everything and the more you can use them to replace your brain, the better.)

Being selective about your tools will bring you satisfaction. — Cal Newport

Principle #3: Lessons of the Amish Hacker. *Intentionality is satisfying.*

Digital minimalists derive significant satisfaction from their general commitment to being more intentional about how they engage with new technologies. This source of satisfaction is independent of the specific decisions they make and is one of the biggest reasons that minimalism tends to be immensely meaningful to its practitioners. **Q:** What do you mean when you say that the satisfaction that digital minimalists derive from their general commitment to being more intentional about how they engage with new technologies is “independent of the specific decisions they make?” **Q:** Is this because being forced to choose is another way of asking yourself ‘what do I value most?’ **Q:** How much of this is about the consideration that comes with making a decision, and how much of it is about the affirmation of value that comes from making the actual choice (i.e. commitment is proof-positive of agency in a society that seems to value “keeping all your options open.”)

The source of our unease is not evident in these thin-sliced case studies, but instead becomes visible only when confronting the thicker reality of how these technologies as a whole have managed to expand beyond the minor roles for which we initially adopted them. What’s making us uncomfortable, in other words, is this feeling of losing control...It’s not about usefulness, it’s about autonomy. — Cal Newport

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOLITUDE

All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone. — Blaise Pascal

You open your chapter on solitude with an anecdote about Abraham Lincoln and the subtitle, “When Solitude Saved the Nation.” **Q:** What was the Lincoln anecdote and how did ‘solitude save the nation’ as you say? **Q:** What is the importance of solitude? **Q:** What is solitude (how do we define ‘time spent alone?’) **Q:** Why is solitude important? Over the years, as America has become more of a surveillance state and as people have come to see privacy as the luxury of a free society and not a prerequisite for it, I have often wondered if there isn’t something more integral to the maturation of an individual at stake here. In other words, the ability to spend time alone (particularly for the developing child) with our thoughts seems essential for the formation of the western individual. **Q:** Are children particularly in need of solitude? **Q:** Is solitude essential for the development of a healthy ego? **Q:** Was there a critical moment in the breaking of the wall of solitude (you mention the iPod)? **Q:** What role did the iPhone and smartphones play in changing our “time spent alone,” and what sort of research exists that sheds light on this transformation ([Jean Twenge](#)). **Q:** How useful are our phones and how



much of what we use technology for is unnecessary and actually counterproductive? **Q:** How important is socialization? [Research strongly suggests](#) that social media can make us unhappy by taking us away from the type of real-world interaction that we need in order to find joy. **Q:** Why, then, do people so often choose their phones over real-world interaction?

PRACTICING ATTENTION RESISTANCE (THE ATTENTION RESISTANCE MOVEMENT)

In terms of “fighting back” against the forces taking away our solitude, as well as our attention at large, you suggest approaching these networks with what you call “zero-sum antagonism.” **Q:** What is “zero-sum antagonism?” **Q:** What do you mean by one of your suggestions “don’t click like ever and don’t comment ever?” **Q:** What about this thing you call “consolidated texting” and what do you mean by “holding conversation hours?” **Q:** What is the FI (financial independence) 2.0 movement and why is it important?

Practice #1: Delete Social Media from Your Phone

Q: Why is it less important that you have access to social media and more important whether or not you have access to these networks “on the go” as you say?

Practice #2: Turn Your Devices into Single-purpose Computers

Q: What is it about the multi-purpose machine that is so alluring and what is so powerful about limiting these machines to single-purpose?

Q: Is it that our brains are displaced as general purpose machines when we off-load those tasks to another general computer like a smart-phone? **Q:** How much of the allure of the smart-phone as a general purpose machine is a result of our confusing multi-tasking with productivity?

Practice #3: Use Social Media Like a Professional

Q: How do you know that you are using social media as a professional and what does that even mean? **Q:** Is it important to limit your number of connections or the number of people you follow on social media? (Dunbar Number). **Q:** Can we discriminate between social networks when assessing value and is this subjective based on the business? (Twitter vs Facebook or Instagram vs LinkedIn)

Practice #4: Embrace Slow Media

Q: What is the difference between ‘embracing slow media,’ which you say is ‘more European,’ and a ‘low information diet,’ which you say is ‘more American?’

Practice #5: Dumb Down Your Smartphone

Q: Doesn’t this fall into the broader category of turning your device into a single-purpose computer?

