

COACHING *for* LEADERS

Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life

by Nir Eyal

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Dave's Reading Highlights

One particular day, the two of us played games from an activity book. We turned to a page and answered questions designed to bring dads and daughters closer together. The first activity involved naming each other's favorite things. The next project was to build a paper airplane with one of the pages. The third was a question we both had to answer. The question was: "If you could have any superpower, what would it be?" I wish I could tell you what my daughter said at that moment, but I can't. I have no idea because I wasn't really there. I was physically in the room, but my mind was elsewhere. "Daddy?" she said. "What would your superpower be?" "Huh?" I grunted. "Just a second. I just need to respond to this one thing." I dismissed her as I attended to something on my phone. My eyes were still glued to my screen, fingers tapping away at something that seemed important at the time but could definitely have waited. She went quiet. By the time I looked up, she was gone. I had just blown a magical moment with my daughter because something on my phone had grabbed my attention.

Imagine a line that represents the value of everything you do throughout your day. To the right, the actions are positive; to the left, they are negative. On the right side of the continuum is "traction,"

which comes from the Latin *trahere*, meaning to draw or pull. We can think of traction as the actions that draw us toward what we want in life. On the left side is “distraction,” the opposite of traction. With the same Latin root, the word means the “drawing away of the mind.”³ Distractions impede us from making progress toward the life we envision.

Unless we deal with the root causes of our distraction, we'll continue to find ways to distract ourselves. Distraction, it turns out, isn't about the distraction itself; rather, it's about how we respond to it.

If distraction costs us time, then time management is pain management.

Let's begin with the first factor: boredom. The lengths people will go to avoid boredom is shocking, sometimes literally. A 2014 study published in *Science* asked participants to sit in a room and think for fifteen minutes.⁴ The room was empty except for a device that allowed the participant to mildly but painfully electrocute themselves. “Why would anyone want to do that?” you might ask. When asked beforehand, every participant in the study said they would pay to avoid being shocked. However, when left alone in the room with the machine and nothing else to do, 67 percent of men and 25 percent of women shocked themselves, and many did so multiple times. The study authors conclude their paper by saying, “People prefer doing to thinking, even if what they are doing is so unpleasant that they would normally pay to avoid it. The untutored mind does not like to be alone with itself.” It's no surprise, therefore, that most of the top twenty-five websites in America sell escape from our daily drudgery, whether through shopping, celebrity gossip, or bite-sized doses of social interaction.

In a study, participants who were told to avoid thinking of a white bear for five minutes did so on average once per minute, just as Dostoevsky predicted. But there was more to Wegner's study. When the same group was told to try and conjure the white bear, they did so much more often than a group who hadn't been asked to suppress the thought. “The results suggested that suppressing the thought for

the first five minutes caused it to ‘rebound’ even more prominently into the participants’ minds later,” according to an article in *Monitor on Psychology*. Wegner later dubbed this tendency “ironic process theory” to explain why it’s so difficult to tame intruding thoughts. The “ironic” part of the ironic process theory is the fact that relief of the tension of wanting makes relieving it all the more rewarding, and therefore habit-forming. An endless cycle of resisting, ruminating, and finally giving in to the desire, perpetuates the cycle and quite possibly drives many of our unwanted behaviors.

When the flight attendants flying to New York were above the Atlantic Ocean, they reported weak cravings. Meanwhile, at the exact same moment, the cravings of their colleagues who had just landed in Europe were at their strongest. What was going on? The New York-bound flight attendants knew they could not smoke in the middle of a flight without being fired. Only later, when they approached their destination, did they report the greatest desire to smoke. It appeared the duration of the trip and the time since their last cigarette didn’t affect the level of the flight attendants’ cravings. What affected their desire was not how much time had passed after a smoke, but how much time was left before they could smoke again. 4 If, as this study suggests, a craving for something as addictive as nicotine can be manipulated in this way, why can’t we trick our brains into mastering other unhealthy desires? Thankfully, we can!

Rather than trying to fight the urge, we need new methods to handle intrusive thoughts. The following four steps help us do just that: Step 1: Look for the discomfort that precedes the distraction, focusing in on the internal trigger. Step 2: Write down the trigger. Step 3: Explore your sensations. Step 4: Beware of liminal moments.

