***Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World***

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**Introduction**

In September 2016, the influential blogger and commentator Andrew Sullivan wrote a 7,000-word essay for *New York* magazine titled, “I Used to Be a Human Being.” Its subtitle was alarming: “An endless bombardment of news and gossip and images has rendered us manic information addicts. It broke me. It might break you, too.”

I'm one of the few members of my generation to never have a social media account, and tend not to spend much time web surfing. As a result, my phone plays a relatively minor role in my life- a fact that places me outside the mainstream experience this article addressed. In other words, I knew that the innovations of the Internet age were playing an increasingly intrusive role in many people's lives, but I didn't have a *visceral* understanding of what this meant. That is, until everything changed.

Earlier in 2016, I published a book titled *Deep Work*. It was about the underappreciated value of intense focus and how the professional world's emphasis on distracting communication tools was holding people back from producing their best work. As my book found an audience, I began to hear from more and more of my readers. Some sent me messages, while others cornered me after public appearances- but many of them asked the same question: What about their personal lives? They agreed with my argument about office distractions, but as they then explained, they were arguably even more distressed by the way new technologies seem to be draining meaning and satisfaction from their time spent outside of work. This caught my attention and tumbled me unexpectantly and to a crash course on the promises and perils of modern digital life.

A common term I heard in these conversations about modern digital life was *exhaustion*. As many people clarified, the issue was the overall impact of having *so many* different shiny baubles pulling so insistently at their attention and manipulating their mood. Their problem with this frenzied activity it's less about its details than the fact that it's increasingly beyond their control. Few want to spend so much time online, but these tools have a way of cultivating behavioral addictions.

Some of these addictive properties are accidental (few predicted the extent to which text messaging could command your attention), while many are quite purposeful (compulsive use is the foundation for many social media business plans). But whatever its source, this irresistible attraction to screens is leading people to feel as though they’re ceding more and more of their autonomy when it comes to deciding how they direct their attention. They joined Facebook to stay in touch with friends across the country, and then ended up unable to maintain an uninterrupted conversation with the friend sitting across the table.

I also learned about the negative impact of unrestricted online activity on psychological well-being. Many people I spoke to underscored social media's ability to manipulate their mood. The constant exposure to their friends’ carefully curated portrayals of their lives generates feelings of inadequacy- especially during periods when they're already feeling low- and for teenagers, it provides a cruelly effective way to be publicly excluded.

People are tired of feeling like they've become a slave to their devices. This reality creates a jumbled emotional landscape where you can simultaneously cherish your ability to discover inspiring photos on Instagram while fretting about this app's ability to invade the evening hours you used to spend talking with friends or reading.

In my work on this topic, 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.

There are many philosophes that might satisfy these goals. On one extreme, there are the Neo-Luddites, who advocate the abandonment of most new technologies. On another extreme, you have the Qualified Self enthusiasts, who carefully integrate digital devices into all aspects of their life with the goal of optimizing their existence. Of the different philosophies I studied, however, there was one in particular that stood out as a superior answer for those looking to thrive in our current moment of technological overload. I call it *digital minimalism*, and it applies to the belief that *less can be more* to our relationship with digital tools.

Because digital minimalists spend so much less time connected than their peers, it's easy to think of their lifestyle as extreme, but the minimalist 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.

**PART I: Foundations**

**Chapter 1: A Lopsided Arms Race**

**We Didn’t Sign Up For This**

It's widely accepted that new technologies such as social media and smartphones massively changed how we live in the twenty first century. These changes crept up on us and happened fast, before we had a chance to step back and ask what *we really wanted* out of the rapid advances of the past decade. We added new technologies to the periphery of our experience for minor reasons, then woke one morning to discover that they had colonized the core of our daily life. We didn't, in other words, sign up for the digital world in which we're currently entrenched; we seem to have stumbled backward into it.

In my experience, when concerns about new technologies are publicly discussed, techno-apologists are quick to push back by turning the discussion to utility-providing case studies, for example, of a struggling artist finding an audience through social media, or WhatsApp connecting a deployed soldier with her family back home. They then conclude that it's incorrect to dismiss these technologies on the grounds that they’re useless, a tactic that is usually sufficient to win the debate.

The techno-apologists are right in their claims, but they're also missing the point. The perceived utility of these tools is not the ground on which our growing wariness builds. If you ask the average social media user, for example, why they use Facebook, or Instagram, or Twitter, they can provide you with reasonable answers. Each one of these services probably offers them something useful that would be hard to find elsewhere: the ability, for example, to keep up with baby pictures of a siblings child, or to use a hashtag to monitor a grassroots movement.

People don't succumb to screens because they're lazy, but instead because billions of dollars have been invested to make this outcome inevitable. Earlier I noted that we seem to have stumbled backward into a digital life we didn't sign up for. As I'll argue next, it's probably more accurate to say that we were *pushed* into it by the high-end device companies and attention economy conglomerates who discovered that there are vast fortunes to be made in a culture dominated by gadgets and apps.

**Tobacco Farmers In T-Shirts**

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 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.

