

This document is kind of like a sparknotes to Feel Good Productivity by Ali Abdaal and Deep Work by Cal Newport. We will cover topics related to work like productivity, procrastination, and burnout. People are different, so pick and choose what works for you.

Helpful videos on productivity:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iR822\\_romF4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iR822_romF4)

Helpful articles on productivity:

TLDR:

- Productivity could be thought of as the cycle of motivation and work:
- Getting stuff done is what motivates you when nothing else will
  - The cycle could be scaled down to the smallest task, whatever jumpstarts the cycle works
- This model explains why it is easier to complete tasks right before the deadline because motivation is high
- This model also explains why crossing off tasks from to-do lists are effective because it lets you feel good about completing a task while giving another to do
- This cycle can not go on forever because tiredness, confusion, boredom, anxiety, and distractions inevitably make the cycle less efficient
  - Walks are a general remedy for these problems (gives some energy, gives you time to collect your thoughts, gives you something to do besides work, calms anxiety, and allows your mind to wander so distractions are unnecessary later)
  - In regards to tiredness, ideally sleep is the solution but caffeine works
  - In regards to confusion, making to-do lists, breaking big tasks into smaller ones, and planning how to do them offers more clarity
  - In regards to boredom, background noise can help, preferably music without lyrics and changing location is another strategy
  - In regards to anxiety, here are some questions you can ask yourself
    - What am I most worried about?

- Is the worry reasonable?
  - Will this worry matter in the long run?
  - What can I control?
- In regards to distraction, they are best to be avoided
  - For example, leaving the phone in another room when working

## **Outline:**

Feel Good Productivity:

- Part 1 - Tap the Three Sources of Good Feelings: Fun, Empowerment, Connection
- Part 2 - Overcome the Three Sources of Procrastination: Confusion, Habit, Anxiety
- Part 3 - Avoid the Three Kinds of Burnout: Strain, Drain, Mismatch

## **Deep Work:**

- Part 1 - Deep Work is Important
  - Deep Work is Difficult
- Part 2 - Plan Out Time for Deep Work
  - Build Your Deep Work Environment
  - Train Focus
  - Make the Most of Your Focused Time

## **Feel-Good Productivity Notes:**

- Ali Abdaal argues that getting things done should feel natural, easy, and most importantly enjoyable
- Abdaal emphasizes that everyone is different and it is important to find out what works for you; if a suggestion works then keep doing it, and if not then let it go
- The system he outlines challenges the “grind” and “hustle culture” mindset that modern culture celebrates and rather prioritizes emotional well-being
  - The popular theory of productivity today is based on discipline and endurance:  
How much can you force yourself to do?
  - Abdaal argues that’s the opposite of how people naturally work
- Abdaal’s system could be broken down into three concepts

- Where good feelings come from and how to integrate emotional well-being into your work
- Why people procrastinate and how to stop procrastination at its source
- Why people get burned out, and how to avoid or recover from burnout
- Abdaal bases his model of feel-good productivity on the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions
  - The theory states that feeling good isn't just a brief reward for accomplishing something; those positive emotions directly lead to greater accomplishment
  - The theory proposed in 1948 has been proved:  
<https://positivepsychology.com/broaden-build-theory/#empirical-support-for-broaden-and-build-theory?text=down%20the%20line.-,Empirical%20Support%20for%20Broaden%20and%20Build%20Theory,-Following%20Fredrickson%E2%80%99s%20development>
  - When you feel good you're more receptive to new information and more likely to think of creative ideas – broadening your mind and reserving mental energy
    - Conversely studies have shown that being scared or angry narrows your attention (tunnel vision) and feeling sad or overwhelmed drains energy
  - The model can be summed up in this cycle
    - Feeling good boosts your energy
    - Energy boosts productivity
    - Productivity makes you feel even better, and the cycle repeats
      - This model works under the assumption you feel good after finishing a task

## **Content**

- Part 1 - Tap the Three Sources of Good Feelings: Fun, Empowerment, Connection
- Part 2 - Overcome the Three Sources of Procrastination: Confusion, Habit, Anxiety
- Part 3 - Avoid the Three Kinds of Burnout: Strain, Drain, Mismatch

