SHORTFORM

Summary of Indistractable

Original book by Nir Eyal

In today's tech-dependent, app-centered, notification-ruled world, it's easier than ever to get distracted from what's really important—your values, your relationships, and your work. In *Indistractable*, Nir Eyal develops a four-part model for gaining the modern-day superpower of "indistractability."

You'll learn how your distractions start *internally*, why your schedule should be based on your values instead of tasks, how to diminish the power of external triggers in your life, and how to commit to yourself—so you can start driving your life instead of letting its distractions drive you.

1-Page Summary

Every one of your actions either reflects *traction*—moving in the direction of what you *actually* want, helping you accomplish goals—or *distraction*—moving *away* from what you actually want and your goals.

Today, with technology as an integral part of your world, it's harder than ever to avoid the temptation of distraction. To keep moving in the right direction, you need to become *indistractable*—**able to understand and avoid your distractions and choose traction.**

There are four elements of the indistractablity model:

- Control your internal triggers.
- Build your schedule around your values.
- Reduce external triggers.
- Create precommitments.

We'll discuss these four elements and then examine different ways you can bring indistractable habits to your workplace, your children, and your relationships.

Part 1: Control Your Internal Triggers

The root of distraction is *inside you*. Humans are motivated by *freedom from discomfort*—mental and physical discomfort triggers you to find escapes.

- This may look like escaping difficult homework by scrolling social media or escaping marriage problems by building a farm on Animal Crossing.

To get a handle on your distractions, you need to control their root cause—internal triggers.

Change Your Thinking Around Your Discomfort

Learning to control your internal triggers isn't about trying not to think about them—this will just make you fixate on them more. It's about *learning to change how you think about them.* Three exercises can help you examine and understand your internal triggers.

Exercise 1: Reflect on the Trigger

Rather than *reacting* to triggers with distraction, take four steps to meaningfully *reflect* on them and make more deliberate, traction-supporting choices.

1. **Identify the trigger.** When you're about to switch over to a distracting activity, ask yourself: "What discomfort or feeling triggered me to do this?" Usually, you'll find that the source is a negative emotion like anxiety, boredom, or lack of control.
2. **Note the trigger.** Keep a "distraction notebook" where you write down the details of your triggers—the time of day, where you were, your emotions, what you were doing when you felt distracted, and the distracting action you took. This step raises your awareness of your distraction patterns, helping you better control your actions in the future.
3. **Examine the feeling.** When you experience internal discomfort, commit to fully exploring all of your mental and physical feelings. Trying to suppress feelings often makes them stronger, but approaching them with curiosity helps them dissipate.

4. **Look out for transitions.** Distraction often happens when your brain is in the process of shifting from one activity to another. In these moments, tell yourself you'll give in to the distraction *in 10 minutes*—usually, the urge passes by then.

Exercise 2: Reframe the Situation

Rethink the situation you're in, finding a way to make it fun. **"Fun" doesn't always feel *good*—it often feels like challenge, discovery, or most importantly, freedom from discomfort.** Making your situation engaging decreases internal triggers such as boredom and frustration, which curbs your urge to escape into distracting behaviors. This process has two parts:

1. **Dive deeper into the situation.** Break the situation down into its smallest elements and examine them. This helps you find new perspectives and challenges. For example, if you're bored at your job in a coffee shop, closely examine each element of making a perfect latté—espresso type, cream content, steaming temperature, and so on.
2. **Create play.** Come up with different challenges. These should include *limitations*, which spark creativity and engagement. For example, if you have several essays to write, you might aim to write 3,000 words every day or set time limits to beat.

Exercise 3: Rethink Who You Are

Successfully becoming indistractable requires you to rethink two ideas about yourself: your willpower and your labels.

Willpower: Many people believe they have *finite* willpower that becomes depleted. We often use this as an excuse for unhealthy behaviors—for example, you binge-watch Netflix after work because your "willpower is spent." It's important to think of your willpower as an *emotion* that comes and goes rather than a *resource* that runs out.

- If you think of willpower as a resource, you might give up on an overwhelming project because you "need a break." On the other hand, if you think of willpower as an emotion, you find a way to manage it in that moment, such as completing a small or easy part of the project to get a boost of motivation.

Labels: Pay attention to the way you label yourself. When you label yourself a certain way—for example, "easily distracted" or "impulsive"—your behavior becomes more aligned with that label. This works in a positive way, too: Calling yourself "focused" or "indistractable" will prompt focused, indistractable behaviors.

Part 2: Build Your Schedule Around Your Values

When your time isn't structured, it's all too easy to give it up to distractions that feel urgent or necessary. You get to the end of the day having done a lot, but none of the things you *meant* to do. The natural solution to distraction-filled days is creating a schedule.

Build your schedule around the three responsibilities that take up all of your time—you, your relationships, and your work—and your *values* in each. This allows you to visualize the balance among your responsibilities and better distinguish between traction and distraction. *Any behavior that happens at a time it's not scheduled is a distraction, even if it feels productive.*

In this section, we'll examine how each of your three responsibilities should show up in your life, then discuss how to build and maintain an indistractable schedule.

Responsibility 1: You

If you're suffering in the "you" department, your relationships and work will suffer, so it's crucial that your personal values are scheduled first instead of squeezed around other activities. There are two parts to scheduling meaningful "you" time:

1. Schedule your basic needs such as sleeping, eating, and grooming. This helps you compare how you *should* care for yourself with how you *actually* care for yourself.
2. Think about who you want to be and the qualities you want to have, and what value-aligned activities you can schedule. For example, for your value of "mindfulness," you might schedule 15 minutes of gratitude reflection in the morning. For your value of "staying healthy," you might schedule an hour-long walk every morning.

Responsibility 2: Your Relationships

Make time for *non-negotiable commitments* to your relationships with your family and friends every week.

Family: Schedule regular indistractable time with your kids and partner. This time is a commitment, not something that can be pushed aside for another activity or interrupted by your email or social media.

- With your children, you might dedicate several device-free hours every Saturday afternoon doing an activity of their choosing.
- With your spouse, schedule deliberate time together to enjoy one another's company, such as date nights or projects you want to work on.

Friends: Friendship is easily overshadowed by everyday wants and needs of your partner, children, and work. Without maintenance, your friendships easily dissipate. **Your plans with friends need to be *regular, set events* in your schedule, not items on a to-do list.**

- For example, you might have a *weekly commitment* to Sunday night drinks with your group of friends. Because this event happens every week as a group, members can occasionally miss it if they must but can count on seeing you again the next week.

Responsibility 3: Your Work

It's crucial that the way you're spending your time at work is well-aligned with what you want to do and who you want to be—otherwise, your workday can easily become disorganized and distracted. **A schedule helps your manager understand your distractions and see how your time is spent, and it makes for a better balance of values both *at work* and *outside of work.***

At work: Your schedule gives your manager a clear idea of how you're spending your time, which helps them contextualize problems such as late projects, a slump in productivity, and so on. With this information and an understanding of your values, they can suggest areas where you might reprioritize your tasks or cut out activities that aren't serving your and their goals.

- For example, you want a promotion so you start taking on too many projects, making you increasingly frazzled and disorganized. When your manager understands your motivations and schedule, they can explain that spending more time on boosting your sales and less time on other projects would be more helpful to their goals and *won't* hurt your chances of promotion.

Outside of work: Your work-related schedule should note any *non-negotiable* commitments that happen

outside the workplace. This helps your manager know when it is and isn't appropriate to ask you to do extra work or stay late.

- For example, if your weekly schedule shows Thursday nights blocked off for family, your manager understands that it's *not* reasonable or appropriate to ask you to stay late. However, if there are no non-negotiables on your Wednesday night schedule, your manager could reasonably ask to cut into that time if a project is truly urgent.

Build and Maintain an Indistractable Schedule

First, reflect on how your three responsibilities show up in your life and ask yourself three questions:

1. **"What is or isn't working in my current schedule?"** Think about areas where you're spending too much time or too little time.
2. **"What activities would better align me with my values?"** Think about parts of your day where you sacrifice your values in one area for another, and imagine how activities would look different if you stuck to *one* responsibility at a time.
3. **"How much time do I want to allocate to each of my responsibilities?"** Think about the ways your schedule would allow you more time for some values and restrict others.

Your answers to these questions reveal how your time will *ideally* be spent. Next, build your ideal schedule using two essential elements of indistractable scheduling.

Element 1: Timeboxing

Timeboxing is a way of organizing your calendar by dedicating blocks of time to specific activities. For example, you might timebox "read to kids" or "go through emails." Timeboxing serves two purposes:

1) It helps you balance your responsibilities. Limiting the time you can spend on an activity stops you from working on it "until it's done" as you might with tasks on a to-do list. This prevents you from letting one responsibility take up too much of your time at the expense of another.

2) It helps you stick to what you're *meant* to be doing. You decide *what* you'll do and *when* you'll do it. This can stop small, easy tasks from distracting you from what you're doing, because you know it will get done at another time.

- For example, in the middle of a difficult task, you might think, "I should return Sheila's call now, before I forget." Having a timeboxed schedule allows you to say, "I set time this afternoon for catching up on calls. I'll add Sheila to that list."

Element 2: No Blank Space

You must schedule everything you do, because it's the only way to accurately gauge your indistractability—that is, how often you do what you planned. It doesn't matter so much what your schedule looks like—it matters that you *stick to it*.

- For example, if you *plan* to spend all morning on Reddit and actually do so, you were indistractable—doing what you planned to. On the other hand, if you planned to spend an hour watching television but answered a few work emails on your phone, you were distracted—not doing what you planned.

Part 3: Reduce External Triggers

Our lives are inundated with external triggers that tempt us with an easy escape from internal discomfort. Deciding how to handle these triggers can be complicated—while most are distractions, *some* can help you build traction.

- For example, you may have alarms that keep you on schedule or health apps that send reminders to drink water and stretch.

Manage Eight Common External Triggers

It's up to you to decide which of your device's triggers are useful and which are distracting. **Give each trigger an *honest* assessment by asking yourself: Does this trigger serve me?** Then, adjust your devices so only the triggers that serve you can get your attention. There are eight common triggers that you should think about:

1) Other people: Create an obvious visual cue that tells other people that you're not available for interruption. This can take any form that makes sense to you, such as a sign on top of your computer monitor with the message, "I'm focusing right now, please come back later" or a designated hat or pair of headphones that signify deep focus time.