Maher’s concern with social media was sparked by a *60 Minutes* segment that aired a month earlier. The segment is titled “Brain Hacking,” and it opens with Anderson Cooper interviewing a lean, red-haired engineer with the carefully tended stubble popular among young men in Silicon Valley. His name is Tristan Harris, a former start-up founder and Google engineer who deviated from his well-worn path through the world of tech to become something decidedly rarer in this closed world: a whistleblower.

“This thing is a slot machine,” Harris says early in the interview while holding up his smart phone.

“How is that a slot machine?” Cooper asks.

“Well, every time I checked my phone, I'm playing the slot machine to see ‘what did I get?’” Harris answers. “There's a whole playbook of techniques that get used[by technology companies] to get you using the product for as long as possible.”

“Is Silicon Valley programming apps or are they programming people?” Cooper asks.

“They are programming people, Harris says. “there's always this narrative that technology is neutral. And it's up to us to choose how we use it. This is just not true.”

“Technology is not neutral?” Cooper interrupts

“It's not neutral. They want you to use it in particular ways and for long periods of time. Because that's how they make their money.”

Bill Maher, for his part, thought this interview seemed familiar. After playing a clip of the Harris interview for his HBO audience, Maher quips: “Where have I heard this before?” He then cuts to Mike Wallace's famous 1995 interview with Jeffrey Wigland- the whistleblower who confirmed for the world what most already suspected: that the big tobacco companies engineered cigarettes to be more addictive.

“Phillip Morris just wanted your lungs,” Maher concludes. “The App Store wants your soul.”

For years, those of us who were grumbling about the seeming ease with which people or becoming slaves to their smartphones were put down as alarmist. But then Harris came along and confirmed what many were increasingly suspecting to be true: These apps and slick sites were not, as Bill Maher put it, gifts from “nerd gods building a better world.” they were, instead, designed to put slot machines in our pockets.

Harris had the moral courage to warn us about the hidden dangers of our devices. If we want to thwart their worst effects, however, we need to better understand how they're so easily able to subvert our best intentions for our lives. Fortunately, when it comes to this goal, we have a good guide. As it turns out, during the same years when Harris was wrestling with the ethical impact of addictive technology, a young marketing professor at NYU turned his prodigious focus to figuring out how exactly this techno-addiction works.

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 stripped of these more lurid elements. Here is 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.

Until recently, it was assumed that addiction only applied to alcohol or drugs: substances that include psychoactive compounds that can directly change your brain chemistry. As the twentieth century gave way to the twenty first, however, a mounting body of research suggested that behaviors that did not involve ingesting substances could become addictive in the technical sense defined above. An important 2010 survey paper, for example, appearing in the *American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, concluded that “growing evidence suggests that behavioral addictions resemble substance addictions in many domains.” The article points to pathological gambling and Internet addiction as two particularly well-established examples of these disorders. When the American Psychiatric Association published its 5th edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) in 2013, it included, for the first time, behavioral addiction as a diagnosable problem.

This brings us back to Adam Alter. As Alter admits, the behavioral addictions connected to technology tend to be “moderate” as compared to the strong chemical dependencies created by drugs and cigarettes. A moderate behavioral addiction will make it really hard to resist checking your account again and again throughout the day. Just as Tristan Harris warned, in many cases these addictive properties of new technologies are not accidents, but instead carefully engineered design features.

In his 2017 book, *Irresistible*, Alter explores the many different “ingredients” that make a given technology likely to hook our brain and cultivate unhealthy use. 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. To understand this claim, let's briefly discuss both.

We begin with the first force: intermittent positive reinforcement. Scientists have known since Michael Zeiler’s famous pecking pigeon experiments from the 1970s that rewards delivered unpredictably are far more enticing than those delivered with a known pattern. Something about unpredictability releases more dopamine- a key neurotransmitter for regulating our sense of craving. The original Zeiler experiment had pigeons pecking a button that unpredictably released a food pellet. As Adam Alter points out, this same basic behavior is replicated in the feedback buttons that have accompanied most social media posts since Facebook introduced the “Like” icon in 2009.

It's hard to exaggerate how much the ‘like’ button changed the psychology of Facebook use,” Alter writes. “What had begun as a passive way to track your friends’ lives was now deeply interactive, and with exactly the sort of unpredictable feedback that motivated Zeiler’s pigions.” Alter goes on to describe users as “gambling” every time they post something on a social media platform: Will you get likes (or hearts or retweets), or will it languish with no feedback? The former creates what one Facebook engineer calls “bright dings of pseudo-pleasure,” while the latter feels bad. Either way, the outcome is hard to predict, which, as the psychology of addiction teaches us, makes the whole activity of posting and checking maddeningly appealing.

Technology companies, of course, recognize the power of this unpredictable positive feedback hook and tweak their products with this in mind to make their appeal even stronger. As whistleblower Tristan Harris explains: “Apps and websites sprinkle intermittent variable rewards all over their products because it's good for business.” Attention-catching notification badges, or the satisfying way a single finger swipe swoops in the next potentially interesting post, are often carefully tailored to elicit strong responses. As Harris notes, the notification symbol for Facebook was originally blue, to match the palette of the rest of the site, “but no one used it.” So they changed the color to read- an alarm color- and clicking skyrocketed.