## **Part 1:**

### **Tap the Three Sources of Good Feelings**

- **Fun:** Abdaal says people are hardwired to have fun and fun is a key part of emotional well-being; however, many people lose that sense of fun, joy, and excitement as they grow up
  - The first strategy is to find out what kind of player you are; after all the way you play games is likely the way you live life
  - This should give insight to your own approach to productivity
    - For example, some people want to plan out the most efficient way to conquer quests while others casually wander doing what they find interesting; some enjoy playing by themselves, some enjoy the company of others, some seek out opponents for competition
    - For example, if you are competitive try challenging a friend to see who can get more done
  - The second strategy is to make your work engaging
    - People spend hours playing video games since they are designed to hold your attention with bright colors, exciting music, engaging characters, steady rewards
      - The goal is to mimic the formula game companies use
    - The main idea is to find the joy in what you're doing rather than what has been done
      - People play games because they are fun, not just to get to the end
  - The third strategy is to recognize that you do your best work when you're having fun
    - Abdaal stresses to understand the difference between fun and frivolity
      - Abdaal says the idea that people who are enjoying themselves are not enjoying themselves is a misconception for that is frivolity
      - Rather he claims that people can only do their best work when they're having fun meaning they are giving it they're all at the same time
      - Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi described the same thing in his book Flow

- Csikszentmihalyi described “flow” as a state of absolute focus where you do your best work seemingly without effort; however, one caveat of entering “flow” is that you must enjoy what you are working on, because feelings of boredom and frustration are distracting
- **Empowerment:** When Abdaal says empowerment he is referring to the sense of control over your actions, work, and life; after all the feeling of importance is a basic necessity as is food, water, shelter
  - The first tip is to be bold; in other words, fake it until you make it
    - The tactic of often called “acting as if” and it is common advice for people who struggle with self-confidence
    - Envision the person you want to be and act as if you already are that person
  - The second tip is to constantly assess your abilities to improve your abilities
    - Knowing that you are good at what you do gives a sense of power and control, so if you struggle with feelings of self-consciousness about your skills, take the time to remember and celebrate the progress you have made
    - Compare yourself with the past as a metric for progress
  - The third tip is to take responsibility for everything
    - Accepting the consequences of your decisions and actions is a major part of feeling like you’re in control of your life
    - Conversely, avoiding accountability translates to it seeming like you have no control over your life
    - It is important to note that a common situation is that you can’t choose your tasks or goals, but Abdaal reminds you still have control over your mindset and actions
- **Connection:** Connecting with other people is a source of emotional well-being; the people you surround yourself is a reflection of who you are, so you will be happier if you keep good people around

- Connections work both ways; accepting kindness from others will strengthen connects just as much as helping others will
- Connection is more than getting people to like you, it's about getting people to understand and accept you

## **Part 2**

### **Overcome the Three Sources of Procrastination**

- Abdaal discusses three things that harm emotional well-being and productivity and he coins them blockers – these things are all linked to procrastination
  - They are confusion, habit, and anxiety
  - The first cause is confusion
    - People are more prone to procrastination when they aren't sure what to do or how to do it
    - Abdaal recommends not to ask how the task should be done rather why you are doing it because understanding the larger goal behind a task and why it must be done will provide insight to how it might be done
    - There could be confusion on tasks without deadlines so if you don't clarify when to do something it will likely will not be done at all
  - The second cause is habit
    - Habit is the most common, once people get into the habit of doing nothing, they tend to keep doing nothing; however, habit works both ways and people who start getting things done tend to keep getting things done
    - Abdaal recommends to start small, simple, and easy however insignificant it may seem in order to scale the habit more effectively in the future
    - Even accomplishing small simple tasks will start breaking the bad habit of procrastination
      - One nice simple task to start the day is making the bed
  - The third cause is anxiety
    - People tend to put off doing things they want to do when they are worried about the outcome

- For example, people may be hesitant to start a new hobby because they're worried about looking foolish in front of other experienced hobbyists
- Although there is no way to get rid of anxiety there are some steps to work through it
- The first step is identify anxiety and try answering the question: What, specifically, are you afraid of happening
  - For example, someone new to a hobby may be anxious about other people making fun of their lack of knowledge
- The second step is to assess anxiety and try answering the question: Whether the anxiety is a reasonable response
  - Taking a step back to look at the big picture and the long run helps put current worries into perspective and scale
- The third tip is to plan for the worst case so when it does happen there would be less anxiety

### **Part 3**

#### **Avoid the Three Kinds of Burnout**

- Burnout occurs when work stops feeling good, starts feeling tedious, meaningless, and overwhelming instead
  - Abdaal notes that burnout is more than simple fatigue and should not be mistaken for exhaustion which is usually remedied by a break
- Abdaal categorizes burnout into three types
- The first type is strain
  - This happens when you are doing too much
  - The same way exercising too much may cause to strain a muscle, doing too much may “strain” your well-being
  - Abdaal recommends prioritizing and being honest about your priorities
    - Make a list of projects and goals and see if they realistic based on how much you can comfortably get done
    - One way to sort your goals is the Eisenhower Matrix