2) Email: Checking your email and responding to messages may *feel* productive, but it can take up *hours* of your day. To reduce your overall email time, you have to manage two factors:

- **Time spent checking email:** First, make your inbox less tempting by making it predictable—unsubscribe from unimportant newsletters and services. Second, reduce the number of emails you receive—you can do this by setting aside in-person office hours or setting your emails to delay your responses by a few hours, slowing down the response cycle.
- **Time answering email:** Each time you check your inbox, reply to urgent emails, tag semi-urgent emails "Today," and tag non-urgent emails "This week." Set a daily timebox for processing "Today" emails and a weekly timebox for processing "This week" emails.

3) Group chat: Set three boundaries around your group chat use so that it shows up in your workday as a *tool for traction*, rather than invading your workday as a distraction.

- **Use it sparingly:** Use group chat like any other real-time communication—schedule time to check messages and reply. Set an away message and turn it off at the end of your group chat timebox.
- **Keep groups small:** Restrict chat invitees to two or three people who are most relevant to the issue and can contribute meaningfully.
- **Use it *only* for quick, unimportant matters:** Discuss complicated and sensitive issues in person and leave your chat for simple confirmations or questions.

4) Meetings: Often, meetings are an excuse for someone to get *others* to think about a problem they have. They interrupt employees' schedules, and when attendees are stuck in a boring and unproductive echo chamber of the same ideas around an issue, they'll be triggered toward distracted behaviors. You can make meetings more meaningful in two ways:

- **Require preparation:** The meeting organizer must send out a short agenda that details the problem and their best suggestion for a solution. Prior to the meeting, attendees should use this information to brainstorm solutions. These two steps ensure that everyone will hit the ground running at the meeting.
- **Ban devices:** Ask attendees to take notes with pen and paper, and set up a charging station by the door where they can plug in their devices.

5) Smartphones: Your smartphone is probably one of the most distracting things in your life, but it can also be a useful tool for a variety of tasks. Maximize your phone's use as a tool for traction by first rearranging your apps and then adjusting their settings.

- **Rearrange your apps:** First, delete any apps that don't serve you. Second, think about apps that are useful to you, but distracting. You can often *replace* where you use these apps—for example, you might delete social media from your phone and use it exclusively on your computer. Last, rearrange your apps to remove clutter. Sort traction-supporting apps into a *Goals* folder and a *Tools* folder on your home screen, and move all other apps to the secondary screen.
- **Adjust the settings:** Think about which apps *deserve to grab your attention in any situation.* These apps—for example, your email and your messaging app—can keep their audio or visual notifications. Disable notifications for everything else.

6) Desktop: When you work against the background of a cluttered desktop, you encounter many visual reminders of questions to answer, tasks to complete, or ideas you wanted to research. These visual reminders of easy and interesting tasks can easily trigger you to escape from the discomfort of your work. **Combat this by sorting everything into out-of-sight folders.** This organizes your desktop so you can find what you're looking for quickly and reduce your chances of being distracted by visual reminders.

7) Articles: When you come across an interesting article, you'll often read it right away—at the expense of what you *should* be doing—or you'll keep it open in a browser tab so you don't lose it, which clutters your workspace with tempting visual reminders. Articles are knowledge-boosting tools when used the right way—rather than cutting them out, change how and when you spend time on them.

- *Stop reading articles on your web browser.* Eyal recommends the browser extension and app Pocket for this step. Pocket will pull an article's content and save it to the app on your phone, so you can read during your article timebox instead.

8) Social media: One of the most addictive features of social media is the "news feed," where you can scroll through endless pictures and posts. Without the news feed, social media becomes less addictive and more in your control. There are two methods you can use:

- **Install browser extensions to control what you see:** You can find extensions to block almost anything that you find is keeping you stuck on social media—including the news feed, recommended videos, and comments.
- **Preload specific pages:** Skip over the homepage—where the news feed lives—by navigating directly to the page you want to access. To do this, save specific frequently visited or important URLs to your bookmarks bar so you'll go directly to the part of the site you *want* to be on. For example, instead of bookmarking Facebook.com, you might bookmark Facebook.com/messages or Facebook.com/[your business page]

Part 4: Create Precommitments

The last part of the indistractable model focuses on locking yourself *into* traction, rather than keeping distractions *out.* You accomplish this by using *precommitments*—choices you make while in an undistracted state that will help guide your behaviors when you're tempted by distraction in the future. There are three types of precommitments that minimize the power of distraction: effort pacts, price pacts, and identity pacts.

Effort Pacts

An effort pact is a precommitment that makes it *more difficult* to do something *undesirable*. This extra bit of difficulty gives you a moment to pause and ask yourself if the distraction is *really* what you want to do. There are several ways you can create effort pacts for yourself.

- You can set apps, such as Self Control and Forest, to block certain websites when you need to focus.
- You can make yourself accountable to others—for example, asking a friend who works from home to come work in your home office so you both stay focused.

Price Pacts

Price pacts attach money to your precommitment as an incentive to stick with what you said you would do. If you do what you're supposed to, you get to keep the money. If you don't, you have to give up the money. This works especially well because people are much more motivated by *possible loss* than they are by *possible gains*.

- For example, if you always skip over guitar practice, attach a $100 bill to your practice schedule and make a pact: If you miss a session, you must light the bill on fire. Every time you think about skipping practice, this tangible loss will help you rethink it.

Identity Pacts

Identity pacts are a precommitment to the identity you want to have. These pacts naturally align your behaviors with the desired identity.

- For example, make being indistractable an integral part of your identity by making a pact to describe yourself as someone who *is* indistractable. For example, you're not someone who *can't* tolerate distracting notifications—you're someone who *doesn't* tolerate them.

Introduction: What Does It Mean to Be Indistractable?

In our overconnected world, there's always an app notification begging for your attention, an email pinging in the background, or a news feed to scroll through. Technology *can* be useful if you have control over how you use it, but that's often not the case. Many people are ruled by their devices—unable to pull themselves away even when they *know* they should. **This takes a toll on your physical and mental health, your ability to focus, and your relationships.**

Understand Traction and *Dis*traction

Every one of your actions is spurred by an internal trigger, such as boredom, or an external trigger, such as an Instagram notification. These actions either reflect *traction* or *distraction*.

- **Traction:** Actions that push you in the direction of what you *actually* want and help you accomplish goals. For example, sitting down to do your homework after dinner.
- **Distraction:** Actions that pull you *away* from what you want and don't help you with your goals. For example, scrolling through Reddit while you're supposed to be doing homework.

Distractions have always existed, but today's world offers unprecedented amounts of information, apps attuned to human behavior, and ever-present technology. It's almost impossible to escape distraction, and it's always much more accessible and tempting than traction.

The Indistractable Model

Being indistractable means that you understand your distractions and control them instead of letting them control you. When a trigger pushes you toward distraction, you'll take a moment to examine your feelings and your behavior and figure out how to change your actions to better align with your values.

When you can recognize and stop your distractions, you'll more consistently choose behaviors that help you gain traction in life—helping you follow through on what you say you'll do, balance different areas of your life, and become more focused.

The indistractable model has four parts:

1. Control your internal triggers.
2. Build your schedule around your values.
3. Cut out your external triggers.
4. Create precommitments.

In this summary, we'll discuss the importance of each of these elements and examine actionable ways to practice them.

Exercise: Think About the Consequences of Your Distractions

Reflect on the distracting, unimportant activities that take your time away from goal-supporting and productive actions.

Think about your day-to-day activities. What do you consider your most distracting habits? (For example, checking social media on your phone or binge-watching Netflix.)

What are the important things these habits are distracting you from? (For example, social media is distracting you from studying, and Netflix is distracting you from getting a good night's sleep.)

What do you believe you could accomplish if you learned to be indistractable? (For example, less procrastination and stress in school, more time focusing on your family without thinking about work, or less dependence on your smartphone.)

Part 1: Control Your Internal Triggers

Before you can control your distractions, you first need to understand what distractions *are*. Like many people, you probably believe that distraction is a product of the things around you such as your phone, different apps, or your chatty coworkers. **In reality, the root of distraction is *inside you*.**

Contrary to popular belief, humans aren't motivated by punishment and reward—we're motivated by *freedom from discomfort.* When we feel physical or mental discomfort, we naturally search for ways to escape it. These discomforts and escapes can take many forms, such as:

- The reality of difficult homework and the escape of scrolling social media
- The reality of marriage problems and the escape of building a farm on Animal Crossing
- The reality of work stress and the escape of Netflix binges

To get a handle on your distractions, you need to control their root cause—internal triggers.

Change Your Thinking Around Your Discomfort

No matter how good your life is, it's likely you have a nagging sense of dissatisfaction or restlessness that drives you to look for "escapes." **What's surprising about this feeling is that it's *completely normal*—human evolution was driven by dissatisfaction**. The desire to have *more* is what drives advancement and discovery.

Understanding that discomfort and dissatisfaction are *normal* is an essential part of becoming indistractable. Acknowledging your discomfort means you can examine it and think about how to use it, rather than suppressing it. The more you try to *suppress* an idea, the more aggressively it will invade your thoughts—as would happen if someone asked you *not* to think about a white bear.

Learning to control your internal triggers isn't about learning *not to think about them*—it's about *learning to change how you think about them.* Three exercises can help you examine and understand your internal triggers.

Exercise 1: Reflect on the Trigger

Rather than *reacting* to triggers with distraction, take four steps to meaningfully *reflect* on them and make more deliberate, traction-supporting choices.

Step 1: Identify the Trigger

When you find yourself about to switch over to a distracting activity, ask yourself: "What particular discomfort or feeling triggered me to do this?" Usually, you'll find that the source is a negative emotion like anxiety, frustration, boredom, craving, incompetence, or lack of control.

- For example, you might be constantly checking your emails when you're supposed to be working on difficult thesis revisions. Upon reflection, you find that you're reacting to feeling frustrated and overwhelmed by escaping into the productive feeling of getting caught up on email.

Step 2: Note the Trigger

Keep a "distraction tracker" where you write down the details of your internal triggers—the time of day, who you were with, where you were, your emotions, what you were doing when you felt distracted, and the

distracting action you took.

Time	Where/Who	Activity	Feeling	Distracting Action
2:15	Home, alone	Studying	Overwhelmed and nervous	Reorganized bookcase
3:45	Starbucks, alone	Editing résumé	Frustrated, bored, unaccomplished	Scrolled through Instagram
7:45	Home, with family	Watching a movie	Anxious about upcoming exams	Started checking and organizing emails

This step raises your awareness of your distraction patterns, helping you better control your actions in the future.

- For example, the next time you start feeling restless while studying, you *know* you're about to click over to Reddit so you block the website for a few hours.