In perhaps the most telling admission of all, in the fall of 2017, Sean Parker, the founding president of Facebook, spoke candidly at an event about the attention engineering deployed by his former company:

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.

Let's now consider the second force that encourages behavioral addiction: the drive for social approval. As Adam Alter writes: “We're social beings who can't ever completely ignore what other people think of us.” This behavior, of course, is adaptive. In paleolithic times, it was important that you carefully managed your social standing with other members of your tribe because your survival depended on it. In the twenty-first century, however, new technologies have hijacked this deep drive to create profitable behavioral addictions.

Consider, once again, social media feedback buttons. In addition to delivering unpredictable feedback, as discussed above, this feedback also concerns other people’s approval. If lots of people click the little heart icon under your latest Instagram post, it feels like the tribe is showing you approval- which we’re adapted to strongly crave. The other side of this evolutionary bargain, of course, is that a lack of positive feedback creates a sense of distress. This is serious business for the Paleolithic brain, and therefore it can develop an urgent need to continually monitor this “vital” information.

A similar drive to regulate social approval helps explain the current obsession among teenagers to maintain Snapchat “streaks” with their friends, as a long unbroken streak of daily communication is a satisfying confirmation that the relationship is strong. It also explains the universal urge to immediately answer an incoming text, even in the most inappropriate or dangerous conditions (think: behind the wheel).

The technology industry has become adept at exploiting this instinct for approval. Social media, in particular, is now carefully tuned to offer you a rich stream of information about how much (or how little) your friends are thinking about you at the moment.

These technologies are in many case *specifically* designed to trigger addictive behavior. Compulsive use, in this context, is not the result of a character flaw, but instead the realization of the massively profitable business plan.

We didn't sign up for the digital lives we now lead. They were instead, to a large extent, crafted in boardrooms to serve the interests of a select group of technology investors.

The fact that our humanity was routed by these tools over the past decade should come as no surprise. We've been engaging in a lopsided arms race in which the technologies encroaching on our autonomy we're preying with increasing precision on deep-seated vulnerabilities in our brains, while we still naively believed that we were just fiddling with fun gifts handed down from the nerd gods.

When Bill Maher joked that the App Store was coming for our souls, he was actually onto something. As Socrates explained to Phaedrus in Plato’s famous chariot metaphor, our soul can be understood as a chariot driver struggling to rein two horses, one representing our better nature and the other our baser impulses. When we increasingly cede autonomy to the digital, we energize the latter horse and make the chariot drivers struggle to steer increasingly difficult- a diminishing of our souls 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 *for* our best aspirations and not *against* them. Digital minimalism is one such strategy. It's toward its details that we now turn our attention.

**Chapter 2: Digital Minimalism**

**A Minimal Solution**

Around the time I started working on this chapter, a columnist for the New York Post published an op-ed titled “How I Kicked the Smartphone Addiction- and You Can Too.” His secret? He disabled notifications for 112 different apps on his iPhone. “It's relatively easy to retake control,” he optimistically concludes.

These types of articles are common in the world of technology journalism. The author discovers that his relationship with his digital tools has become dysfunctional. Alarmed, he deploys a clever life hack, then reports enthusiastically that things seemed much better.

The problem is that small changes are not enough to solve are big issues with new technologies. The underlying behaviors we hope to fix are ingrained in our culture, and, as I argued in the previous chapter, they're backed by powerful psychological forces that empower our base instincts. To reestablish control, we need to move beyond tweaks and instead rebuild our relationship with technology from scratch, using our deeply held values as a foundation.

The *New York Post* columnist cited above, in other words, should look beyond the notification settings on his 112 apps and ask the more important question of why he uses so many apps in the first place. What he needs- what all of us who struggle with these issues need- is a *philosophy of technology* use, something that covers from the ground up which digital tools we allow into our life, for what reasons, and under what constraints. In the absence of this introspection, we will be left struggling in a whirlwind of addictive and appealing cyber trinkets, vainly hoping that the right mix of ad hoc hacks will save us.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I have one such philosophy to propose:

**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.

By working backward from their deep values to their technology choices, digital minimalists transform these innovations from a source of distraction into tools to support a life well lived. By doing so, they break the spell that has made so many people feel like they're losing control to their screens.

**The Principles of Digital Minimalism**

Before I ask you to experiment with digital minimalism in your life, however, I must provide you with a more thorough explanation for *why* it works. My argument for this philosophy's effectiveness rest 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 minimalist 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.

**Chapter 3: The Digital Declutter**

**On (Rapidly) Becoming Minimalist**

Assuming I convinced you that digital minimalism is worthwhile, the next step is to discuss how best to adopt this lifestyle. In my experience, gradually changing your habits one at a time doesn't work well- the engineered attraction of the attention economy, combined with the friction of convenience, will diminish your inertia until you backslide toward where you started.

