

Maybe it is the Damn Phone

How to quit Doomscrolling and why you **NEED** to

Who Am I? Why This Talk?

- I'm Nathan (sometimes Starbucks spells it “Naethin”)
- You already know most of what I'm going to say
- My goal: Make you Angry (and hopeful) enough to Change

Audience Check-In

- How many of you doomscroll more than you want to?
- Who's tried to quit or cut back?
- How many have relapsed or reinstalled?

Self-Audit: Your Phone Habits

- How soon after waking do you check your phone?
- How many times do you unlock per day?
- Does not checking your phone for an hour or more make you anxious or restless?
- Do you check your phone in places you know you shouldn't? (Class, conversations, etc.)
- Do you ever lose hours to your phone, “by accident”?

Nicotine Addiction Questions

Nicotine Dependence (FTND/TDS)

1. How soon after you wake up do you smoke your first cigarette?

2. Do you find it difficult to refrain from smoking where it's forbidden?

Smartphone-Use Parallel

1. How soon after you wake up do you check your phone?

2. - Do you check your phone in places you know you shouldn't? (Class, conversations, etc.)

Nicotine Dependence (FTND/TDS)

Smartphone-Use Parallel

3. Have you ever tried to quit or cut down on tobacco and found you could not?

3. Have you tried to reduce or quit using your phone/app and been unable to?

4. How many cigarettes do you smoke per day?

4. How many times per day do you unlock or open your phone?

Just Say It!

It's not Voldemort, bro

- Those questions come straight from addiction surveys
- So we struggle like it's addictive, and we measure like it's addictive
- Why don't we call it addiction ???

Harmless Addiction? Like Caffeine?

- Maybe it's just a harmless habit—like coffee?



Doomscrolling: Mental Health & Cognitive Costs

- ➤ **Higher anxiety, stress, depression**
 - Systematic review shows doomscrolling boosts anxiety, stress, depressive symptoms, sleep disruption via amygdala hyperactivation & cortisol dysregulation
- ➤ **Lower well-being & life satisfaction**
 - Doomscrolling Scale correlations: increased psychological distress, lower mental-well-being, reduced life satisfaction and harmony

Doomscrolling: Mental Health

- ➤ **Existential anxiety, mistrust, PTSD-like symptoms**
 - Study (N=800, US & Iran): linked doomscrolling to existential anxiety, suspicion, despair, misanthropy, and vicarious trauma
- ➤ **Cognitive impairment & academic harm**
 - Neuro-HCI synthesis: students who doomscroll face prefrontal impairment, poorer focus, memory issues, lower academic performance
- ➤ **Reduced Sleep Quantity and Quality**

Not just Boomers blaming the phone - CLINICALLY VALIDATED

It goes the other way too!

When we intervene and reduce doomscrolling - we see mental health improvements

But Wait! There's MORE!

Lemme Cook

- When you love a movie or music - you pay attention
- When you love a person - you pay attention
- When you love a hobby - you pay attention

Attention is the Foundation of Love

Lemme Cook part 2

You WILL DIE. Your Time is FINITE

You WILL DIE. Your Time is FINITE

- Time is not a Resource - IT IS YOUR LIFE
- When you are robbed of your time, you never get it back.
- The Attention economy isn't taking something as mundane as money - it's your LIFE

"iTs nOT tHaT bIg a DeAl ..."

Ducktyping: If It Looks Like Addiction ...

- Looks like addiction, acts like addiction, measured as addiction
- we treat it like addiction, it impacts our health like addiction
- Why aren't we calling it that?
- Calling it addiction helps us see the risk—before it gets worse

“nOt eNouGh eVidEnce f0r adDicTIon ...”

ARE YOU SERIOUS?!?

Tinfoil Hat: Why They Won't Call It Addiction

- Attention is profitable—just like tobacco was
- Big Tobacco: denied, confused, funded bogus science
- Same playbook now—science and culture slow to respond

We Don't Need More Evidence

- We need legislation
- resources
- societal change

I Hope You're Mad

- Now let's learn what we can do about it
- it's time for a little psychology
- Let's learn HOW our minds get hijacked

System 1 and System 2

The mind has two parts

System 1

Fast, Automatic, Heuristics

Cave Person Brain

System 2: The Rational, Reflective Self

- Slow, rational, reflective—“the you you think is in charge”
- We are not all little Socrateses
- System 2's Default Mode: Justify what System 1 did

System 1 Basics

- Fast, intuitive, automatic—“caveman brain”
- Runs on *heuristics*: rules like “if notification, check!”

How System 1 Gets Hijacked

- Good for survival during caveman times
- some "heuristics" don't work well today
- the most basic heuristic is : "If it rewards me, do it again."

Nobody does it like Vegas

- Once upon a time, Slot machines SUCKED
- Today, they're ~80% of profits
- How?