Step 3: Examine the Feeling

When you experience internal discomfort, commit to fully exploring all of your mental and physical feelings.

- For example, you might notice that when you feel internal discomfort your leg starts bouncing, you get a tightness in your chest, you start feeling restless, or you start humming to yourself. Once you *give in* to the distraction, you might feel relaxed, anxious in a different way, or equally restless.

The important part of this step is *sticking with your feelings* for as long as possible. This helps you accept and feel curious about your urges, instead of making them stronger by resisting them or trying to push them away.

Step 4: Look Out for Transitions

Distraction often crops up during *transitional moments*, when your brain is already in the process of shifting gears from one activity to another. In these moments, you usually think you'll do something "just for a moment" while you shift gears, but your brain has other plans and hooks onto this new activity.

- This might look like sending a message to a friend and opening up Tumblr while you wait for their reply or going to the kitchen for a snack and scrolling through Instagram while you're at it—only to find yourself still scrolling 30 minutes later back at your desk.

Try adopting a 10-minute rule to avoid latching onto the wrong activity in a moment of transition. Whenever you're in one of these moments and feel the urge to grab your phone, open a new website, or distract yourself, tell yourself, "Okay, I'll do that in 10 minutes." Often, when those 10 minutes are up, you're already deep into another, more productive task and have forgotten your urge.

- Psychologists call this "surfing the urge"—when the desire to distract comes up, you acknowledge it

and commit to "surfing" on the feelings rather than diving into them or pushing them elsewhere.

Exercise 2: Reframe the Situation

The second way to harness your discomfort's power is *rethinking the situation you're in* and finding a way to make it fun.

"Fun" doesn't always feel *good*—it often feels like challenge, discovery, or most importantly, freedom from discomfort. Making your situation engaging decreases internal triggers such as boredom and frustration, which curbs your urge to escape into distracting behaviors.

How to Create More Fun

Creating fun doesn't require you to *run away from* the situation by switching to a new activity or to *add elements* to it like points or friends. Rather, it requires that you *dive deeper* to discover new information, perspectives, and challenges within the situation. When you manipulate a familiar situation to give it a sense of novelty, challenge, or excitement, you reframe your effort or concentration as "play," making you feel more focused and engaged.

1) Dive deeper: Focus intently on the situation, break it down into its smallest elements, and learn as much about each element as you can.

- For example, if you're bored with your job at a coffee shop, think about making the perfect latté. This requires learning about different types of espresso, the cream content of different types of milk, the outcome of various steaming temperatures, and so on.

2) Create play: Come up with different challenges—these should include different types of limitations because working within constraints sparks creativity and engagement.

- For example, if you have several essays to write, you might aim to write 3,000 words every day or set time limits to beat.

(Shortform note: Read our summary of How to Stop Worrying and Start Living to learn more about the benefits of finding ways to make your work interesting.)

Exercise 3: Rethink Who You Are

It's commonly thought that people have a *finite* amount of willpower. Once it's used up, you have to wait until your "tank" is full again. Many people use this idea to excuse unhealthy behaviors after class or work, such as vegging out on the couch in front of Netflix. **However, scientists have recently found that *willpower depletion isn't real*.** Your willpower isn't running out—rather your *belief* it's running out fuels defeated behaviors.

Willpower isn't a resource so much as an *emotion*—it comes and goes depending on internal and external circumstances, and can be managed and controlled with reflection and practice.

- Imagine you're working on an overwhelming project and are feeling low on motivation. If you thought of willpower as a resource, you might give up because you "need a break." On the other hand, if you think of willpower as an emotion, you find a way to manage it in that moment, such as completing a small or easy part of the project to get a boost in motivation.

Pay Attention to Labels

In addition to thinking about your willpower the right way, pay attention to the way you label yourself.

When you label yourself a certain way—for example, "easily distracted" or "impulsive"—your behavior becomes more aligned with that label. This works positively, too: Calling yourself "focused" or "indistractable" will prompt focused, indistractable behaviors.

This means that it's especially important to be self-compassionate when you experience failure or setbacks. By chastising yourself or calling yourself a failure, you create greater internal discomfort which translates into more distracting habits.

- One way that many people train themselves to be more self-compassionate is by talking to themselves as they'd talk to one of their friends—we're naturally kinder with others than with ourselves, focusing on what went right and seeing the situation more objectively.

Exercise: Reflect on the Feelings Driving Distraction

One of the keys to stopping and preventing distraction is paying attention to the internal triggers that usually drive you to undesirable behaviors.

Describe the situations where you find that you're most easily driven to distraction—pay attention to both the activity and details such as time of day or who's usually with you. (For example, you might feel most distracted at work right after lunch or when you're trying to study alone in your room.)

What are the feelings—physical and mental—that usually precede giving in to a distraction? (For example, you experience restlessness, chest tightness, anxiety, or boredom.)

How does giving in to distracting activities usually make you feel? (For example, you might feel relief, or you might feel *more* anxious.)

Exercise: Reframe Your Situation

Adding challenges to everyday activities makes them engaging and interesting—reducing your need for a distracting "escape."

Describe an activity that often makes you feel bored, restless, or otherwise in need of escape. (For example, practicing an instrument or writing article pitches.)

How can you "dive deeper" into this activity—that is, break it down into smaller parts and examine them closely? (For example, you might research each of your instrument's chords and which chord combinations work best, or go through old, accepted pitches to identify "best practices.")

How can you create a challenge within this activity? Keep in mind that engaging challenges usually set *limits*. (For example, you challenge yourself to learn one new song per week or make a goal of sending three pitches in two hours.)

Part 2: Build Your Schedule Around Your Values

The second part of becoming indistractable is learning to schedule your day around traction-supporting activities—that is, activities that pull you toward what you want to do and who you want to be.

Why Scheduling Is Essential to Indistractablity

Two-thirds of Americans report that they don't plan out their days. **Although an unplanned day might make you *feel* that you have more freedom over how your day is spent, it actually creates *less* freedom—instead of controlling your day, your day controls you.** When your time isn't structured, it's all too easy to give it up to distractions that feel urgent or necessary. You get to the end of the day having done a lot, but none of the things you *meant* to do.

Often, people try to add structure to their days by creating to-do lists. This is one of the *worst* ways to plan your day, for several reasons:

- It's easy to move unfinished tasks to the next day, then move the next day's unfinished tasks to the *next* day, and so on. The tasks never get done and continue to loom over you.
- As your tasks get bumped from day to day, the list expands as you think of new tasks that need to be done. This creates ample opportunity for distraction—you're likely to choose the easiest tasks on the list instead of buckling down and completing the bigger and more difficult tasks.

The natural solution to distraction-filled days and the "I'll do it later" mindset is creating a schedule and *sticking to it*.

Consider Your Values and Responsibilities

You should build your schedule around the three responsibilities that take up all of your time—you, your relationships, and your work—and your *values* in each. Your values represent what's important to you and who you want to be.

- Your values may look like: mindfulness and learning for yourself, equality and presence in your relationships, and creativity and variety at work.

It's crucial to build your schedule around them because mismanaged values trigger distraction. The values in different parts of your life usually won't quite intersect, so you must consciously balance them. If you accidentally concentrate too much on the values in one part of your life, your values elsewhere will suffer from neglect.

- For example, focusing too much on your work can cause you to miss out on time with your spouse or may cause you to miss family dinners.

When your values are unbalanced, you become stressed or feel that you're "not enough." These feelings of stress or dissatisfaction will drive you to distracting habits—leaving you with even *less* time for fully living your values.

Your values become easier to live—and balance—when you consciously track how your time is spent on each responsibility. On a schedule, you can not only visualize the balance between your values but can

also better distinguish between traction and distraction. *Any behavior that happens at a time it's not scheduled is a distraction, even if it feels productive.*

- For example, you make time for playing with your kids at the park on Saturday afternoon. During that time, you ended up answering a few work emails—a *distraction* from what you meant to do with your time, though it may have felt productive.

Through the rest of this chapter, we'll examine how each of your three responsibilities should show up in your life, then discuss how to build and maintain an indistractable schedule.

Responsibility 1: You

Taking care of yourself and meeting your personal values is the *core* of your life. If you're suffering in the "you" department, your relationships and work will suffer, so it's crucial that your personal values are scheduled first instead of squeezed around other activities. Spending time on yourself looks like:

- Taking care of yourself with exercise, healthy eating, and good hygiene
- Spending time on things that you enjoy, such as your hobbies or entertainment, or taking a "day off."
- Engaging in spirituality or mindfulness

How to Schedule "You" Time

There are two parts to building meaningful "you" time into your schedule. First, schedule time for meeting your basic needs such as sleeping, eating, and grooming. You may think scheduling basic self-care is unnecessary, but you've likely sacrificed sleep for spending time on social media or healthy eating for ordering takeout. When you have these basic needs on your schedule and compare them with what happened in reality, you can more easily see unhealthy patterns of distraction.

Second, think about who you want to be and the qualities you want to have, and what value-aligned activities you can schedule.

- For example, if one of your values is "mindfulness," you might schedule 15 minutes of gratitude reflection in the morning. If one of your values is "staying healthy," you might schedule an hour-long walk every morning.

Responsibility 2: Your Relationships

It's essential to schedule your relationships because they're easily ignored when something urgent or important comes up, meaning your loved ones get your *leftover* time, not your *dedicated* time. Make time for *non-negotiable commitments* to your relationships with your family and friends every week.

Commit Time to Family

Schedule regular indistractable time with your kids. This time is a commitment, not something that can be pushed aside for another activity or interrupted by your email or social media.

- For example, you might dedicate several device-free hours every Saturday afternoon doing an activity of your child's choosing.

It's important to schedule time with your partner, too. This may not make sense to you because you *live* with your partner—you already spend plenty of time with them. However, it's likely that much of this time together isn't aligned with your values.

- For example, you might be having dinner together every night but watching television in silence

instead of enjoying each other's company.

Schedule *deliberate* time together, such as date nights, projects you want to work on together, or tech-free outings.

Commit Time to Friends

Friendship is incredibly important to your well-being, yet is easily overshadowed by the everyday wants and needs of your partner, children, and work. Without maintenance, your friendships easily dissipate, and it becomes harder to reconnect.

Your plans with friends need to be *regular, set events* in your schedule, not "someday" items on a to-do list. Otherwise, it becomes too easy to prioritize something else—like a weekend project nagging at you—or flake out for unimportant reasons—such as simply feeling too lazy to go to that dinner party.