I recommend instead a rapid transformation- something that occurs in a short period of time and is executed with enough conviction that the results are likely to stick. I call the particular rapid process I have in mind the *digital declutter*. It works as follows.

**The Digital Declutter Process**

1. Put aside a thirty-day period during which you will take a break from optional technologies in your life.
2. During this thirty-day break, explore and rediscover activities and behaviors that you find satisfying and meaningful.
3. 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.

Much like decluttering your house, this lifestyle experiment provides a reset for your digital life by clearing away distracting tools and compulsive habits that may have accumulated haphazardly over time and replacing them with a much more intentional set of behaviors, optimized, in proper minimalist fashion, to support your values instead of subverting them.

The second part of this book will provide ideas and strategies for shaping your digital minimalist lifestyle into something sustainable over the long term.

The digital declutter works. People were surprised to learn the degree to which their digital lives had become cluttered with reflexive behaviors and compulsive tics. A simple action of sweeping away this detritus and starting from scratch in crafting their digital life felt like lifting a psychological weight they didn't realize had been dragging them down.

The second conclusion I reached is that the declutter process is tricky. A nontrivial number of people ended up aborting this process before the full thirty days were done. Given the reality of the second conclusion, I will dedicate the remainder of this chapter to providing clarifying explanations and suggestions for the three steps of the declutter process summarized above.

**Step #1: Define Your Technology Rules**

During the thirty days of your digital declutter, you're supposed to take a break from “optional technologies” in your life. The first step of the declutter process, therefore, is to define which technologies fall into this “optional” category.

When I say *technology* in this context, I mean the general class of things we've been calling “new technologies” throughout this book, which include apps, websites, and related digital tools that are delivered through a computer screen or a mobile phone and are meant to either entertain, inform, or connect to you. Text messaging, Instagram, and Reddit are examples of the types of technologies you need to evaluate when preparing for your digital declutter.

An interesting special case brought to my attention by many participants during the mass declutter experiment is video games. Many people-especially young men- feel an addictive pull to these games that's similar to what they experience from other new technologies

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 master clutter experiment, I was somewhat ambivalent as to whether streaming Netflix, and its equivalents, with something to consider as a potentially optional technology. The feedback I received from participants, however, was near unequivocal: *You should*.

Once you've identified the class of technologies that are relevant, you must then decide which of them are sufficiently “optional” that you can take a break from them for the full thirty days of the declutter process. My general heuristic is the following: consider the technology optional unless it's temporary removal would harm or significantly disrupt the daily operation of your professional or personal life.

This standard exempts most professional technologies from being deemed optional. If you stop checking your work email, for example, this would harm your career- so you can't use me as an excuse to shut down your inbox for a month. Similarly, if your job requires you to occasionally monitor Facebook Messenger to help recruit students, then, of course, this activity is not optional either.

On the personal side, these exemptions usually apply to technologies that play a key logistical role. If your daughter uses text messaging to tell you when she's ready to be picked up from soccer practice, then it's okay to still use text messages for this purpose. Similar exemptions also apply when their technologies removal might cause serious harm to relationships: for example, using FaceTime to talk with a spouse deployed overseas with the military.

**Step #2: Take A Thirty-Day Break**

Now that you have defined your technology rules, the next step of your 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 experiences. This disruption can feel unpleasant. Many of the participants in my mass declutter experiment, however, reported that these feelings of discomfort faded after a week or two.

It's a mistake to think of the digital declutter as *only* a detox experience. The goal is not to simply give yourself a break from technology, but to instead spark a permanent transformation of your digital life. The detox scene is merely a step that supports this transformation.

With this in mind, you have duties during this declutter beyond following your technology rules. For this purpose to succeed, you must also spend this period trying to rediscover what's important to you and what you enjoy outside the world of the always-on, shiny digital. Figuring this out *before* you begin to reintroduce technology at the end of this declutter process is crucial. You're more likely to succeed in reducing the role of digital tools in your life if you cultivate high-quality alternatives to the easy distraction they provide. For many people, their compulsive phone use papers over a void created by a lack of a well-developed leisure life. Reducing the easy distraction without also filling the void can make life unpleasantly stale- an outcome likely to undermine any transition to minimalism.

**Step #3: Reintroduce Technology**

After your thirty day break comes to the final step of digital declutter: this reintroduction is more demanding than you might imagine.

Some of the participants in my mass declutter experiment treated the process only as a classical digital detox- reintroducing *all* their optional technologies when the declutter ended. This is a mistake. The goal of this final step is to start from a blank slate and only let back into your life technology that passes your strict minimalist standards. It's the care you take here that will determine whether this process sparks lasting change in your life.

With this in mind, for each optional technology that you're considering reintroducing into your life, you must first ask: Does this technology directly support something that I deeply value? This is the only condition on which you should let one of these tools into your life. The fact that it offers *some* value is irrelevant- the digital minimalist deploys technology to serve the things they find most important in their life, and is happy missing out on everything else. For example, when asking this first question, you might decide that browsing Twitter in search of distraction doesn't support an important value. On the other hand, keeping up with your cousin’s baby photos on Instagram does seem to support the importance you place on family.

