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Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World

by Cal Newport

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44 Highlights

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 103

I've become convinced that what you need instead is a full-fledged philosophy of technology use, rooted in your deep values, that provides clear answers to the questions of what tools you should use and how you should use them and, equally important, enables you to confidently ignore everything else.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 113

In this book, you'll encounter many examples of digital minimalists who experienced massively positive changes by ruthlessly reducing their time spent online to focus on a small number of high-value activities. Because digital minimalists spend so much less time connected than their peers, it's easy to think of their lifestyle as extreme, but the minimalists would argue that this perception is backward: what's extreme is how much time everyone else spends staring at their screens. The key to thriving in our high-tech world, they've learned, is to spend much less time using technology.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 145

In Walden, Thoreau famously writes: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." Less often quoted, however, is the optimistic rejoinder that follows in his next paragraph: They honestly think there is no choice left. But alert and healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear. It is never too late to give up our prejudices. Our current relationship with the technologies of our hyper-connected world is unsustainable and is leading us closer to the quiet desperation that Thoreau observed so many years ago. But as Thoreau reminds us, "the sun rose clear" and we still have the ability to change this state of affairs.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 229

Bill Maher ends every episode of his HBO show Real Time with a monologue. The topics are usually political. This was not the case, however, on May 12, 2017, when Maher looked into the camera and said: The tycoons of social media have to stop pretending that they're friendly nerd gods building a better world and admit 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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 298

To many people, addiction is a scary word. In popular culture, it conjures images of drug addicts stealing their mother's jewelry. But to psychologists, addiction has a careful definition that's stripped of these more lurid elements. Here's a representative example: Addiction is a condition in which a person engages in use of a substance or in a behavior for which the rewarding effects provide a compelling incentive to repeatedly pursue the behavior despite detrimental consequences.

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I want to briefly focus on two forces from this longer treatment that not only seemed particularly relevant to our discussion, but as you'll soon learn, repeatedly came up in my own research on how tech companies encourage behavioral addiction: intermittent positive reinforcement and the drive for social approval. Our brains are highly susceptible to these forces. This matters because many of the apps and sites that keep people compulsively checking their smartphones and opening browser tabs often leverage these hooks to make themselves nearly impossible to resist.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 435

Digital Minimalism A philosophy of technology use in which you focus your online time on a small number of carefully selected and optimized activities that strongly support things you value, and then happily miss out on everything else.

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The so-called digital minimalists who follow this philosophy constantly perform implicit cost-benefit analyses. If a new technology offers little more than a minor diversion or trivial convenience, the minimalist will ignore it. Even when a new technology promises to support something the minimalist values, it must still pass a stricter test: Is this the best way to use technology to support this value? If the answer is no, the minimalist will set to work trying to optimize the tech, or search out a better option.

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minimalists don't mind missing out on small things; what worries them much more is diminishing the large things they already know for sure make a good life good.

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The average Facebook user, by contrast, uses the company's products a little over fifty minutes per day.

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A particularly heartwarming example of digital minimalism unlocking new value is the story of Dave, a creative director and father of three. After embracing minimalism, Dave reduced his persistent social media use down to

only a single service, Instagram, which he felt offered significant benefits to his deep interest in art. In true minimalist fashion, however, Dave didn't settle for simply deciding to "use" Instagram; he instead thought hard about how best to integrate this tool into his life. In the end, he settled on posting one picture every week of whatever personal art project he happens to be working on. "It's a great way for me to have a visual archive of my projects," he explained. He also follows only a small number of accounts, all of which belong to artists whose work inspires him—making the experience of checking his feed both fast and meaningful. The reason I like Dave's story, however, is what was enabled by his decision to significantly cut back on how much he uses these services. As Dave explained to me, his own father wrote him a handwritten note every week during his freshman year of college. Still touched by this gesture, Dave began a habit of drawing a new picture every night to place in his oldest daughter's lunchbox. His two youngest children watched this ritual with interest. When they became old enough for lunchboxes, they were excited to start receiving their daily drawings as well. "Fast-forward a couple of years, and I'm spending a decent chunk of time every night doing three drawings!" Dave told me with obvious pride. "This wouldn't have been possible if I didn't protect how I spend my time."