- For example, you might organize a weekly potluck with a small group of friends that rotates between houses. This dinner should be a *set commitment* among your friends. Because this event happens every week as a group, members can occasionally miss it if they must—the rest of the group can get together without them, and they can rejoin the next week.

Responsibility 3: Your Work

It's crucial that the way you're spending your time at work is well-aligned with what you want to do and who you want to be—otherwise, your workday can easily become disorganized and distracted by constant emails, people coming into your office, last-minute meetings, and so on. All these distractions make your work feel overwhelming and unfulfilling, or they pressure you to spend more time on work than on yourself or your relationships.

A schedule lets your manager understand your distractions, see how your time is spent, and help you balance your values both *inside* and *outside* the office.

How Your Schedule Balances Values at Work

Your schedule gives your manager a clear idea of how your time is being spent, which helps them contextualize problems such as late projects, a slump in productivity, and so on.

With this information and an understanding of your values, they can suggest areas where you might reprioritize your tasks or cut out activities that aren't serving your goals and theirs.

- For example, you may be taking on too many projects and offering to mentor many people because you'll be seeking a promotion within the next few years. This is making you increasingly frazzled and disorganized. When your manager understands your motivations and looks at your schedule, they can explain that spending more time on boosting your sales and less time on mentoring would be more helpful to their goals and *won't* hurt your chances of promotion.

When your manager helps you define what's important and what's not important, it becomes easier for you to say "no" to things that would distract you, disorganize you, or cut into the time meant for your other responsibilities.

How Your Schedule Balances Values Outside of Work

Your work-related schedule should note any *non-negotiable* commitments that happen outside the workplace. This helps your manager know when it is and isn't appropriate to ask you to do extra work or stay late.

- For example, if your weekly schedule shows Thursday night blocked off for family, your manager understands that it's *not* reasonable or appropriate to ask you to stay late. However, if there are no non-negotiables on your Wednesday night schedule, your manager could reasonably ask to cut into that time if a project is truly urgent.

This system works best when you make it a priority to check in *regularly* with your manager about your schedule.

- If you can plan your schedule weekly, schedule a 15-minute meeting every Monday morning to go over it together, and align on your expectations for the week. Your manager can suggest places to reshuffle priorities and note when they can and cannot interrupt you—at work and at home.
- If you have a schedule that changes every day, meet with your manager for five minutes at the beginning of the day.

(Shortform note: Read our summary of Daring Greatly to learn how focusing on the gap between your *aspirational* values and your *practiced* values can benefit you, your relationships, and your work.)

How to Build an Indistractable Schedule

Reflect on how your three responsibilities show up in your life and ask yourself three questions:

1) "What is or isn't working in my current schedule?" Think about responsibilities that are taking too much of your attention and values that are being neglected.

- For example, you're spending too many late nights at work, which is cutting into your relationship value of being a present parent.

2) "What activities would better align with my values?" Think about parts of your day where you sacrifice your values in one area for another, and imagine how activities would look different if you stuck to *one* responsibility at a time.

- For example, you might frequently check work emails while spending time with your children, instead of listening to their stories. Focusing on *just* your children would make you a more present parent.

3) "How much time do I want to allocate to each of my responsibilities?" Think about the ways your *ideal* schedule would allow more time for some values and restrict others.

- For example, you might want an hour each day to work on your hobbies or ensure that your work responsibilities never interfere with your weekend.

Your answers to these questions reveal how your time will *ideally* be spent. Next, build your ideal schedule using two essential elements of indistractable scheduling: *timeboxing* and *no blank spaces*.

Element 1: Timeboxing

Timeboxing is a way of organizing your calendar by dedicating blocks of time to specific activities. For example, you might timebox "read to kids" or "go through emails." Timeboxing serves two purposes:

1) It helps you balance your responsibilities. Limiting the time you can spend on an activity stops you from working on it "until it's done" as you might with tasks on a to-do list. This prevents you from letting one

responsibility take up too much of your time at the expense of another.

- For example, you see how staying late at work to wrap up projects regularly cuts out your scheduled gym time, revealing how much you're neglecting your personal values in favor of your work values.

2) It helps you stick to what you're *meant* to be doing. Timeboxing creates what psychologists call an "implementation intention"—you decide *what* you'll do and *when* you'll do it, which can help you get tasks done instead of perpetually pushing them off. Additionally, timeboxing stops small, easy tasks from interrupting what you're doing because you establish a specific time you'll take care of them.

- For example, if you're in the middle of a difficult client proposal, you might think, "I'm so busy today—I'll get in touch with Sheila and Bill tomorrow," or "I should return Sheila's call and email Bill now, before I forget." A timeboxed schedule would help you avoid both of these mindsets: "I've blocked off an hour this afternoon for catching up on calls and emails. I'll get in touch with Sheila and Bill at that time."

(Shortform note: Visit Eyal's *Indistractable website* for a timeboxing tool.)

Element 2: No Blank Space

You must schedule everything you do, because it's the only way to accurately gauge your indistractability—that is, how often you do what you planned. It doesn't matter so much what your schedule looks like—it matters that you *stick to it*.

- For example, if you *plan* to spend all morning on Reddit and do so, you were indistractable—doing what you planned to. On the other hand, if you planned to spend an hour watching television but answered a few work emails on your phone, you were distracted—not doing what you planned.

How to Maintain Your Schedule

Keep in mind that the first schedule you create is *ideal*—your reality usually won't match up on the first try. If you expect perfection, you'll end up stressed or discouraged, which triggers *more* distracted behaviors. Two mindsets will help you optimize your schedule without stressing about it.

Mindset 1: Your Schedule Is a Constant Experiment

It's crucial that you *continually* reflect on how you spend your time in reality, identify strong and weak points of your schedule, and make edits. Each week, take 20 minutes to reflect on two questions:

1) When did I do what I planned to do? When did I become distracted? Reflect on this question while looking over your weekly distraction tracker so that you can easily pinpoint *reasons* for your distractions.

- You may find that internal triggers are worse at a certain time of day or that one colleague has a tendency to interrupt you.

2) What schedule changes might help me avoid distraction? Sometimes, distraction happens in your schedule as an unpredictable, one-time event—such as a major problem at work forcing you to miss family dinner three nights in a row. These types of distractions don't usually warrant changing your schedule.

On the other hand, many distractions happen because your schedule has a flaw or doesn't allow for or circumvent a predictable event. In these cases, you need to make changes.

- For example, you scheduled quality time with your daughter on Friday nights from 6-7, but you forgot that she has karate practice—so you spend the time on your phone. To fix this, you'd move the quality time to another day or to the hour after karate.
- Or imagine that you have a colleague who always interrupts you after she gets back from lunch to see what you need help with during the afternoon. You can fix this by timeboxing 10 minutes before lunch to email her updates and help requests. Let her know about this new system so she doesn't come looking for you after lunch.

By frequently reflecting on your schedule, you'll become more aware of what parts of your day support traction or cause distraction. **Over time, you'll adjust your schedule and experiment with new ways to gain traction—eventually helping you create a refined schedule that meets all your values and truly works with your life.**

Mindset 2: You Can Control Input, Not Outcome

One thing that can be frustrating about making your schedule is that you sometimes don't get the outcome you *want*, despite making the time for it. **These setbacks can make you feel frustrated and stressed, throwing you off track.**

- For example, you set aside seven hours for sleep—but when you get in bed and turn out the light, you feel wide awake. You become so worried about not sleeping that you make yourself even *more* sleepless. You reach for your phone and start scrolling.

Reduce the stress around your schedule by understanding that the outcome of your efforts won't always be within your control—all you *can* control is the effort you put in. Your responsibility is to be in the right place at the scheduled time. Even if your body doesn't cooperate with you, you're at least providing the necessary input.

- For example, if you timebox 7 to 8 p.m. for work on an essay, you should be sitting at your desk at 7 p.m. with the document open in front of you. You might not have the motivation or inspiration to make much headway on it, but at the very least, you're sitting at your desk as planned.
- On the other hand, imagine you *didn't* control your input—7 p.m. rolls around and you're in the kitchen making tea before heading to your desk. You don't feel very motivated, so you scroll through your emails. The hour counts as a distraction because you weren't sticking to your plan.

While the outcome may not be what you hoped, you can at least make sure you're giving yourself the best possible chance to do what you planned.

Exercise: Build Your Ideal Self and Relationship Schedule

Building a schedule that prioritizes what's *truly* important depends on being clear about your values.

What are your *personal* values? (For example, your values may include challenge, variety, and learning.)

What value-aligned activities can you schedule into your week? (For example, you might timebox several hours per week for advancing in your hobby and an hour on the weekend for exploring a new part of town.)

What are some non-negotiable timeboxes you can create for your family and friends? (For example, you read to your kids for 30 minutes every night, cook dinner for your spouse one night per week, and have a standing appointment for Sunday night drinks with your friends.)

Part 3.1: Cut Out External Triggers: Communication Without Boundaries

The third element of becoming indistractable is reducing the external triggers in your life. While internal triggers are frequent drivers of distraction, external triggers constantly invade our lives with beeps, pop-up notifications, vibrations, alarms, and so on. They tempt you with an escape from any internal discomfort you may be feeling.

It's vital that you get a handle on the external triggers around you because they don't just interrupt you for a moment—they can derail your workflow for an extended period. Research shows that when people are interrupted during a task—to answer a message or check their email, for example—they'll try to compensate when they return to the task by working faster, but with higher stress levels.

Unfortunately, the answer isn't so easy as refusing to respond to incoming emails or turning your phone facedown.

- One study showed that simply *receiving* a notification is just as distracting as *responding* to a message or call.
- Furthermore, the mere presence of your phone—even if you're not looking at it—strains your attention because a portion of your mental energy is allocated to ignoring your phone.

Sort Your External Triggers

Deciding how to handle external triggers can be complicated because while most are distractions, *some* can help you build traction.

- For example, you may have alarms that keep you on track with your timeboxed schedule, health apps that send reminders to drink water and stretch, and so on.

It's up to you to decide which of your device's triggers are useful and which are distracting. **Give each trigger an *honest* assessment by asking yourself: Does this trigger benefit *me*, or do I benefit *it*?**

There are two types of external triggers you'll have to adjust in your life—triggers that come from a lack of boundaries around your communication with others, and triggers that stem from the technology you use every day. In this chapter, we'll explore ways to reduce distraction from communication without boundaries, and in the next chapter we'll discuss technology triggers.