Y'all Heard of Pavlov?

- He's the dude with the dogs and the bell
- Stimulus/Cue -> Reward = Behaviour Forms
- Ring bell -> get food = dogs salivate in expectation and learn to show up for the bell

(This explanation was approved by a Psychology PhD student)

**The more we are rewarded for a
behaviour the deeper it goes**

Variable Reward is the JUICIEST Kind

- No reward
- Consistent reward
- Variable Reward

Work on **ANYTHING** with a brain

- Rats, dogs, pigeons, monkeys
- You and Me

Vegas MASTERED the Variable Reward Rate

- The most stimulating Attention grabbing stimulus/cue = flashing colourful lights and sound
- The Juiciest Reward = Money
- You only win sometimes, but more often than not

Phones Use the Same Tricks AND MORE

⚠ Attention-Capture Dark Patterns

Pattern	What It Does	How It Affects You
Infinite Scroll	Loads more content endlessly	Breaks stopping cues → keeps you scrolling longer
Pull-to-Refresh	Swipe-down mimics slot-machine lever	Triggers dopamine & compulsive checking
Autoplay	Automatically queues next video/song	Removes breaks → drags out sessions

Phones Use the Same Tricks PART 2

Pattern	What It Does	How It Affects You
Time Fog	Hides time passage (no timestamps/scroll bar)	You lose track of time and goals
Nagging Notifications	Repeated alerts and badges	Hijacks attention via FOMO and anxiety reflex
Variable Rewards	Unpredictable likes, comments, memes	Creates reward-loops → compulsive behavior

**These are DELIBERATE designs to hijack
your attention not innocent UI quirks**

What Can You Do?

Rip out the Hacks

- Make CUES less stimulating
 - Turn your phone black and white (less fun)
 - Turn off notifications—you won't miss much
- Add Friction: Blockers like one-sec
- Get rid of it: Uninstall Apps

TEASER: reduce the quality of the reward (System 2)

It doesn't stop at the Phone

- On laptops: browser extensions to block infinite scroll, homepages, recommendations

System 2: The Rational, Reflective Self

System 2 Basics

- Slow, rational, reflective—“the you you think is in charge”
- We are not all little Socrateses
- System 2's Default Mode: Justify what System 1 did
 - That's Hijackable

System 2 is slept on

- The literature really focuses on system 1
- we know how it's hijacked
- system 2 is less talked about but it's just as essential

System 2 is slept on

- The things we find rewarding, are based on OUR **Beliefs** and **Values**
- Beliefs and values can be built at the system 2 level
- Beliefs and Values can be hijacked

I have to value something for it to be a reward

- The slot machine gives me MONEY
- I value Money
- The slot machine cues me, it rewards me with money, I develop the behaviour
- If it gave me dirt I wouldn't give a shit

**What does the Attention Economy
Reward us with?**

**What do you value? What we do we
ALL value?**

2 Fundamental Human Values

- Social Connection
- Learning

Social Connection is CORE to Humanity

- we are not a species of loners - we need each other to survive
- In "caveman time": isolation = death
- loneliness manifests in the brain, the same way physical pain does

Learning

- predict our environment
- predict danger
- predict food
- gain competence
- improve survival

How Valuing Social Connection is Hijacked

- The pitch of social media: connect with anyone, anywhere, anytime
- That sounds pretty good!
- But it's a shallow simulacrum of connection

Tokenization of Social Connection

- Break Social Connection down into little tokens
 - likes, comments, posts
- Just enough to make you FEEL a hit of social connection
- Just enough to fit into variable reward machines

Just enough to form a belief

- Social media helps me be socially connected
- Now system 2 can justify your social media use

**We can change our beliefs
and how do we do that?**

We Act like a Scientist

Building New Beliefs

- Create a hypothesis:
 - "calling a friend, seeing them in person, playing a game will make me MORE socially connected than scrolling"
- Test it
- Review Data: Ask yourself how it went

Building New Beliefs

- When you see the data, feel the change -> you form new beliefs
- "Calling a friend better supports my value of social connectedness, than social media"
- It dulls the reward

What about both?

Remember: you will die. Your time is limited.

Don't settle for a token, when you can have the real thing

Beating the Attention Economy from Both Sides

- System 1: Reduce cues and eliminate opportunities to be given reward
- System 2: Make new beliefs that make tokens, feel like dirt, not money

Youtube and Learning

One Last Belief: I'm Too Tired

A Bit of Hope Goes a Long Way

- 5 Years ago: 4 to 6 hours of scrolling per day
- Slowly I've reclaimed that time
- And I've put it to things I love

What I Want For You

- This is not a call to hustle and grind those 4 hours instead
- I don't care what you do
- I only care that YOU choose, NOT F*ckerberg

Thank you!

Reach out and Read/Watch More

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