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 514

Before I can ask you to experiment with digital minimalism in your own life, however, I must first provide you with a more thorough explanation for why it works. My argument for this philosophy's effectiveness rests on the following three core principles: Principle #1: 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. Principle #2: Optimization is important. Digital minimalists believe that deciding a particular technology supports something they value is only the first step. To truly extract its full potential benefit, it's necessary to think carefully about how they'll use the technology. Principle #3: 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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 536

Over the ensuing decades, as Thoreau's ideas diffused through pop culture and people became less likely to confront his actual text, his experiment at Walden Pond has taken on a poetic tinge. (Indeed, the passion-seeking boarding school students in 1989's Dead Poets Society open their secret poetry reading meetings by reciting the "deliberate living" quote from Walden.) Thoreau, we imagine, was seeking to be transformed by the subjective experience of living deliberately—planning to walk out of the woods changed by transcendence. There's truth to this interpretation, but it misses a whole other side to Thoreau's experiment. He had also been working out a new theory of economics that attempted to push back against the worst dehumanizing effects of industrialization. To help validate his theory, he needed more data, and his time spent by the pond was designed in large part to become a source of this needed information. It's important for our purposes to understand this more pragmatic side to Walden, as Thoreau's often overlooked economic theory provides a powerful justification for our first principle of minimalism: that more can be less.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 561

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."

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 582

When people consider specific tools or behaviors in their digital lives, they tend to focus only on the value each produces. Maintaining an active presence on Twitter, for example, might occasionally open up an interesting new connection or expose you to an idea you hadn't heard before.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 597

This is why clutter is dangerous. It's easy to be seduced by the small amounts of profit offered by the latest app or service, but then forget its cost in terms of the most important resource we possess: the minutes of our life.

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These observations dismiss the popular belief that the Amish reject all new technologies. So what's really going on here? The Amish, it turns out, do something that's both shockingly radical and simple in our age of impulsive and complicated consumerism: they start with the things they value most, then work backward to ask whether a given new technology performs more harm than good with respect to these values. As Kraybill elaborates, they confront the following questions: "Is this going to be helpful or is it going to be detrimental? Is it going to bolster our life together, as a community, or is it going to somehow tear it down?"

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 834

Another borderline case is television—which, in an age of streaming, is a vague term that can cover many different visual entertainments. Prior to the mass declutter experiment, I was somewhat ambivalent as to whether streaming Netflix, and its equivalents, was something to consider as a potentially optional technology. The feedback I received from participants, however, was near unequivocal: You should. As a management consultant named Kate told me: "I have so many ideas I'd like to implement, but every time I [sat] down to work on them, somehow Netflix [appeared] on my screen." These technologies, participants like Kate insisted, should be included when defining your personal declutter rules.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 853

More importantly, the inconvenience might prove useful. Losing lightweight contact with your international friends might help clarify which of these friendships were real in the first place, and strengthen your relationships with those who remain. This is exactly what happened with Anya, a participant in my experiment who is from Belarus but is currently studying at an American university. As she told the New York Times in an article about my experiment, taking a break from online socializing with her international friends helped her "feel more invested in the time I spend with people. . . . Because we [interacted] less frequently, we [had] this

idea that we want to make the most of the experience.” A college sophomore named Kushboo put it even simpler when he told me: “In a nutshell, I only lost touch with people I didn’t need (or, in some cases, didn’t even want) to be constantly in touch with.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 889

Now that you have defined your technology rules, the next step of the digital declutter is to follow these rules for thirty days.* You’ll likely find life without optional technologies challenging at first. Your mind has developed certain expectations about distractions and entertainment, and these expectations will be disrupted when you remove optional technologies from your daily experience. This disruption can feel unpleasant.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 899

A young management consultant named Daria admitted that during the first days of the experiment she would compulsively pull out her phone before realizing she had removed all of the social media and news apps. The only thing left on her phone that she could check for new information was the weather. “In that first week,” she told me, “I knew the hourly weather conditions in three to four different cities”—the compulsion to browse something was too strong to ignore. After two weeks, however, she reported: “I lost almost any interest [in checking things online].”