Trigger #1: Other People

Other people are some of the most pervasive distractions in your workplace. **This problem is especially present in modern office environments, as 70% of American offices have adopted "open floor plans."** This means that employees don't have closed-off workspaces that they can retreat to for deep focus. Instead, they're in the middle of a sea of triggers—they can see what their colleagues are doing, overhear conversations, see who's coming in and out, smell the donuts in the break room, and so on. These constant distractions slow down your work, force you to catch up by working faster with more stress, and decrease your overall satisfaction.

Send the Right Message

You can't control everything that's happening around you in your work environment, but you *can* control your messaging. Create an obvious visual cue that tells other people that you're not available for interruption. This can take any form that makes sense to you:

- A large piece of cardstock on the top of your computer monitor with a message such as, "I'm focusing right now, please come back later."
- Taping a sign to the back of your chair that says, "Please don't interrupt me right now. I'll be available at 3."
- A designated hat or pair of headphones that signify deep focus time

It's important to talk to everyone in your workspace—whether you're in an office environment or working from home—about your system, for three reasons.

1. You ensure that they understand your commitment to being indistractable and don't interrupt you.
2. They're forced to think about their behaviors, and they'll be more aware of interrupting you and others in the future.
3. They may learn from you and make their own signal to show that they need time without interruptions.

Trigger #2: Email

Checking your email and responding to messages may *feel* productive, but it's a huge source of distraction in your life. **The average employee receives 100+ emails per day—that means that if you spend just two minutes reading and replying to each message, you're spending nearly *three and a half hours* per day on email.** Compounding email's distracting power is the fact that, on average, it takes you 64 seconds to refocus on your work after checking your email. Every time your phone dings with an email alert, you lose at least a minute.

The total time you spend on email is made up of a) how much time you spend checking your inbox and b) how much time you spend responding to messages. By reducing the time you spend on these activities, you can reclaim hours of your day.

Part 1: Spend Less Time Checking Your Inbox

You may *rationally* know that checking your email constantly is a waste of your time and a serious interruption of your focus—but most of us just can't stop. This is due to two elements of human psychology.

1) Your inbox offers *random rewards*. When you can't predict when an action will reward you, the action becomes exciting or tempting. This is the same factor that makes gambling so addictive—you never know if the next $20 you bet will reward you with a jackpot. Your inbox delivers random rewards in the same fashion. Sometimes it contains useless or boring messages, other times an important message from your boss, a piece of good news, or a message from a friend. You can't stop checking, *just in case* the next click delivers a reward.

- **Make your inbox as predictable as possible to make it less tempting.** Unsubscribe from any emails that aren't useful any longer, such as newsletters or retail promos. You can do this in a dedicated hour, or streamline your inbox over a matter of weeks by unsubscribing from unwanted emails as they come in.

2) You're inclined to reciprocate communication. Humans are social creatures that mirror the actions of others—when someone smiles at you, you'll smile back. While this *reciprocity cycle* is fine in person, helping you establish social connections, it becomes a problem online. When someone sends you a message, you're naturally inclined to respond right away. Unfortunately, this prompts the *other* person to respond right away, which triggers you to respond—it becomes a stressful, fast-paced cycle. **By finding ways to *send* fewer emails, you can break the cycle of reciprocity and ensure that you'll *receive* fewer emails.** There are two ways to accomplish this.

- **Create office hours for non-urgent matters.** Instead of responding to someone's question right away, you might say, "I have some time open on Wednesday and Friday from 2-3. If you'd still like to talk about this at that time, feel free to stop by my desk!" This prevents you and the other person from replying back and forth multiple times and creates a "cooling off" period for the question—often, the sender will find a solution on their own, or the problem resolves itself or becomes irrelevant.
- **Manually slow down reciprocity.** Most people send emails immediately after writing them. When you and another person are keeping up a fast-paced back-and-forth, the matter can feel deserving of your immediate attention—even when it's not urgent at all. Use your email service's "delayed delivery" tool to send your emails a few hours or days after you write them. This clears the email off your plate but doesn't prompt a quick reply from the other person. Additionally, this service can prevent you from getting replies when you don't want them—for example, if you answer emails on Friday afternoons but don't want replies over the weekend, you can delay their delivery until Monday morning.

Part 2: Spend Less Time Responding to Emails

Reducing the number of emails you receive each day will drastically reduce the amount of time you spend in your inbox. The second step is to set up a system that reduces the amount of time you spend responding to those you *do* let through. **The most efficient way to deal with your emails is by going through them in batches during dedicated email timeboxes, rather than dealing with them as they come in.** Processing your email in this way has two advantages:

1. This reduces the number of times your brain needs to switch between tasks (meaning you lose "refocusing time" once, instead of many times throughout the day).
2. You can *schedule* it—so that it becomes the thing you mean to do, instead of the thing dragging you away from what needs to get done.

Make your batch-processing as efficient as possible by *eliminating the need to check emails repeatedly.* Many people open messages, scan the contents, reply to anything urgent, and then leave everything else for later. By the *next* time you check your email, you've forgotten what the "everything else" emails said, so you open them again. This happens every time you check your email—you read the same emails, multiple times a day.

The main reason you read emails multiple times is to discern exactly when you need to reply to them—fix the issue by categorizing your emails by reply urgency. To do this, create two email tags: "Today" and "This Week." Each time you check your email, answer anything that needs an immediate reply, then tag the rest to be answered during your email timebox later in the day or later in the week. **This system ensures that you only read each email twice: when you initially receive it and when you reply.**

Trigger #3: Group Chat

Having a group chat feature at work can be helpful for chatting about ideas or getting quick answers, but it's also distracting in several ways. First, the messages you're receiving all day are from different people, in different channels, about different subjects—essentially, part of your brain is in numerous meetings covering diverse topics all day, while you're trying to focus on your own work. Second, many people use group chat to fire off thoughts one sentence at a time. Receiving ideas as a stream of consciousness can make you feel frazzled, and the constant message alerts don't help.

Create Group Chat Guidelines

Set three rules around your group chat use so that it shows up in your workday as a *tool for traction*, rather than invading your workday as a distraction.

1) Use Group Chat Sparingly

While the real-time feature of group chat can be useful and engaging, think of it as you would any other real-time communication.

- For example, you wouldn't agree to be on a conference call all day with six people who occasionally call for your input while you're trying to do your work.

In the same way, set boundaries around how much of your time and attention people can have via group chat. There are two ways to do this:

- **Timebox group chat sessions.** Schedule time to scan for missed messages, send out replies, or scroll through different channels. Communicate your schedule to your colleagues so they understand when they can expect replies. When you're not online, set an "away" message such as, "I'm not checking messages now but will be online later. If your issue is urgent, please call me or stop by my desk."
- **Organize meetings.** If you have to discuss an issue that doesn't necessitate an in-person meeting, set up a time for everyone to be in the group chat together to talk in real-time. This not only saves everyone from being pinged at random all day but also prevents the disruption of going to an in-person meeting.

2) Keep Groups Small

If you're creating a chat group, limit invitees to those who will truly contribute to the conversation and benefit from it—usually the two or three people who are most relevant to the issue. Everyone has a chance to contribute to these smaller discussions, and less central parties can be updated later via email.

3) Use Group Chat for the Right Topics

This isn't the right communication medium for sensitive topics or large issues, for several reasons. First, when it comes to sensitive topics such as criticism or HR decisions, everyone needs to be able to contextualize what's being said with body language, tone, and mood.

Second, when it comes to complicated issues, it can be difficult to follow along with people's short, stream-of-consciousness messages while others are replying, reacting with emojis, and so on. Amid the distraction, you may miss important information or be unable to see a connection you'd normally pick out quickly.

- If you *must* deal with a complicated issue on group chat, have the person raising the issue put all of their ideas and arguments into a document that's shared with the group before the discussion.

Generally, group chat should *only* be used for quick, relatively unimportant matters, such as asking

for confirmation on information or letting someone know you've taken care of an issue.

Trigger #4: Meetings

All too often, someone trying to escape the discomfort of solving a difficult problem by themselves will organize a meeting, so they can make *other people* think about the problem for them. These meetings interrupt employees' schedules, and attendees who feel stuck in a boring and unproductive echo chamber of ideas around a problem will become distracted.

- For example, they might check social media if they're bored or go through their emails if they want to feel productive.

Meetings *can* create traction, not distraction, if they're organized in the interest of finding solutions rather than discussing the problem. There are two parts to this: the *pre-meeting* and the *meeting*.

Pre-Meeting: Adequately Prepare and Brainstorm

Both the meeting organizer and attendees have a pre-meeting responsibility:

- **The meeting organizer** should be required to send out a short agenda to attendees to outline the problem, propose the best solution they've thought of, and explain their reasoning. Sometimes, this step eliminates the need for a meeting—either it helps the organizer think through the problem herself or someone solves the problem via email.
- **Attendees:** After reading the meeting agenda, attendees should brainstorm solutions and come to the meeting with prepared ideas. This brainstorming should happen alone or in small groups—large groups tend to repeat the same ideas, but small groups often come up with diverse and innovative ideas.

These two steps make meetings much more productive and efficient—when people think about the problem ahead of time, the meeting can jump right into solutions.

Meeting: Cut Out Unnecessary Devices

A common problem in many meetings is that no one is paying attention—they're checking their phones, sending emails, or doing work on their laptops. **When attendees are only half-listening and half-participating, meetings become inefficient, boring, and unproductive.** Put guidelines in place to minimize device use, such as:

- Asking that attendees take notes with pen and paper rather than on their devices
- Banning device use—put a charging station by the door and require everyone to plug their phone, tablet, or laptop for the duration of the meeting
- Having *one* person present slides on a projector instead of having everyone follow on their own devices

Part 3.2: Cut Out External Triggers: Technology

In this chapter, we'll examine ways to diminish the power of the second type of external trigger—the technology you use every day.

Trigger #5: Smartphone

Your smartphone is probably one of the most—if not *the* most—distracting things in your life. However, it can also be a valuable tool for staying in touch with people, listening to music, capturing photos, or navigating. **Maximize your phone's use as a tool for traction by first rearranging your apps and then adjusting their settings.**

Step 1: Sort Your Apps

Look through the apps on your phone and assess each honestly: Does it benefit *you* or do you benefit *it*? Based on your answer, take one of three actions:

1) Remove: Delete unused apps and apps that don't benefit you or don't align with your values.

- For example, you might keep a mindfulness app but delete a news app that always makes you feel stressed out.

2) Change: Some apps *can* be used for traction, but they show up in your life as distractions.

- For example, you may use social media to stay in touch with friends and promote your business, but you also check it when you're with family, at work, or driving.

For these apps, *change* where you use them—that is, delete them from your phone and use them exclusively on your computer. When you're unable to access these apps anytime and anywhere, you're more likely to use them only during their timebox.