By reimagining an uncomfortable internal trigger, we can disarm it. ● Step 1. Look for the emotion preceding distraction. ● Step 2. Write down the internal trigger. ● Step 3. Explore the negative sensation with curiosity instead of contempt. ● Step 4. Be extra cautious during liminal moments.

Bogost tells us that, “fun is the aftermath of deliberately manipulating a familiar situation in a new way.” The answer, therefore, is to focus on the task itself. Instead of running away from our pain or using rewards like prizes and treats to help motivate us, the idea is to pay such close attention that you find new challenges you didn’t see before. Those new challenges provide the novelty to engage our attention and maintain focus when tempted by distraction.

Bogost gives the example of mowing his lawn. “It may seem ridiculous to call an activity like this ‘fun,’” he writes, yet he learned to love it. Here’s how: “First, pay close, foolish, even absurd attention to things.” For Bogost, he soaked up as much information as he could about the way grass grows and how to treat it. Then, he created an “imaginary playground in which the limitations . . . produce[d] meaningful experiences.” He learned about the constraints he had to operate under, including his local weather conditions and what different kinds of equipment can and can’t do. Operating under constraints, Bogost says, is the key to creativity and fun. Finding the optimal path for the mower or beating a record time are other ways to create an imaginary playground.

We can master internal triggers by reimagining an otherwise dreary task. Fun and play can be used as tools to keep us focused. ● Play doesn’t have to be pleasurable. It just has to hold our attention. ● Deliberateness and novelty can be added to any task to make it fun.

An addict’s belief regarding their powerlessness was just as significant in determining whether they would relapse after treatment as their level of physical dependence. Just let that sink in—mindset mattered more than physical dependence! What we say to ourselves is vitally important. Labeling yourself as having poor self-control actually leads to less self-control. ¹³ Rather than telling ourselves we failed because we’re somehow deficient, we should offer self-compassion by speaking to ourselves with kindness when we experience setbacks.

Several studies have found people who are more self-compassionate experience a greater sense of well-being. A 2015 review of seventy-

nine studies looking at the responses of over sixteen thousand volunteers found that people who have “a positive and caring attitude ... toward her- or himself in the face of failures and individual shortcomings” tend to be happier. 14 Another study found that people’s tendency to selfblame, along with how much they ruminated on a problem, could almost completely mediate the most common factors associated with depression and anxiety. 15 An individual’s level of self-compassion had a greater effect on whether they would develop anxiety and depression than all the usual things that tend to screw up people’s lives, like traumatic life events, a family history of mental illness, low social status, loneliness, or a lack of social support.

Reimagining our temperament can help us manage our internal triggers. ● We don’t run out of willpower. Believing we do makes us less likely to accomplish our goals, by providing a rationale to quit when we could otherwise persist. ● What we say to ourselves matters. Labeling yourself as having poor self-control is self-defeating. ● Practice self-compassion. Talk to yourself the way you’d talk to a friend. People who are more self-compassionate are more resilient.

Seneca, the Roman Stoic philosopher, wrote, “People are frugal in guarding their personal property; but as soon as it comes to squandering time, they are most wasteful of the one thing in which it is right to be stingy.” 2 Though Seneca was writing more than two thousand years ago, his words are just as applicable today. As he noted, people protect their property in all sorts of wayslocks, security systems, and storage units—but most do little to protect their time. A study by PPAI Research found only a third of Americans keep a daily schedule, 3 which means the vast majority wake up every morning with no formal plans. Our most precious asset—our time—is unguarded, just waiting for someone to steal it. If we don’t plan our day, someone else will.

You can’t call something a distraction unless you know what it’s distracting you from.

The most effective way to make time for traction is through timeboxing. Timeboxing uses a well-researched technique psychologists call, “setting an implementation intention,” which is a fancy way of saying, “deciding what you're going to do, and when you're going to do it.”⁸ It's a technique that can be used to make time for traction in each of your life domains. The goal is to eliminate all white space in your calendar so you're left with a template for how you intend to spend your time each day.