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 903

This detox experience is important because it will help you make smarter decisions at the end of the declutter when you reintroduce some of these optional technologies to your life. A major reason that I recommend taking an extended break before trying to transform your digital life is that without the clarity provided by detox, the addictive pull of the technologies will bias your decisions. If you decide to reform your relationship with Instagram right this moment, your decisions about what role it should play in your life will likely be much weaker than if you instead spend thirty days without the service before making these choices.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 936

Like several other parents who participated in my experiment, Tarald invested his newfound time and attention in his family. He was unhappy with how distracted he was when spending time with his sons. He told me about how, on the playground, when they would come seeking recognition for something they figured out and were proud of, he wouldn’t notice, as his attention was on his phone. “I started thinking about how many of these small victories I miss out on because I feel this ridiculous need to check the news for the umpteenth time,” he told me. During his declutter he rediscovered the satisfaction of spending real time with his boys instead of just spending time near them with his eyes on the screen. He noted how surreal it can feel to be the only parent at the playground who is not looking down.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1016

The day the declutter was over, I raced back to Facebook, to my old blogs, to Discord, gleeful and ready to dive back in—and then, after about thirty minutes of aimless browsing, I kind of looked up and thought . . . why am I

doing this? This is . . . boring? This isn't bringing me any kind of happiness. It took a declutter for me to notice that these technologies aren't actually adding anything to my life.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1081

Against this backdrop of bustle, Lincoln's decision to spend almost half the year escaping the White House, setting out each night to make the long horseback commute to the quiet cottage at the Soldiers' Home, makes sense. The cottage provided Lincoln something we now see would have been almost impossible to obtain in the White House: time and space to think.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1132

Soon after their initial meeting, Kethledge and Erwin decided to co-write a book on the topic of solitude. It took them seven years, but their efforts culminated in the 2017 release of *Lead Yourself First*. The book summarizes, with the tight logic you expect from a federal judge and former military officer, the authors' case for the importance of being alone with your thoughts. Before outlining their case, however, the authors start with what is arguably one of their most valuable contributions, a precise definition of solitude. Many people mistakenly associate this term with physical separation—requiring, perhaps, that you hike to a remote cabin miles from another human being. This flawed definition introduces a standard of isolation that can be impractical for most to satisfy on any sort of a regular basis. As Kethledge and Erwin explain, however, solitude is about what's happening in your brain, not the environment around you. Accordingly, they define it to be a subjective state in which your mind is free from input from other minds.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1188

Harris argues, perhaps counterintuitively, that “the ability to be alone . . . is anything but a rejection of close bonds,” and can instead affirm them. Calmly experiencing separation, he argues, builds your appreciation for interpersonal connections when they do occur. Harris is not the first to note this connection. The poet and essayist May Sarton explored the strangeness of this point in a 1972 diary entry, writing: I am here alone for the first time in weeks, to take up my “real” life again at last. That is what is strange—that friends, even passionate love, are not my real life unless there is time alone in which to explore and to discover what is happening or has happened. Without the interruptions, nourishing and maddening, this life would become arid. Yet I taste it fully only when I am alone . . . Wendell Berry summarized this point more succinctly when he wrote: “We enter solitude, in which also we lose loneliness.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1198

Examples similar to those given above are voluminous and point to a clear conclusion: regular doses of solitude, mixed in with our default mode of sociality, are necessary to flourish as a human being. It's more urgent now than ever that we recognize this fact, because, as I'll argue next, for the first time in human history solitude is starting to fade away altogether.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1245

Solitude Deprivation A state in which you spend close to zero time alone with your own thoughts and free from input from other minds.