3) Rearrange: At this stage, your phone will have only traction-supporting apps—but even these can be distracting visual cues on a cluttered home screen. Avoid this by making your home screen as minimalist as possible, organizing your apps into three categories:

- Tools: Apps in this category help you with everyday tasks—it might include maps, your calendar, Uber, and so on.
- Goals: Apps in this category help you with things you'd like to spend your time doing, such as mindfulness, exercise, or audiobooks.
- Everything else: Your tools and goals apps should be the only ones on your home screen. Everything else can be organized into folders on the secondary screen. For example, you may have a "Communication" folder that contains your email, messenger, and WhatsApp.

Step 2: Go Notification-Free

The second part of diminishing your phone's distractions is cutting out the temptation to look at it in the first place. Most people look at their phones when they receive a notification because it grabs their attention with a ding, vibration, or lit-up screen. **By disabling notifications, you eliminate these external triggers.**

Timebox 30 minutes in your schedule to readjust your app settings—be sure to pay attention to both the *audio* and *visual* settings, as both can interrupt your focus.

- **Audio notifications are especially distracting because they can grab your attention even if your phone is face down or in another room.** Think about which of these apps *truly* needs your attention at any moment, depending on your life and work. For example, a student may keep sound activated *only* for phone calls, but a small business owner might keep her email sound activated so she can immediately check incoming orders.
- **Visual notifications only work when you can see your phone, but you can adjust how prominent they are.** You may set your essential apps to light up your home screen when notifications come in and adjust your less important apps to only display a small red bubble when there are notifications to check.

Trigger #6: Desktop

Having a cluttered desktop as the background to your work can drain your cognitive ability. Studies show that when people have disorganized objects in their field of vision, they perform worse on cognitive tasks than people who have organized objects in their field of vision. Additionally, when you look for something specific on a cluttered desktop, you encounter many visual reminders of questions to answer, tasks to complete, things you wanted to look into, and so on. These visual reminders of easy and interesting tasks can easily trigger you to escape from the discomfort of your work.

There are two ways to manage your desktop clutter:

1) Sort everything on your desktop into out-of-sight folders. This organizes your desktop so you can find what you're looking for quickly and reduce your chances of being distracted by visual reminders.

- Like Eyal, you can take this step to an indistractable extreme. He leaves his desktop completely blank except for one or two files he's currently working on. Everything else is filed into one folder labeled "Everything." Whenever he needs a file, he'll use his laptop's search feature instead of sifting through the folder—this guarantees he won't come across any distracting visual reminders.

2) Disable desktop notifications. Turn off notifications for anything that might grab your attention while you work, such as group chat, email, your music streaming app, and so on. If your computer has a Do Not Disturb feature, set it for parts of the day when you're focusing.

Trigger #7: Articles

Articles pop into your day constantly—you may receive a news alert in the morning, get sidetracked while doing research for work, or see a good read while scrolling social media. Often, you'll either read these articles right away—distracting you from the activity you *should* be doing—or you'll save them for later across numerous open tabs—cluttering your workspace with tempting visual reminders.

Articles are interesting, knowledge-boosting tools when used the right way—rather than cutting them out, change how and when you spend time on them. The most important step in this change is to *stop reading articles on your web browser.*

- Eyal recommends the browser extension and app Pocket for this step. When you come across an interesting article, clicking the Pocket icon on your browser will pull the article text—leaving out ads

and recommendations—and save it to the Pocket app linked on your phone.

With this system, you don't have to choose between reading an article right away or keeping it open in the background—the content is kept tucked away until you're ready to read.

(Shortform note: Eyal recommends Pocket, but there are many similar services available.)

Get More Out of Your Articles With Temptation Bundling

Not only are tucked-away articles less distracting, but they can also be used as a reward in *temptation bundling*—making an unappealing activity more interesting by combining it with something you *want* to do.

- For example, the Pocket app has a text-to-speech feature, so you can use it in the same way the study participants did—combine the pleasure of listening to your saved articles with less interesting activities such as meal prepping, going to the gym, mowing the lawn, or doing laundry.

Trigger #8: Social Media Feeds

One of the most addictive features of social media is the "news feed," which usually has an "infinite scroll." You can scroll through pictures and posts without ever coming to the end of the page—you don't stop, because there's no natural place to do so.

Without the infinite scroll of the news feed, social media becomes much less entertaining—and that's a good thing. **When you have control over what you see, social media can be used as a tool rather than a distraction.** There are three ways you can circumvent the news feed on various social media.

1. Install a News Feed Blocker

There are many extensions you can install on your web browser to prevent you from seeing your Facebook news feed, such as:

- News Feed Eradicator for Facebook: The homepage won't display any posts. Rather, you'll see a blank page with an inspirational quote.
- Todobook: Instead of seeing your news feed, you'll see your to-do list. When you complete all the tasks for the day, the list disappears and the news feed reappears.

(Shortform note: Both of these extensions are currently available only on Google Chrome.)

2. Preload Specific Pages

Most people access social media sites by going to the homepage, which contains the news feed. **Skip over the homepage entirely by navigating directly to the page you want to access.**

To do this, save specific frequently visited or important URLs to your bookmarks bar. Clicking on these links will take you directly to the part of the site you *want* to be on—helping you use social media more deliberately and efficiently.

- For example, instead of bookmarking Facebook.com, you might bookmark Facebook.com/messages or Facebook.com/[your business page].

3. Block Recommendations

Social media sites run algorithms in the background while you use them, figuring out what types of videos

and articles will be most appealing to you based on your past activity. They'll then give you a list of recommendations, tempting you to keep clicking.

- A fairly obvious example of this is Youtube's "recommended videos" list—by combining interesting video thumbnails with subjects you're interested in, it can easily drag you into *hours* of unplanned video-watching.

Many web browsers have features to turn off these recommendations, and there are extensions you can download to manage especially tempting sites.

- For example, the Google Chrome extension DF Tube allows you to watch videos without recommendations, autoplay, or comments.

Exercise: Reduce Your External Triggers

Left unchecked, external triggers can easily break your focus and pull you off task throughout your day.

What external trigger(s) do you find most distracting? (For example, audio text notifications, your email, or recommendations at the bottom of articles.)

Why do you think this particular trigger is so distracting to you? (For example, your audio notifications grab your attention even when your phone is put away, email always has something new to look at, or recommended articles give you something easy and interesting to browse.)

Describe your plan for diminishing this trigger's ability to distract you. (For example, you turn off text notifications, unsubscribe from unimportant emails and tag incoming emails to be processed later, or save your recommended articles to an app so you can read them later.)

Part 4: Create Precommitments

The last part of the indistractable model focuses on locking yourself *into* traction, rather than keeping distractions *out.* ***You accomplish this by using precommitments—choices you make while in an undistracted state that will help guide your behaviors when you're tempted by distraction in the future.***

- For example, you might precommit to saving money by setting up a portion of your paycheck to automatically deposit in your savings account, instead of believing you'll make the right choice on payday.

Precommitments are the last piece of the indistractable model because their success depends on the first three elements:

- You must understand and manage your internal triggers. Otherwise, your internal discomfort will be strong enough to drive you away from your precommitments.
- You can't fulfill a precommitment unless you set aside time in your schedule to do so.
- External triggers can easily pull you off task.

There are three types of precommitments that can minimize the power of distraction: effort pacts, price pacts, and identity pacts.

Precommitment Type 1: Effort Pacts

An effort pact is a precommitment that makes it *more difficult* to do something *undesirable*. This extra bit of difficulty gives you a moment to pause and ask yourself if the distraction is *really* what you want to do

There are several ways you can use technology to create effort pacts for yourself.

- You can set apps, such as Self Control and Forest, to block certain websites when you need to focus. You must manually turn the app off if you want to visit a blocked site—the distraction becomes less tempting when it's more than a click away.
- Apple has a time limit function that forces you to confirm your choice if you decide to spend more than the agreed-upon time on an app. You think twice about your behavior.

Effort pacts are especially effective when you make them with *others* because we're inclined to mimic others' actions and want to be seen doing the "right thing." Before smartphones and personal computers, these types of social effort pacts used to happen naturally in offices. If someone was slacking off, it was visible to the entire office—either they'd feel shame at being the odd one out or a colleague would shame them, and they'd get back on task. Today, it's harder to see what people are doing all day, especially with the growing number of people working from home. Without natural social pressure to stay on task, you'll have to look for ways to create social effort pacts, such as:

- Asking a colleague to be your accountability partner and regularly checking in on each other's progress
- Asking a fellow WFHer to come work in your home office
- Joining a service like Focusmate, a video service that pairs people all over the world who need motivation to "show up" for work

Precommitment Type 2: Price Pacts

You already know that distraction costs you *time*—a price pact makes distraction's cost more tangible with *money*. In these pacts, you attach money to your precommitment as an incentive to stick with what you said you would do. If you do what you're supposed to, you get to keep the money. If you don't, you have to give up the money. The reason price pacts work so well is that people are more motivated by *loss aversion* than they are by *potential gains*.

The New England Journal of Medicine published a study with three groups of smokers attempting to quit.

- Members of Group A, the control group, received educational resources and free nicotine patches to help them quit.
- Members of Group B were promised $800 if they stopped smoking within six months.
- Members of Group C made a precommitment—they gave $150 of their own money, along with a pledge to quit within six months. If they fulfilled their pledge, they'd receive their deposit of $150 and a $650 bonus.

The results showed success in 6% of Group A, 17% of Group B, and *52%* of Group C. Although groups B and C received $800 total at the end of the study, Group C was exceptionally motivated because they risked *losing their own money.*

To create an effective price pact, attach a potential loss to distraction. For example, Eyal wanted to stop skipping out on his exercise regimen but nothing was working for him. He then attached a $100 bill to his workout schedule and created a pact: If he missed a gym session, he would light the bill on fire. Every time he thought about skipping the gym, the tangible loss made him rethink it.

In addition to triggering our loss aversion, price pacts transform the way you think about the outcome of distraction—rather than a vague future concept of lost time or lost productivity, the outcome is tangible in the *present*.

- Imagine you wanted to finish your first draft of a book. You make a pact with a friend—you'll give them $1,000 if you don't finish by an agreed-upon date. Every time you think about skipping writing time, you're faced with the thought of losing all that money. The fear of it gets you on task. On the other hand, trying to push through distraction by imagining potential disappointment wouldn't be so motivating.

Four Warnings About Price Pacts

Price pacts *can* be exceptionally effective, but you have to be prepared for them. There are four warnings to consider:

1) Price pacts don't work if you can't remove external triggers. If you can't circumvent external triggers that tempt you to become distracted, you won't be able to find ways to stick to the pact—you'll inevitably break it.