**PART 2: Practices**

**Chapter 4: Spend Time Alone**

**The Value of Solitude**

Many people mistakenly associate the term *solitude* 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 regular basis. Solitude is about what's happening in your brain, not the environment around you. Solitude is a subjective state in which your mind is free from input from other minds.

You can enjoy solitude in a crowded coffee shop. Solitude can be banished in even the quietest setting if you allow input from other minds to intrude.

Its benefits have been explored since at least the early years of the Enlightenment. “All of humanity’s problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone,” Blaise Pascal famously wrote in the late seventeenth century. Half a century later, and an ocean away, Benjamin Franklin took up the subject in his journal: “I have read abundance of fine things on the subject of solitude…. I acknowledge solitude an agreeable refreshment to a busy mind.”

Spending a great deal of time alone was common among the majority of poets, novelists, and composers. Descartes's, Newton, Locke, Pascal, Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard are examples of men who never had families or fostered close personal ties, yet managed to lead remarkable lives. Solitude can be just as important for both happiness and productivity.

**Solitude Deprivation**

The concern that modernity is at odds with solitude is not new. The question before us is whether our current moment offers a *new* threat to solitude that is somehow more pressing than those that commentators have bemoaned for decades. I argue that the answer is a definitive yes.

To understand my concern, the right place to start is the iPod revolution that occurred in the first years of the twenty-first century. We had portable music before the iPod, most commonly in the form of Sony Walkman and Discman (and their competitors) but these devices played only a restricted role in most people’s lives- something you used to entertain yourself while exercising, or in the back seat of a car on a long family road trip. If you stood on a busy city street corner in the early 1990s, you would not see too many people sporting black foam Sony earphones on their way to work.

By the early 2000s, however, if you stood on that same street corner, white earbuds would be near ubiquitous. The iPod succeeded not just by selling lots of units, but also by changing the culture surrounding portable music. It became common, especially among younger generations, to allow your iPod to provide a musical backdrop to your *entire* day- putting the earbuds in as you walk out the door and taking them off only when you couldn't avoid having to talk to another human.

The iPod provided for the first time the ability to be *continuously* distracted from your own mind. The iPod was pushing us toward a newly alienated phase in our relationship with our own minds.

This transformation started by the iPod, however, didn't reach its full potential until the release of its successor, the iPhone, or, more generally, the spread of modern internet-connected smartphones in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Even though iPods became ubiquitous, there were still moments in which it was either too much trouble to slip in the earbuds (think: waiting to be called into a meeting), or it might be socially awkward to do so (think: sitting bored during a slow hymn at a church service). The smartphone provided new technique to banish these remaining slivers of solitude: *the quick glance*. At the slightest hint of boredom, you can now surreptitiously glance at any number of apps or mobile-adapted websites that had been optimized to provide you an immediate and satisfying dose of input from other minds.

Part of what complicates discussions of waning solitude in the smartphone age is that it's easy to underestimate the severity of this phenomenon. While many people admit that they use their phones more than they probably should, they often don't realize the full magnitude of this technology's impact. The NYU professor Adam Alter, whom I introduced earlier in this book, details a typical story of such underestimation in *Irresistible*. While researching his book, Alter decided to measure his own smartphone use. To do so, he downloaded an app called Moment, which tracks how often and how long you look at your screen each day. Before activating the app, Alter estimated that he probably checks his phone around 10 times a day for a total of about an hour of screen time.

A month later, Moment provided Alter the truth: on average, he was picking up his phone 40 times per day and spending around a total of three hours looking at his screen. Surprised, Alter contacted Kevin Holesh, the app developer behind a Moment. As Holesh Revealed, Alter is not an outlier. In fact, he's remarkably typical: the average Moment user spends right around 3 hours a day looking at their smartphone screen, with only 12% spending less than an hour. The average Moment user picks up their phone 39 times a day.

As Holesh reminds Alter, these numbers probably skew low, as the people who download an app like Moment are people who are already careful about their phone use. “There are millions of smartphone users who are oblivious or just don't care enough to track their usage,” Alter concludes. “There’s a reasonable chance they’re spending even more than three hours on their phone each day.”

Surrounding the announcement of his company's 2012 IPO, Mark Zuckerberg triumphantly wrote: “Facebook… was built to accomplish a social mission- to make the world more open and connected.” This obsession with connection is clearly overly optimistic, and it's easy to make light of its grandiose ambition, but when solitude deprivation is put into the context of the ideas discussed earlier in this chapter, this prioritization of communication over reflection becomes a source of serious concern. For one thing, when you avoid solitude, you miss out on the positive things it brings you: the ability to clarify hard problems, to regulate your emotions, to build moral courage, and to strengthen relationships. If you suffer from chronic solitude deprivation, therefore, the quality of your life degrades.

When it comes to constant connectivity, these extremes are readily apparent among young people born after 1995- the first group to enter their preteen years with access to smartphones, tablets, and persistent internet connectivity. As most parents or educators of this generation will attest, their device use is *constant*. (the term *constant* is not hyperbole: a 2015 study by Common Sense Media found that teenagers were consuming media- including text messaging and social networks- *nine hours* per day on average.)