- Important and urgent tasks take the priority and must be done as soon as possible
- Important but not urgent tasks should be scheduled and planned for in the future
- Urgent but not important tasks should ideally be delegated to others if possible (preferably the task is important to them)
- Neither important nor urgent tasks should be ignored
- Abdaal recommends choosing distractions carefully
  - He suggests indulging in breaks and distractions that make you feel good, rather than ones that burn time
  - Breaks are a necessity to maintaining productivity
- The second type is drain
  - This happens when you do not get enough rest or do not rest effectively
    - Effective types of rest are ones that help you feel calm and temporarily free of any demands in regards to time and energy
    - Each person is different so only you can discover what works for you
      - For example, some find video games restful, others prefer creative activities like drawing, others enjoy spending time with others like going out to the bar or playing sports with friends
    - Abdaal warns not to let methods of rest turn into more work
    - It is important to understand that resting and taking breaks is productive, because being well-rested makes you more creative, more efficient, and more capable of solving problems
  - The third type is mismatch
    - This happens when your work does not align with your interests and personal principles
      - If what you are doing feels meaningless, that is a clear sign you are headed towards this kind of burnout



- An important question to answer is: what's motivating you?
  - If your only motivation is simply a kind of reward such as paycheck, prestige, or someone's goodwill then the task may not be a good match for you
  - On the other hand if your feelings help drive you and you are excited to work on that task, that indicates your actions are properly aligned with your goals
- Abdaal's advice to figuring out what motivates you can be broken down into four criteria
  - Passion: it must be something you enjoy
  - Skill: it must be something you're good at doing
  - A Cause: it must be something you genuinely believe will benefit others or make the world a better place
  - Profit: it must be something you can make money doing

### ***Deep Work Notes:***

#### **Synopsis:**

- Cal Newport defines “deep work” as focused, interrupted, undistracted work on a task that pushes your cognitive abilities.
  - In contrast “shallow work” describes tasks that aren't cognitively demanding
- Newport argues that deep work is significantly more necessary in the information age when skills like complex problem solving are more prevalent
  - Ironically, the same technologies of the information age like phones, emails, and addictive apps hinder our ability to do deep work

The book was broken down into two parts. The first part were the three foundational ideas of deep work and its benefits. The second part was practices that encourage deep work. I have done my best to make the content more easily digestible. These are the author's thoughts not mine.

#### **Content:**

- Part 1 - Deep Work is Important
  - Deep Work is Difficult
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## **Part 1:**

### **Deep Work is Important**

- Newport argues deep work allows you two abilities: the ability to learn and master new skills, and the ability to increase output in terms of quality and speed
- The ability to learn and master new skills requires deep work
  - Skills whether physical or intellectual can be thought of as brain circuits
  - Myelin is a layer of fatty tissue that grows around neurons, acting as an insulator allowing the cells to fire more efficiently
  - You get better at a skill the more myelin you develop around relevant neurons
  - Focusing intensely on a specific skill, you force relevant circuits to fire which triggers the growth of myelin around the neurons in those circuits
  - Being able to perform deep work translates to focusing intensely on one skill
    - This neurological understanding of skill development demonstrates the necessity of undistracted focus
- Deep work increases output in terms of quality and speed
  - Newport cites Sophie Leroy's concept of "attention residue" in order to explain the negative effects of handling tasks simultaneously and sequentially
    - The problem with multitasking is that switching from Task A to Task B leaves a "residue" of attention that remains thinking about Task A even if Task A has been completed
    - The accumulation of "attention residue" translates to poorer performance on following tasks
      - Therefore, Newport argues that working on long single tasks without switching minimizes the side effects of "attention residue"

- Newport claims productivity could be understood with this formula:
  - $\text{Work Produced} = \text{Time Spent} \times \text{Intensity of Focus}$
- Assuming this formula, deep work supports increasing intensity of focus therefore increasing output in terms of quality and speed

## **Deep Work is Difficult**

- Newport defines the “Principle of Least Resistance”
  - “In a setting, without clear feedback on the impact of various behaviors” ... “we will tend towards behaviors that are easiest in the moment”
  - Newport goes back to this quality as the sort of enemy of deep work and uses it to explain behaviors antithetical to deep work
- Newport defines “Busyness as a Proxy for Productivity”
  - “In the absence of clear indicators of what it means to be productive and valuable” .. “workers turn towards an industrial indicator of productivity: doing lots of stuff in a visible manner”
  - Newport distinguishes busyness from productivity as low concentration versus high concentration work
- Instant communication is problematic for deep work
  - Instant messaging tools interrupt an individual’s work environment
  - Newport suggests the movement towards a work culture encourages human networking rather than deep work is problematic
- Newports thoughts on social media
  - Newport advises to recognize it as a tool and weigh its pros and cons
  - The addictive quality of social media is due to our attraction to variable rewards
    - Variable rewards are rewards that happen unpredictably; you can’t predict which refresh of your feed will reward you with something interesting or something you like so the action never loses appeal