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As part of his reporting, Denizet-Lewis interviewed Jean Twenge, who made it clear that she didn't set out to implicate the smartphone: "It seemed like too easy an explanation for negative mental-health outcomes in teens," but it ended up the only explanation that fit the timing. Lots of potential culprits, from stressful current events to increased academic pressure, existed before the spike in anxiety that begins around 2011. The only factor that dramatically increased right around the same time as teenage anxiety was the number of young people owning their own smartphones. "The use of social media and smartphones look culpable for the increase in teen mental-health issues," she told Denizet-Lewis. "It's enough for an arrest—and as we get more data, it might be enough for a conviction." To emphasize the urgency of this investigation, Twenge titled her article in the Atlantic with a blunt question: "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" Returning to our canary-in-the-coal-mine analogy, the plight of iGen provides a strong warning about the danger of solitude deprivation. When an entire cohort unintentionally eliminated time alone with their thoughts from their lives, their mental health suffered dramatically. On reflection, this makes sense. These teenagers have lost the ability to process and make sense of their emotions, or to reflect on who they are and what really matters, or to build strong relationships, or even to just allow their brains time to power down their critical social circuits, which are not meant to be used constantly, and to redirect that energy to other important cognitive housekeeping tasks. We shouldn't be surprised that these absences lead to malfunctions.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1317

Simply put, humans are not wired to be constantly wired.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1453

In short, I would be lost without my walks because they've become one of my best sources of solitude. This practice proposes that you'll find similar benefits by spending more time alone on your feet. The details of this practice are simple: On a regular basis, go for long walks, preferably somewhere scenic. Take these walks alone, which means not just by yourself, but also, if possible, without your phone. If you're wearing headphones, or monitoring a text message chain, or, God forbid, narrating the stroll on Instagram—you're not really walking, and therefore you're not going to experience this practice's greatest benefits. If you cannot abandon your phone for logistical reasons, then put it at the bottom of a backpack so you can use it in an emergency but cannot easily extract it at the first hint of boredom. (If you're worried about not having your phone, see the discussion on this topic in the preceding practice.)

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1508

Earlier in this chapter, I introduced Raymond Kethledge and Michael Erwin's definition of solitude as time spent alone with your own thoughts and free from inputs from other minds. Writing a letter to yourself is an excellent

mechanism for generating exactly this type of solitude. It not only frees you from outside inputs but also provides a conceptual scaffolding on which to sort and organize your thinking.

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The explanation for these results is that rock paper scissors, contrary to initial assumption, requires strategy. What separates advanced players like the Brain, Land Shark, and Master Roshambollah from RPS mortals, however, is not a tediously memorized sequence of plays, or statistical wizardry, it's instead their sophisticated grasp of a much broader topic: human psychology. A strong rock paper scissors player integrates a rich stream of information about their opponent's body language and recent plays to help approximate their opponent's mental state and therefore make an educated guess about the next play. These players will also use subtle movements and phrases to prime their opponent to think about a certain play. The opponent, however, might notice the priming attempt and adjust their play accordingly. Of course, the original player might expect this, and execute a tertiary adjustment, and so on. It should come as no surprise that participants in rock paper scissors tournaments often describe the experience as exhausting.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1619

These experiments represent only some key highlights among many from a vast social cognitive neuroscience literature that all point to the same conclusion: humans are wired to be social. In other words, Aristotle was on the right track when he called us social animals, but it took the modern invention of advanced brain scanners to help us figure out how much he was likely understating this reality.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1690

The problem, then, is not that using social media directly makes us unhappy. Indeed, as the positive studies cited above found, certain social media activities, when isolated in an experiment, modestly boost well-being. The key issue is that using social media tends to take people away from the real-world socializing that's massively more valuable. As the negative studies imply, the more you use social media, the less time you tend to devote to offline interaction, and therefore the worse this value deficit becomes—leaving the heaviest social media users much more likely to be lonely and miserable. The small boosts you receive from posting on a friend's wall or liking their latest Instagram photo can't come close to compensating for the large loss experienced by no longer spending real-world time with that same friend. As Shakya summarizes: "Where we want to be cautious . . . is when the sound of a voice or a cup of coffee with a friend is replaced with 'likes' on a post."