My first indication that this hyper-connected generation was suffering came a few years before I started writing this book. I was chatting with the head of mental health services at a well-known university where I had been invited to speak. This administrator told me that she had begun seeing major shifts in student mental health. Until recently, the mental health center on campus had seen the same mix of teenage issues that have been common for decades: homesickness, eating disorders, some depression, and the occasional case of OCD. Then everything changed. Seemingly overnight the number of students seeking mental health counseling massively expanded, and the standard mix of teenage issues was dominated by something that used to be relatively rare: anxiety.

She told me that everyone seemed to suddenly be suffering from anxiety or anxiety-related disorders. When I asked her what she thought caused the change, she answered without hesitation that it probably had something to do with smartphones. The sudden rise in anxiety related problems coincided with the first incoming classes of students that were raised on smartphones and social media. She noticed that these new students were constantly and frantically processing and sending messages. It seemed clear that the persistent communication was somehow messing with the students’ brain chemistry.

A few years later, this administrator's hunch was validated by San Diego State University psychology professor Jean Twenge, who is one of the world's foremost experts on generational differences in American youth. As Twenge notes in a September 2017 article for the *Atlantic*, she has been studying these trends for over 25 years, and they almost always appear and grow gradually. But starting around 2012, she noticed the shift in measurement of teenage emotional states that was anything but gradual:

The gentle slopes of the line graphs [charting how behavioral traits change with birth year] became steep mountains and sheer cliffs, and many of the distinctive characteristics of the Millennial generation began to disappear. In all my analyses of generational data- some reaching back to the 1930s- I had never seen anything like it.

Young people born between 1995 and 2012, a group Twenge calls “iGen,” exhibited remarkable differences as compared to the millennials that preceded them. One of the biggest and most troubling changes was iGen’s psychological health. “Rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed,” Twenge writes, with much of this seemingly due to a massive increase in anxiety disorders. “It's not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades.”

What instigated these changes? Twenge Agrees with the intuition of the university mental health administrator when she notes that these shifts in mental health correspond “exactly” to the moment when American smartphone ownership became ubiquitous. The defining trait of iGen, she explains, is that they grew up with iPhones and social media, and don't remember a time before constant access to the internet. They're paying a price for this distinction with their mental health. “Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones,” Twenge concludes.

When journalist Benoit Denizet-Lewis investigated this teen anxiety epidemic in the *New York Times Magazine,* he also discovered that the smart phone kept emerging as a persistent signal among the noise of plausible hypotheses. “Anxious kids certainly existed before Instagram,” he writes, “but many of the parents I spoke to worried that their kids’ digital habits- round-the-clock responding to texts, posting to social media, obsessively following the filtered exploits of peers- were partly to blame for their children’s struggles.”

Denizet-Lewis assumed that the teenagers themselves would dismiss this theory as standard parental grumbling, but this is not what happened. “To my surprise, anxious teenagers tended to agree.” A college student he interviewed at a residential anxiety treatment center put it well: “Social media is a tool, but it's become this thing that we can't live without that's making us crazy.”

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.

Once you begin studying the positive benefits of time alone with your thoughts, and encounter the distressing effects that appear in populations that eliminate this altogether, a simpler explanation emerges: we *need* solitude to thrive as human beings, and in recent years, without even realizing it, we've been systematically reducing this crucial ingredient from our lives.

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

**Practice: Leave Your Phone At Home**

The urgency we feel to always have a phone with us is exaggerated. To live permanently without these devices would be needlessly annoying, but to regularly spend a few hours away from them should give you no pause. It's important that I convince you of this reality, as spending more time away from your phone is exactly what I'm going to ask you to do.

If you're struggling at first, a useful compromise is to bring your phone where you're going, but then leave it in your car's glove compartment. This way, if there’s an emergency that requires connection, you can always go retrieve your device, but it's not *right there* with you or it can destroy solitude at a moment's notice.

To emphasize what I hope is clear, this practice is not about getting rid of your phone- most of the time, you'll have your phone with you and enjoy all of its conveniences. It does aim, however, to convince you that it's completely reasonable to live a life in which you sometimes have a phone with you, and sometimes do not. Indeed, not only is this lifestyle reasonable, but it represents a small behavior tweak that can reap large benefits by protecting you from the worst effects of solitude deprivation.

**Practice: Take Long Walks**

I sometimes go on what I call “gratitude walks,” where I just enjoy particularly good weather, or take in a neighborhood I like, or, if I'm in the middle of a particularly busy or stressful period, try to generate a sense of anticipation for a better season to come. 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.

**Chapter 5: Don’t Click “Like”**

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 boost you receive from posting on a friends 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.

Online interaction is both easier and faster than old-fashioned conversation. Humans are naturally biased toward activities that require less energy in the short term, even if it's more harmful in the long term- so we end up texting our sibling instead of calling them on the phone, or liking a picture of a friend’s new baby instead of stopping by to visit.