- For example, a price pact *can* work for limiting social media use—you can turn off notifications, delete apps, and so on. It *can't* help you stop biting your nails—you can't get rid of your hands (a trigger), so you'll likely repeatedly break the pact and eventually render it meaningless.

2) Price pacts are for short tasks. They work best when you just need a short, sustained bit of motivation to go the gym, ride out a cigarette craving, or turn off social media for a few hours. If the pact is too long, it

becomes a punishment rather than a motivation.

- For example, "I'm going to eat vegetables every day or give Paul $50" is too long-term and vague. Inevitably, you'll come home after a long day of work to discover you don't have any vegetables in the house. Either you break the pact, or the pact becomes a punishment as you resentfully drag yourself to the store. You could remedy this by creating a shorter task, such as, "I'll buy three different vegetables every time I go to the store, or I'll give Paul $50."

3) Starting your price pact *won't feel good*. You'll resist making the pact or feel unsure about your decision if you finally do make the pact. Remember that you *should* feel anxious about losing your money—if you didn't feel uncomfortable about the pact, it wouldn't motivate you.

4) It's crucial to be self-compassionate. Changing your behavior or trying to hack your motivation isn't an easy feat—you'll experience setbacks and failures. It's important to be kind to yourself in these moments.

- When you're kind to yourself, you're able to reflect on the reasons for your setback and make successful changes to your behaviors and methods.
- On the other hand, if you feel that you're a failure or unable to change, you'll exacerbate the internal discomfort that leads to distraction and the issue will worsen. If you're prone to beating yourself up, a price pact might not be for you.

Precommitment Type 3: Identity Pacts

Changing the way you see yourself can help you change your behaviors because you'll naturally act like the person you believe yourself to be. **Identity pacts are a precommitment to the identity that aligns with who you want to be and what you want to do.** These pacts help you think about your self-image and your behaviors and align them in two ways.

1. Changing Your Self-Image Changes Your Behaviors

You can make it more likely you'll perform certain behaviors by changing the way you talk about—and see—yourself.

- For example, if you're trying to start running every day, don't think of yourself as someone who's *trying* to run more or *has* to run every day. You're more likely to stick to your exercise plan if you call yourself *a runner* or someone who *runs*.

This applies to cultivating indistractable habits and making them an integral part of your identity—think of yourself and talk about yourself as someone who *is* indistractable when describing your behaviors:

- You're not someone who *can't* take quick breaks to check Instagram. You're indistractable—you *don't* take quick breaks, but you *do* schedule social media time.
- It's not that you *can't* deal with distractions from your coworkers. You simply *don't* deal with them.

2. Changing Your Behaviors Changes Your Self-Image

Cultivating identity also works in the opposite direction—you can change your *self-image* by changing your *behaviors*. When you act in a way that's aligned with the identity you want to have, you naturally see more of that identity in yourself.

Rituals are a great way to foster indistractable behaviors—by continually sticking to planned activity and exhibiting self-control, you reinforce the idea that you're an indistractable person.

- These rituals can be small, easily achievable parts of your day such as your bedtime skincare routine or washing your dishes before you start your work in the morning.

(Shortform note: Read our summary of Switch to learn how small behavioral shifts can translate into powerful, change-driving identity transformations.)

Exercise: Create an Effort Pact

You can help yourself avoid undesirable behaviors by making them harder to perform.

What's an undesirable behavior that you'd like to perform less? (For example, skipping the gym or going on social media when you should be studying.)

How can you attach an effort pact to this behavior to make it more difficult? (For example, finding a gym buddy so you have to call and cancel on them if you want to skip a workout or using a site-blocking browser extension that you must undo before visiting social media.)

Application 1: Cultivate an Indistractable Work Culture

Your indistractability will naturally touch all parts of your life—and, with conscious application, you can use it to *improve* these areas. **Over these next three chapters, we'll explore how you can apply the indistractable model to your work, your children, and your relationships.**

The first area we'll explore is your workplace—while *you* may be on your way to developing strong indistractable habits, a toxic work culture can easily derail you.

- For example, your boss might derail your timeboxed schedule by calling a last-minute meeting, or you might have family dinner time interrupted by a colleague in a different time zone organizing an "urgent" video conference.

You can't be your best at work if you're distracted the whole time—but solving the problem requires a bit of digging. A common scapegoat for workplace distraction is the technology that keeps employees connected inside and outside of the office. But of course, technology itself isn't at the heart of distraction—internal discomfort is.

Work Depression and Distraction

Numerous organizations cultivate work cultures that can cause clinical depression in their employees. **Two factors significantly contribute to workplace depression:**

1. **High job strain:** This happens in work environments where employees must meet high expectations but have little control over their schedules, the outcome of their work, workload, and so on.
2. **Effort-reward imbalance:** This happens when workers don't see rewards for their work, such as raises, recognition, time off, and so on.

Both of these factors are stressful for the same reason: Employees feel that they don't have any control over their work, no matter how much effort they put in. **When an employee feels depressed or that they're lacking control at work, they'll turn to an escape that makes them feel productive or in control.** This may look like sifting through emails, putting together an unnecessary meeting, or chiming in on group chats.

The Cycle of Depression and Distraction

This method of soothing depression with distraction easily becomes a cycle that continually exacerbates itself. Employees feel that they're under the control of their managers, and they work hard to please them in hopes that they'll eventually get the recognition they deserve.

- This means that if their manager sends them an email first thing in the morning with an idea, they'll take care of it right away. If a different manager sends an email late at night with a different idea, they'll stay up late to take care of it. **In these situations, employees feel that they need to be "on" and accessible at all times to meet their managers' expectations.** When employees are constantly available, the reciprocity cycle thrives—they respond immediately to their managers, who respond immediately to them, and so on. Often, any relevant employee gets pulled into the cycle, making the issue of reciprocity worse.

This situation reveals that the problem isn't *technology*—it's a dysfunctional work culture. Depressed, strained employees are forced into a constant, worsening state of distraction by trying to please managers and meet expectations. **If your workplace has a distraction or technology overuse problem, you have a dysfunctional work culture.** It's *crucial* to dig into your culture and figure out how to fix it, because dysfunction creates a host of problems, such as high rates of burnout, high employee turnover, lost productivity, and so on.

How to Fix Workplace Dysfunction and Distraction

To start fixing deep-rooted dysfunctions in your workplace, as a manager, first think about what the *real* problem is—for example, lack of control, unpredictable schedules, or the expectation that employees be "on" all the time. Once you've pinpointed the issue, present a simple solution.

- For example, if your employees are stressed because they feel as though they need to be accessible at all times, propose at least two non-negotiable nights off per week. If your employees don't see much reward for their work, propose a monthly meeting where you discuss the projects their work contributed to.

Confirm with your team that your proposed solution is something that will help them. **If they agree, tell them you approve the idea but *it's up to them to figure out how to make it possible,* and encourage them to meet regularly to talk about it.** In these meetings, the group will discuss what's standing in their way, and which of their workplace practices will have to change to make their goal happen. These discussions will naturally open up new ideas, prompt employees to question the status quo, and find practical employee-level solutions.

The Importance of Psychological Safety

These discussions must be built on a foundation of *psychological safety*—the understanding that no one will be mocked or punished when they bring up criticism, questions, or ideas. *The best solutions, ideas, and outcomes are produced by groups that establish psychological safety.*

First, psychological safety naturally contributes to essential group qualities such as dependability, clarity, sense of purpose, and sense of impact. Second, when people can speak without fear of judgment, they contribute better ideas:

- People will share diverse ideas, rather than parroting ideas that won't be mocked or rejected. This leads to more innovative and creative solutions.
- People will raise valid concerns such as lack of recognition, the expectation to be "on" all the time, unclear expectations, and conflicting information. Previously, they may have kept these concerns to themselves for fear of being seen as lazy or not committed to their work.

Third, these discussions allow managers the time to explain big-picture goals and strategies, which they may not bring up in more "urgent" meetings. This helps employees contextualize their work and understand the impact of their efforts.

When you identify workplace dysfunction and give employees a place to discuss and solve your work culture's issues, you increase the control they feel over their work and increase their satisfaction—driving down distraction and the overuse of technology.

(Shortform note: Read our summary of Dare to Lead for tips on fostering a sense of psychological safety in

your workplace.)

Application 2: Teach Indistractability to Your Children

The second practical application of the indistractable model is using it to support your children in an increasingly connected and technologically dependent world.

Many people blame advancing technology for their children's distraction, emotional dysregulation, behavioral issues, and so on. Technology has been a popular scapegoat for *hundreds* of years—everything from the printing press to the radio has been publicly condemned for "ruining" children's minds and attention spans.

The reason we keep recycling this tired story is that technology allows us to pin the blame of misunderstanding our children on something out of our control, instead of taking responsibility. This mindset is a huge disservice to our children, who need help managing today's distractions.

There's *no* difference between the type of distraction you experience and the distraction your child experiences. Like you, they need to learn how to have a healthy relationship with technology—but *unlike* you, they won't understand the problem and find solutions on their own. It's up to you to explain what it means to be indistractable and help them develop indistractable systems that work for them. **Help your children by coaching them through the four parts of the indistractable model: *understanding internal triggers*, *schedule-building*, *reducing external triggers*, and *creating precommitments.***

Step 1: Understand and Reduce Internal Triggers

The first part of teaching your child to be indistractable is figuring out what their internal triggers are and how to reduce them. Like adults, children are usually driven to distraction by *internal discomfort*. Often, their discomfort will be related to one of the three human psychological needs:

- **Autonomy:** control over ourselves and our choices
- **Competence:** learning, improving, growing, and mastering different skills
- **Relatedness:** feeling that we're important to others, and others are important to us

When you or your children are lacking in any of these three needs, you'll feel restlessness, anxiety, hopelessness, or depression—all feelings that can trigger distraction and unhealthy habits such as too much gaming, too much time on social media, and so on.

By ensuring that your children have opportunities to gain autonomy, competence, and relatedness, you can help them better balance their online and real-world lives.

Create More Opportunities for Autonomy

Many parents feel that they need to plan out their children's days and enforce strict rules around technology to prevent distraction—however, you should be *loosening* your control and granting your children more opportunities for autonomy.

Studies have found that children may actually *lose the ability to control their attention* when they're constantly managed by adults. If you look at American schools you'll notice that students are managed at every moment of the day—their homework needs to be done a certain way, everything has a due date, their

movement is dictated by bells, they're punished with detention, and so on.