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1724

Going forward, I want to borrow some useful phrasing from MIT professor Sherry Turkle, a leading researcher on the subjective experience of technology. In her 2015 book, *Reclaiming Conversation*, Turkle draws a distinction between connection, her word for the low-bandwidth interactions that define our online social lives, and conversation, the much richer, high-bandwidth communication that defines real-world encounters between humans. Turkle agrees with our premise that conversation is crucial: Face-to-face conversation is the most human—and humanizing—thing we do. Fully present to one another, we learn to listen. It's where we develop the capacity for empathy. It's where we experience the joy of being heard, of being understood.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1746

I share Turkle's optimism that there's a minimalist solution to this problem, but I'm more pessimistic about the magnitude of effort required. Toward the end of her book, Turkle offers a series of recommendations, which center in large part on the idea of making more space in your life for quality conversation. The objective of this recommendation is faultless, but its effectiveness is questionable. As argued earlier in this chapter, digital communication tools, if used without intention, have a way of forcing a trade-off between conversation and connection. If you don't first reform your relationship with tools like social media and text messaging, attempts to shoehorn more conversation into your life are likely to fail. It can't simply be digital business as usual augmented with more time for authentic conversation—the shift in behavior will need to be more fundamental.

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To be clear, conversation-centric communication requires sacrifices. If you adopt this philosophy, you'll almost certainly reduce the number of people with whom you have an active relationship. Real conversation takes time, and the total number of people for which you can uphold this standard will be significantly less than the total number of people you can follow, retweet, "like," and occasionally leave a comment for on social media, or ping with the occasional text. Once you no longer count the latter activities as meaningful interaction, your social circle will seem at first to contract. This sense of contraction, however, is illusory. As I have argued throughout this chapter, conversation is the good stuff; it's what we crave as humans and what provides us with the sense of community and belonging necessary to thrive. Connection, on the other hand, though appealing in the moment, provides very little of what we need.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1795

In her book, Sherry Turkle summarizes research that found just five days at a camp with no phones or internet was enough to induce major increases in the campers' well-being and sense of connection. It won't take many walks with a friend, or pleasantly meandering phone calls, before you begin to wonder why you previously felt it was so important to turn away from the person sitting right in front of you to leave a comment on your cousin's friend's Instagram feed.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1829

Earlier, I cited extensive research that supports the claim that the human brain has evolved to process the flood of information generated by face-to-face interactions. To replace this rich flow with a single bit is the ultimate insult to our social processing machinery. To say it's like driving a Ferrari under the speed limit is an understatement; the better simile is towing a Ferrari behind a mule.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1853

The idea that it's valuable to maintain vast numbers of weak-tie social connections is largely an invention of the past decade or so—the detritus of overexuberant network scientists spilling inappropriately into the social sphere. Humans have maintained rich and fulfilling social lives for our entire history without needing the ability to send a few bits of information each month to people we knew briefly during high school. Nothing about your

life will notably diminish when you return to this steady state. As an academic who studies and teaches social media explained to me: “I don’t think we’re meant to keep in touch with so many people.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1878

This practice suggests that you keep your phone in Do Not Disturb mode by default. On both iPhones and Android devices, for example, this mode turns off notifications when text messages arrive. If you’re worried about emergencies, you can easily adjust the settings so calls from a selected list (your spouse, your kid’s school) do come through. You can also set a schedule that turns the phone to this mode automatically during predetermined times. When you’re in this mode, text messages become like emails: if you want to see if anyone has sent you something, you must turn on your phone and open the app. You can now schedule specific times for texting—consolidated sessions in which you go through the backlog of texts you received since the last check, sending responses as needed and perhaps even having some brief back-and-forth interaction before apologizing that you have to go, turning the phone back to Do Not Disturb mode, and continuing with your day.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1897

Being less available over text, in other words, has a way of paradoxically strengthening your relationship even while making you (slightly) less available to those you care about. This point is crucial because many people fear that their relationships will suffer if they downgrade this form of lightweight connection. I want to reassure you that it will instead strengthen the relationships you care most about. You can be the one person in their life who actually talks to them on a regular basis, forming a deeper, more nuanced relationship than any number of exclamation points and bitmapped emojis can provide.

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