A subtler effect is the way that digital communication tools can subvert the offline communication that remains in your life. Because our primal instinct to connect is so strong, it's difficult to resist checking a device in the middle of a conversation with a friend or bath time with a child- reducing the quality of the richer interaction right in front of us.

Many of these tools are engineered to hijack our social instincts to create an addictive allure. When you spend multiple hours a day compulsively clicking and swiping, there’s much less free time left for slower interactions. And because this compulsive use emits a patina of socialness, it can delude you into thinking that you're already serving your relationships well, making further action unnecessary.

To state the obvious, this account doesn't cover all the possible dangers of digital communication tools. Critics have also highlighted the ability for social media to make us feel ostracized or inadequate, as well as to stoke exhausting outrage, inflame our worst tribal instincts, and perhaps even degrade the democratic process itself.

**Reclaiming Conversation**

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-bandwith 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 learned to listen. It's where we develop the capacity for empathy. It's where we experience the joy of being heard, or being understood.

Turkle introduces her readers to middle school students who struggle with empathy, as they lack the practice of reading facial cues that comes from conversation. Turning her attention to the workplace, Turkle finds young employees who retreat to email because the thought of an unstructured conversation terrifies them.

During an appearance on *The Colbert Report*, host Stephen Colbert asked Turkle a “profound” question that gets at the core of her argument: “Don't all these little tweets, these little sips of online connection, add up to one big gulp of real conversation?” Turkle was clear in her answer: No, *they do not*. As she expands: “Face-to-face conversation unfolds slowly. It teaches patience. We tend to tone and nuance.” On the other hand: “When we communicate on our digital devices, we learn different habits.”

As a true digital minimalist, Turkle approaches these issues from a standpoint of smarter use of digital communication tools, not blanket abstention. “My argument is not anti-technology,” she writes. “It's pro-conversation.” She is confident that we can make the necessary changes to reclaim the conversation that we need to thrive, noting that despite the “seriousness of the moment” she remains optimistic that once we recognize the issues in replacing conversation with connection, we can rethink our practices.

I share Turkle’s optimism that there is 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 and large part on the idea of making more space in your life for quality conversation. The objective of this recommendation is faultless, but it's 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 in their life are likely to fail.

**Practice: Don’t Click “Like”**

Contrary to popular lore, Facebook didn't invent the feed “Like” button. The credit goes to the largely forgotten FriendFeed service, which introduced this feature in October 2007. When the massively more popular Facebook introduced the iconic thumbs-up icon sizteen months later, the trajectory of social media was forever changed.

Many Facebook posts attracted a larger number of comments that were all saying more or less the same thing; e.g., “Great!” or “I love it!” The “Like” button was introduced as a simpler way to indicate your general approval of a post, which would both save time and allow the comments to be reserved for more interesting notes.

Not surprisingly, almost every other successful major social media platform soon followed FreindFeed and Facebook’s lead and added similar one-click approval features to their services.

It is important to transform the way you think about the different flavors of one-click approval indicators that populate the social media universe. Instead of seeing these clicks as a fun way to nudge a friend, start treating them as poison to your attempts to cultivate a meaningful social life. Put simply, you should stop using them. Don't click “like.” Ever. And while you're at it, stop leaving comments on social media posts as well. No “so cute!” or “so cool!” remain silent.

The reason I'm suggesting such a hard stance against these seemingly innocuous interactions is that they teach your mind that connection is a reasonable alternative to conversation. The motivating premise behind my conversation-centric communication philosophy is that once you accept this equality, despite your good intentions, the role of low-value interactions will inevitably expand until it begins to push out the high-value socializing that actually matters. If you eliminate these trivial interactions cold turkey, you send your mind a clear message: conversation is what counts- don't be distracted from this reality by the shiny stuff on your screen.

It's worth noting that refusing to use social media icons and comments to interact means that some people *will* inevitably fall out of your social orbit- in particular, those whose relationship with you exists only over social media. Here's my tough love reassurance: let them go. 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 over exuberant 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.”

I urge you, for the sake of your social well-being, to adopt the baseline rule that you’ll no longer use social media as a tool for low-quality relationship nudges. Put simply, don't click and don't comment. This basic structure will radically change for the better how you maintain your social life.

**Chapter 6: Reclaim Leisure**

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, compiled in the fourth century BC, Aristotle tackles the question as urgent then as it is today: How does one live a good life? The Ethics divides its answer across ten books. Much of the first nine focus on what Aristotle calls “practical virtues,” such as fulfilling your duties, or acting justly when faced with injustice and courageously when faced with danger. But then, and the tenth and final book of the Ethics, Aristotle steps back from this gritted-teeth heroic virtue and makes a radical turn in his argument: “The best and most pleasant life is the life of the intellect.” He concludes, “This life will also be the happiest.”

As Aristotle elaborates, a life filled with deep thinking is happy because contemplation is an “actively that is appreciated for its own sake… nothing is gained from it except the act of contemplation.”

As MIT philosopher Kieran Setiya expands in his modern interpretation of the Ethics, if your life consists only of actions whose “worth depends on the existence of problems, difficulties, needs, which these activities aimed to solve,” you're vulnerable to the existential despair that blooms and responds to the inevitable question, *Is this all there is to life*? One solution to this despair, he notes, is to follow Aristotle’s lead and embrace pursuits that provide you a “source of inward joy.”