THE DIGITAL DECLUTTER PROCESS

Q: What is a “digital declutter?” Can you walk us through the process? How did you come up with

The power of a general-purpose machine is in the total number of things it enables the user to do, not the total number of things it enables the user to do simultaneously. — Cal Newport

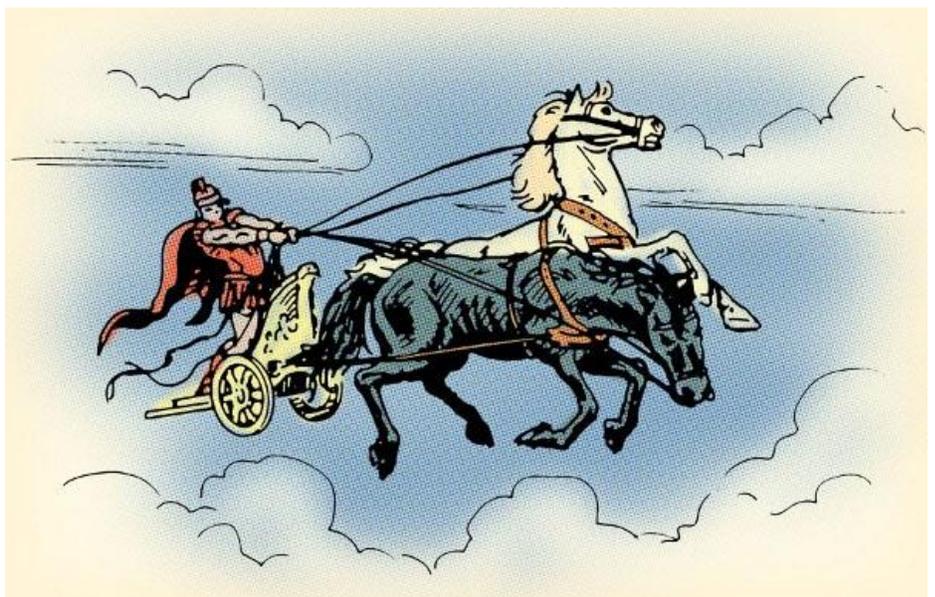


this considering that you've never actually had to do it yourself? Why do you advocate this "rip off the Band-Aid" approach to addictive behavior?

Step #1: Define Your Technology Rules — Put aside a thirty-day period during which you will take a break from optional technologies in your life. The digital declutter focuses primarily on new technologies, which describes apps, sites, and tools delivered through a computer or mobile phone screen. You should probably also include video games and streaming video in this category. Take a thirty-day break from any of these technologies that you deem "optional" — meaning that you can step away from them without creating harm or major problems in either your professional or personal life. In some cases, you'll abstain from using the optional technology altogether, while in other cases you might specify a set of operating procedures that dictate exactly when and how you use the technology during the process. In the end, you're left with a list of banned technologies along with relevant operating procedures. Write this down and put it somewhere where you'll see it every day. Clarity in what you're allowed and not allowed to do during the declutter will prove key to its success.

As Socrates explained to Phaedrus in Plato's famous chariot metaphor, our soul can be understood as a chariot driver struggling to rein in two horses, one representing our better nature and the other our baser impulses. When we increasingly cede autonomy to the digital, we energize the later horse and make the chariot driver's struggle to steer increasingly difficult — a diminishing of our soul's authority. When seen from this perspective, it becomes clear that this is a battle we must fight. But to do so, we need a more serious strategy, something custom built to swat aside the forces manipulating us toward behavioral addictions and that offers a concrete plan about how to put new technologies to use of our best aspirations and not against them. Digital minimalism is one such strategy. — Cal Newport

Step #2: Take a Thirty-Day Break — During this thirty-day break, explore and rediscover activities and behaviors that you find satisfying and meaningful. You will probably find the first week or two of your digital declutter to be difficult, and will fight urges to check technologies you're not allowed to check. These feelings, however, will pass, and this resulting sense of detox will prove useful when it comes time to make clear decisions at the end of the declutter. The goal of a digital declutter, however, is not simply to enjoy time away from intrusive technology. During this month-long process, you must aggressively explore higher-quality activities to fill in the time left vacant by the optional technologies you're avoiding. This period should be one of strenuous activity and experimentation. You want to arrive at the end of the declutter having rediscovered the type of activities that generate real satisfaction, enabling you to confidently craft a better life — one in which technology serves only a supporting role for more meaningful ends. **Q:** Do people who have experienced what life was like without hypoconnectivity (older generations) have a much easier time kicking our addiction? **Q:** What would you say that this process is like for digital natives who have never known a world



Why so Addictive?

without the iPhone? **Q:** What makes our devices so addictive? **Q:** Are they engineered so as to be addictive? **Q:** How is feedback and rewards used? (Positive Reinforcement) **Q:** How important is unpredictability and the drive for social approval? (notifications and the “like” button)

What do I Value?

Step #3: Reintroduce Technology — At the end of the break, reintroduce optional technologies into your life, starting from a blank slate. For each technology you reintroduce, determine what value it serves in your life and how specifically you will use it so as to maximize this value. Ask yourself, “does this technology directly support something that I deeply value?” Your monthlong break from optional technologies resets your digital life. You can now rebuild it from scratch in a much more intentional and minimalist manner. To do so, apply a three-step technology screen to each optional technology you’re thinking about reintroducing. This process will help you cultivate a digital life in which new technologies serve your deeply held values as opposed to subverting them without your permission. It is in this careful reintroduction that you make the intentional decisions that will define you as a digital minimalist.