Working our way toward a more equitable split of the housework restored integrity to my value of equality in my marriage, which also improved the odds of having a long and happy relationship. Lockman's research supports this benefit, stating, “A growing body of research in family and clinical studies demonstrates that spousal equality promotes marital success and that inequality undermines it.”

Other times, we (perhaps unconsciously) sabotage our companies by doing pseudowork, tasks that look like work but aren't in line with the company's top priorities. (Think: spending time on pet projects, corporate politicking, sending more emails, or holding more meetings than necessary.) This sort of pushback seems to increase when people work more hours. In fact, studies have found that workers who spend more than fifty-five hours per week on the job have reduced productivity; this problem is further compounded by their making more mistakes and inflicting more useless work on their colleagues, resulting in getting even less done in more time.

When she sat down with David, she realized many of the commitments clogging her calendar weren't nearly as important to him as the time she spent closing deals. Thanks to their newfound alignment, David agreed she didn't need to attend so many meetings or mentor so many people and reassured her that this would not adversely affect her career ambitions, as long as she put in the time for her most important task: increasing revenue.

The Fogg Behavior Model states that for a behavior (B) to occur, three things must be present at the same time: motivation (M), ability (A), and a trigger (T). More simply, B=MAT. “Motivation” is “the energy for

action,” according to Dr Edward Deci, professor of psychology at the University of Rochester. 4 When we’re highly motivated, we have a strong desire, or energy, to take an action, and when we’re not motivated, we lack the energy to perform a task. Meanwhile, “ability”, in Fogg’s formula, relates to how difficult or easy a behavior is to do. The harder something is to do, the less likely people are to do it. Conversely, the easier something is to do, the more likely we are to do it. When a person has sufficient motivation and ability, they’re primed to do a behavior. However, without the critical third component, the behavior will not occur. A trigger to tell us what to do next is always required. We discussed internal triggers in a previous section, but when it comes to the products we use every day and the interruptions that lead to distraction, external triggers—stimuli in our environment that prompt us to actplay a big role.

Whether it’s a vest, a screen sign, or a light-up crown, the way to reduce unwanted external triggers from other people is to display a clear signal that you do not want to be interrupted. Doing so will help colleagues or family members pause and assess their own behaviors before they break your concentration.

Lest you think email time is well spent, researchers have concluded that an astonishing number of workplace emails are an utter waste. “We estimate that 25 percent of that time is consumed reading emails that should not have been sent ... and 25 per cent is spent responding to emails that ... should never have [been] answered,” the researchers wrote in the Harvard Business Review. 13 In other words, about half the time we spend on email is as productive as counting cracks in the ceiling.

There’s mounting evidence that processing your email in batches is much more efficient and less stress inducing than checking it throughout the day. 18 This is because our brains take time to switch between tasks, so it’s better to focus on answering emails all at once. I know what you’re thinking—you can’t wait all day to check email. I understand. I too need to check my inbox to make sure there’s nothing truly urgent. Checking email isn’t so much the problem; it’s the habitual rechecking that gets us in trouble. See if this sounds

familiar: An icon tells you that you have an email, so you click and scroll through your inbox. While there, you read message after message to see if anything requires a reply. Later in the day, you open your inbox and, forgetting what was in the messages you read earlier, you reopen them once again. If you're anything like I used to be, you might open and reopen some messages an embarrassing number of times. What a waste!

The solution to this mania is simple: only touch each email twice. The first time we open an email, only do one thing before closing it: Answer this question, "When does this email require a response?" Tagging each email as either "Today" or "This Week," attaches the most important information to each new message, preparing it for the second (and last) time we open it. Of course, for super urgent, email-me-right-now-type messages, go ahead and respond, while messages that don't need a response at all should be deleted or archived immediately. Note that I'm not telling you to tag emails by topic or categories, only by when the message requires a response. Tagging emails in this way frees your mind from distraction because you know you'll reply during the time you've specifically allocated for this purpose in your timeboxed schedule. In my case, I give my inbox a quick perusal before my morning coffee. Tagging each new email by when it requires a reply takes no more than ten minutes. It gives me peace of mind to know nothing will fall through the cracks. I can leave those messages alone and do focused work until it's time to reply.