In this chapter, I called these joyful activities *high quality leisure*. The reason that I'm reminding you here of the importance to a well-crafted life- an idea that dates back over two thousand years- is that I have become convinced that to successfully tame the problems of our modern digital world, you must both understand and deploy the core insights of this ancient wisdom.

If you begin decluttering the low-value digital distractions from your life *before* you've convincingly filled in the void they were helping you ignore, the experience will be unnecessarily unpleasant at best and a massive failure at worse. Most successful digital minimalist, therefore, tend to start their conversion by renovating what they do with their free time- cultivating high- quality leisure before culling the worst of their digital habits. In fact, many minimalist will describe a phenomenon in which digital habits that they previously felt to be essential to their daily schedule suddenly seemed frivolous once they became more intentional about what they did with their time. When the void is filled, you no longer need distractions to help you avoid it.

**On Craft and Satisfaction**

Any conversation about high-quality leisure must eventually touch on the topic of craft. In this context, “craft” describes any activity where you apply skills to create something valuable. To make a fine table out of a pile of wood boards is an act of craft, as is knitting a sweater from a skein of yarn or renovating a bathroom without the help of contractors. Coaxing a pleasant song out of a guitar or dominating a game of pickup basketball also qualifies.

My core argument is that craft is a good source of high-quality leisure. Today, however, it's easier than ever before to power down these circuits. Many people experience the world largely through a screen now. We live in a world that is working to eliminate touch as one of our senses, to minimize the use of our hands to do things except poke at a screen.

**Supercharged Sociality**

Another common property of high-quality leisure is its ability to support rich social interactions. The classic games that were popular in the pre-digital 1980s- Monopoly, Scrabble- remain popular sellers today. this popularity is due in large part to the social experience of playing these games. Board games, of course are not the only type of leisure that promote intense social experiences. another interesting intersection of leisure and interaction is emerging in the world of health and exercise. Arguably one of the biggest trends in this sector is the “social fitness” phenomenon, in which, as one sports industry analyst described it, “fitness has shifted from a private activity at the gym to a social interaction in the studio or on the street.”

**Practice: Fix or Build Something Every Week**

The simplest way to become more handy is to learn a new skill, apply it to repair, learn, or build something, and then repeat. Start with easy projects in which you can follow step-by-step instructions more or less directly. Once comfortable, advanced forward more-complicated endeavors that require you to fill in some blanks or adapt what’s suggested. To be more concrete, here’s a sample list of the type of straightforward projects I had in mind for someone new to using their hands for useful purposes. Every example below is something that either I or someone I know was able to learn and execute in a single weekend.

* Changing your own car oil
* Installing a new ceiling-mounted light fixture
* Learning the basics of a new technique on an instrument you already play (e.g. hey guitar player learning Travis picking)
* Figuring out how to precisely calibrate the tone arm on your turntable
* Building a custom headboard from high-quality lumber
* Starting a garden plot

Almost every modern-day handyperson I've spoken to recommends the exact same source or quick how-to lessons: YouTube. For a standard project, there are numerous YouTube videos to walk you through the process. Some are more informative than others, but as you become more confident, you won't need precise instructions- steps that point you in the generally right direction will be enough.

My suggestion is that you try to learn and apply one new skill every week, over a period of six weeks. When the six-week experiment ends, he won't quite be ready to rebuild the engine on your Honda, but you'll have achieved entry-level handy status. That is, just enough competence to realize you're capable of learning new things, and to realize that you enjoy doing so. If you're like most, this six-week crash course will spark a persistent and rewarding inclination toward getting your hands dirty.

**Practice: Schedule Your Low-Quality Leisure**

A few years ago, the Silicon Valley business pioneer Jim Clark was interviewed add an event held at Stanford University. At some point in the interview, the topic turned to social media. Clark's reaction was unexpected given the high-tech background: “I just don't appreciate social networking.” As he then clarifies, this distaste is captured by a particular experience he had sitting on a panel with a social media executive:

[The executive was] just raving about these people spending twelve hours a day on Facebook… so I asked the question to the guy who was raving: “The guy who's spending twelve hours a day on Facebook, do you think he'll be able to do what you've done?”

As Clark incredulously pointed out, no matter what immediate benefits these services might provide the users, the that impact on their productivity and life satisfaction must be profoundly negative if *all* these users do is engage the service. You can't, in other words, build a billion-dollar empire like Facebook if you're wasting hours every day using a service like Facebook.

This tension between the benefits provided by the attention economy and this sector's primary mission of devouring your time proves particularly problematic for our current goal of cultivating high-quality leisure. It's too easy to be good intentioned about adding some quality activity into your evening, and then, several hours of rabbit hole clicking and binge watching later, realize that the opportunity has once again dissipated.

A straightforward solution to this problem would be to stop using most of these engineered distractions. Cultivating a high-quality leisure life *first* will become easier to minimize low quality digital diversions *later*.