CULTIVATING LEISURE

Q: What is the importance of cultivating leisure and what does this even mean?

Leisure Lesson #1: Prioritize Demanding Activity Over Passive Consumption

Q: In this section, you cite the “importance of developing a craft” as something that represents a demanding activity. Can you speak more about this? What constitute a craft and how does this fit with our conception of modern life?

Leisure Lesson #2: Use Skills to Produce Valuable Things in the Physical World

Q: What is the difference between lesson #2 and lesson #1?

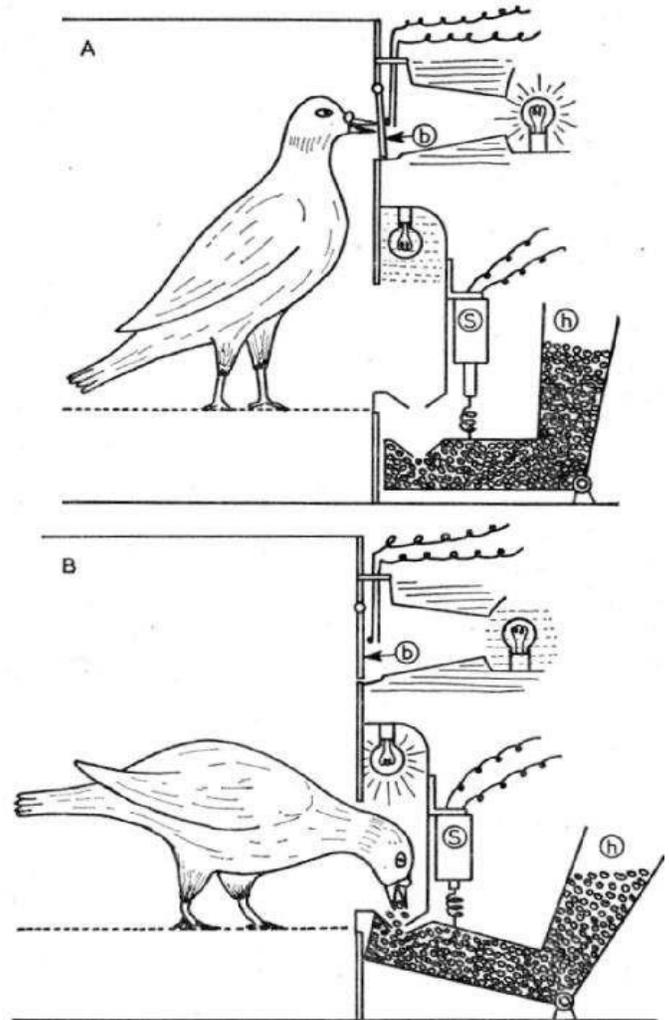
Leisure Lesson #3: Seek Activities that Require Real-world, Structured Social Interactions

PRACTICING LEISURE

Q: What is the importance of each one of these practices? Let’s go through them one-by-one.

1. Fix or Build Something Every Week
2. Schedule Your Low-quality Leisure
3. Join Something
4. Follow Leisure Plans

Q: What is it like to live your life as a digital minimalist? Can you give us some anecdotes of people from your study who transformed their lives? **Q:** What do you mean in the book when you say that digital minimalism is “a philosophy that prioritizes long-term meaning over short-term satisfaction?”



QUOTES:

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation...It is never too late to give up our prejudices. — [Henry David Thoreau](#)

Well every time I check my phone, I'm playing the slot machine to see, "What did I get?" This is one way to hijack people's minds and create a habit, to form a habit. What you do is you make it so when someone pulls a lever, sometimes they get a reward, an exciting reward. And it turns out that this design technique can be embedded inside of all these products. — [Tristan Harris](#), Design Ethicist

The thought process that went into building these applications, Facebook being the first of them, was all about: "How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?" And that means that we need to sort of give you a little dopamine hit every once in a while, because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post or whatever. — [Sean Parker](#), Fmr. President of Facebook

I feel tremendous guilt....In the back, deep, deep recesses of our mind, we kind of knew something bad could happen. — [Chamath Palihapitiya](#), Fmr. Facebook Executive

The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works. No civil discourse. No cooperation. Misinformation. Mistruth. And it's not an American problem. This is not about Russian ads. This is a global problem. So we are in a really bad state of affairs right now, in my opinion. — Chamath Palihapitiya, Fmr. Facebook Executive

The tycoons of social media have to stop pretending that they're friendly nerd gods building a better world and admit that they're just tobacco farmers in T-shirts selling an addictive product to children. Because, let's face it, checking your "likes" is the new smoking...Philip Morris just wanted your lungs. The App Store wants your soul. — [Bill Maher](#)