## **Part 2:**

### **Plan Out Time for Deep Work**

- Four types of deep work scheduling

- Seclusion: Remove as many shallow work tasks from routine and spend all time on deep work
  - For example, some authors, artists, scientists, entrepreneurs go off the grid to work on their next project
  - One drawback, is this is not feasible for most given the requirements of their career
- Periodic: Carve out regular periods each week, month, or parts of the year to focus on deep work. These periods should be at least one full day dedicated to deep work
  - For example, you might carve out a three-day block of the week for deep work while the other two days could be for shallower work
- Daily: Set aside a regular block of time each day to focus on deep work
  - For example, you might set aside 8 to 11 a.m.
  - The benefit of this is that the repetition makes it a habit and is more realistic
  - However, it does not offer the intensity of focus a full day of deep work might provide
- Ad Hoc: Do deep work whenever you can find the time to fit it in
  - This is the most flexible schedule but because it is irregular it requires the ability to switch into deep work instantaneously
- Limit to how much deep work you'll be able to accomplish a day
- Newport recommends is planning out every minute of your day and "quantifying depth"
  - Plan the tasks that need to be done and break them down into half-hour blocks
  - "Quantifying depth" means estimating the complexity and time requirement of these tasks
  - Review the accuracy of your estimates and time blocks for each task, which would allow you to set more realistic goals and expectations in the future
- Newport recommends setting ambitious deadlines
  - Holding yourself accountable to tight deadlines improves productivity because people work best under pressure

## **Build Your Deep Work Environment**

- Build an environment that supports deep work
  - Newport suggests designating a certain space where you only go for deep work
  - Avoid distractions
  - Rituals associated with deep work helps make it a habit
- Newport's thoughts on emails (probably not as important now)
  - He says many people use emails without thought or as a quick way to toss responsibilities into someone else's court, resulting in shallow work and unproductive emails
  - In order to avoid such emails Newport recommends
    - Emails articulate the following: 1. The current state of things 2. What the ultimate goal is 3. The most effective next steps
      - Here is an example of a good response to an invitation for lunch:  
"Here are the times over the next week when I'm available. If any of these work for you, let me know, and please send a calendar invite. If none of these work, please send over a few times that do"
    - Make sure people who are interested in contacting you know how you handle incoming emails and which ones you reject

## **Train Your Focus**

- Most can do about an hour of deep work at a time, but Newport suggests techniques that train your brain to focus for longer stretches
- Let Boredom Happen
  - The ability to tolerate boredom translates to the ability to focus at tasks
  - The internet's entertainment industry has sold the idea that "boredom is a crime" making users dependent on its supply
- Define Metrics of Success
  - This gives the opportunity to measure the success of deep work practices and not wonder if results are enough
  - Setting small goals or challenges makes work a bit like an enjoyable game

## **Make the Most of Your Focused Time**

- These are some principles to optimize your time during deep work
- Using the right metrics
  - The most useful metrics are leading metrics while lagging metrics are less useful
    - For example, counting calories is a leading metric while your weight is a lagging metric
    - Leading metrics are more useful because they give real-time feedback
- Make your metrics visible
  - Continuously celebrating small achievements and feeling a sense of progress is an easy way to boost your overall happiness
- Create accountability where possible
  - One way is to take 15 minutes at the end of your workday reflecting on performance
  - Studies show that employees who spend 15 minutes reflecting on what they learned performed 23% better than those who don't
  - <https://hbr.org/2017/03/why-you-should-make-time-for-self-reflection-even-if-you-hate-doing-it>

## **Summary:**

- Dedicating time to plan your tasks can significantly boost your productivity.
- Investing in the right tools and resources ensures that you work efficiently.
- Consistency in your efforts is key to maintaining momentum and achieving long-term goals.
- Eliminating distractions allows you to focus deeply and produce higher-quality work.
- Nurturing a positive mindset can greatly enhance your ability to stay motivated.
- Taking breaks is essential to avoid burnout and keep your mind fresh.
- Reviewing your progress regularly helps you stay on track and adjust your strategies.
- Aligning your daily activities with your overall objectives leads to greater fulfillment and success.