- Surveys show that American teens are under *10 times* more restrictions than most adults, and under *two times* more restrictions than Marines and convicts.

Many children struggle with distraction in school and when doing schoolwork because they don't have enough autonomy to feel motivated or interested. They escape to places where they *can* feel a sense of autonomy, such as in the creativity of social media or the world-building of video games. **The problem isn't technology. The problem is the alternative to technology—an environment devoid of autonomy *that we adults have created*.** Ironically, many parents respond to their children spending too much time online by imposing *more* rules. This further restricts the child's autonomy, exacerbating the problem. Instead, discuss your child's leisure time and use of technology in a way that supports their autonomy.

Shortform Example: Support Age-Appropriate Autonomy

Instead of dictating exactly how and when your child can use technology, help them set boundaries in a way that gives them options.

- For example, you might say, "You have the whole afternoon free, but I can only let you play on my iPad for one hour. Would you rather have that hour now, or later?"

For teenagers who are a little better at setting boundaries, discuss the harmful effects of too much screen time so that they can make their own informed decisions about their device use.

- You can supplement this by *inviting* them to take part in non-tech activities with you, such as taking a walk or going to a museum.

Create More Opportunities for Competence

The second way you can reduce your child's internal discomfort is by ensuring that they have adequate opportunities to feel *competent*. **This is your responsibility as a parent, because many children don't develop feelings of competence in school.** Feeling competent and experiencing growth in the classroom is harder than ever, especially with the rise of standardized testing. This affects many types of children:

- Children who are strong in some subjects and weak in others must focus more on improving their shortcomings than celebrating their achievements.
- Creative children don't receive recognition for their talents or support in developing them.
- Children develop at *vastly* different rates, but standardized tests don't take variable development into account.

In these environments, only children who develop quickly and in the "right" ways can feel competent. Students who *don't* meet the standard, despite their work, are soon convinced that competence isn't possible for them, and they lose motivation and interest in school. They escape to apps, games, and websites where they do feel a sense of growth and accomplishment. This is why moving up between levels, getting likes, and gaining followers can be so addictive—it feels like a form of achievement.

Shortform Example: Create Feelings of Competence

You likely can't change the testing system in your child's school, but you *can* help your child find activities that allow them to feel a sense of achievement and progress.

- For example, you can teach your child to cook, find a class or workshop for your child who likes to paint, encourage your child to sign up for a challenge aligned with their interests like writing

contests, or help them find volunteer work that interests them and develops their skills.

(Shortform note: Read our summary of The Power of Moments to learn different ways to show your children progress they've made and develop their feelings of competence.)

Create More Opportunities for Relatedness

Lastly, make sure that you're allowing your children to balance their online interactions with unstructured, face-to-face time with their peers. **Children's ability to join in "spontaneous play" is seriously restricted these days.** You'll hardly ever see a group of children playing outside together or roaming the neighborhood to see what fun there is to be had. This is largely due to anxious parenting—children are kept close to home so they don't get hurt or into trouble. As a result, many children and teens spend a lot of their free time at home, connecting with others virtually through games or the Internet.

In interacting with people online, children can easily pick and choose whom they wish to communicate with or which communities they want to be part of—meaning they *aren't* learning the essential skill of getting along with different types of people.

- Interestingly, this means that too much socializing online is both a *cause* and a *consequence* of not being able to connect with others in real life.

On the other hand, online communities can be very positive, especially for children who feel isolated at school or other areas of their lives. They can talk through their issues with people in these communities, and as many communities are based on common interests, they can find people with whom they identify.

- For example, the website Reddit has communities for everything from baking, to learning guitar, to managing chronic diseases, to learning about history.

While some time interacting online is positive, encourage your children to have face-to-face playtime with their peers. This might look like meeting up to walk around the mall, having classmates over for an afternoon of playing in the yard, or encouraging your child to join in pickup games of basketball after school. These real-life environments counterbalance time online and teach children how to interact with others.

Step 2: Schedule-Building

The second part of coaching your child in indistractability is helping them understand their responsibilities and how to balance them. Explain traction and distraction to your child, and teach them to regularly check in and ask themselves: "Does this behavior make me feel good? Do I feel like I'm doing the right thing?"

Then, help them build a schedule that will help them gain traction—like you, having a clear idea of how to spend their time makes them less likely to make impulsive, distracted decisions. Don't forget the importance of allowing your children autonomy—you're *helping* with the schedule, not imposing it. Walk them through scheduling the three responsibilities of their lives:

Responsibility 1: Themselves

Discussing the core responsibility of self-care to children is vitally important because it demonstrates why their needs—exercise, health, hygiene—should be their highest priority. This will help them maintain their physical and mental health throughout their lives.

- To help your child make informed decisions about how to schedule their needs, explain the importance of quality sleep so that they can choose a reasonable bedtime. You can also talk about the psychological need for relatedness, and encourage them to spend time playing in real life rather than online.

Responsibility 2: Their Relationships

Let them determine how much time to allow for family and friends—it's possible you won't *like* their answers, but it's crucial that you respect their decisions. This can look like:

- Not forcing them to reschedule time with friends to spend more time with you.
- Being present for the time they want to spend with you. Don't reschedule or give up family dinners for the convenience of everyone doing their own thing. Make sure you're mentally present as well, being sure not to check your phone instead of paying attention to your child.

Responsibility 3: School and Chores

While time spent in school is non-negotiable, you might encounter arguments when it comes to scheduling household responsibilities or homework. Don't force them to schedule these activities. Instead, take a two-part approach:

1. Ask them if they understand why chores and homework are important to them and you, and make sure they understand what will happen if they don't make time for it.
2. If they refuse to make time, let them experience the consequences of their actions—be it a punishment from their school or punishment from you.

Step 3: External Triggers

The third part of raising an indistractable child is teaching them about external triggers and helping them understand healthy technology use. Children are especially prone to external triggers because they don't understand exactly *why* these triggers work or how to set boundaries around their attention. **Teach your child to manage external triggers by slowly increasing their exposure.**

Just as you wouldn't throw your child into the deep end of a pool to teach her to swim, you shouldn't throw her into technology without teaching her to control her use. You might start with a phone that only has basic texting and calling functions. This introduces technology as a tool, not a box of visually exciting triggers. Eventually, try moving your child up to a slightly more advanced phone, such as a smartphone with parental controls.

As your children grow older and more accustomed to technology, pay attention to how they use their devices and the steps they take to diminish distraction. Some factors to consider include:

- Do they keep devices out of sight when they're with friends or at dinner?
- Do they know how to turn off distracting notifications and use features like Do Not Disturb when they're studying?

If your child can't seem to control herself, remind her of different ways to reduce triggers, and explain that she can't move up to a more advanced phone until she learns control.

Approach all technology with this type of slow, supervised introduction. Instead of allowing your children to have laptops or televisions in their rooms, keep devices in common areas. Here, you can keep an

eye on their use and step in to explain how to diminish triggers as necessary.

Remember That People Are External Triggers

Be mindful of your actions, and remember that *you* may be the external trigger distracting your child. **Respect your child's schedule.** If they've timeboxed homework, don't interrupt them for any non-emergency reason—such as bringing laundry into their room or asking them to see who's at the door—and don't allow anyone else in the family to interrupt them.

- *This applies to all timeboxed activities.* If they've timeboxed playing video games, don't ask them to stop and unload the dishwasher because they're "just playing anyway." Wait until their chores timebox comes up to remind them.

While it may seem silly or extreme to avoid all interruptions, recall that you're not just teaching your child to have a schedule. **You're teaching them to be indistractable, to do what they said they would do when they planned to do it.**

Step 4: Precommitments

The final part of coaching your children in indistractability is helping them learn the vital skill of *self-control* with precommitments. From an early age, explain to your children that apps and games are made by people who want to take up all of their attention, for their own profit. This helps children understand that it's up to them to make smart decisions about their time—they can't rely on app makers.

Then, help your child set limits on their screen time. **Your child must determine *her own limits*.** When a parent imposes limits, they diminish the child's sense of autonomy, which may lead to more distraction. Furthermore, the child learns that they can do whatever they want as long as their parents aren't there enforcing the rules. On the other hand, when a child sets their own limits, they learn how to self-regulate—they'll stick to limits, even when their parents aren't there.

There are three steps to helping your child set a technology time limit.

1. Explain why too much screen time is unhealthy, and ask your child how much screen time *she* thinks is reasonable. If her suggestion is reasonable, agree to it. If it's unreasonable, suggest a lower limit.
2. Ask her how she'll avoid going over her limit. For example, she might set a timer or mark the time with an event: "I'll play on the iPad at 5:30 and finish when we have dinner at 6."
3. Explain that if she breaks her "promise to herself"—a simple way for a child to understand a precommitment—you'll have to have another conversation about being healthy and smart about her time.

Let Precommitments Change

As your children grow, their precommitments will likely change.

- They might use their time differently. For example, they use their screen time for video games instead of TV episodes or switch from a daily screen limit to a weekly limit so they can spend more time online over the weekend.
- They might find different ways to self-regulate, such as downloading app-blocking extensions or setting their laptops to disconnect from the internet at a certain time.

Allow for these developments. It's not important what your child's rules look like or how they're managed

—it's important that they're finding ways to establish and maintain healthy habits without parental intervention.

Application 3: Promote Indistractability in Your Relationships

Lastly, you can use elements of the indestructible model to identify and solve points of distraction in your relationships with your family and your friends.

Distraction is a problem that affects everyone in a relationship—unmanaged, it pushes people away from one another and prevents key moments of connection from happening. This problem is becoming increasingly prevalent, as smartphones are ever-present in everyone's pockets and various devices become necessary fixtures in many homes. Not only are distractions constantly accessible, but they've also become such a common part of our lives that distraction is almost always tolerated.

Strong, indistractable relationships depend on your refusal to tolerate distraction and a group commitment to finding solutions to distraction problems. First, we'll look at how you can manage distraction in your friendships and then examine ways to create distraction-free time with your partner.

Maintain Indistractable Friendships

One reason that distraction happens so frequently in the time spent with your friends is *social contagion*—humans look to one another for social cues, so one person's distraction easily spreads in a group.

- For example, if you're having coffee with a group and one of your friends pulls out her phone, it will prompt everyone else to pull out their phones. Your group inevitably ends up sitting together in silence, scrolling social media instead of talking to each other.

Not only does this tendency to fall into distraction together make it harder for you to maintain indistractable habits, but it also gets in the way of the conversations and shared moments that deepen relationships. The solution to this issue is consciously refusing distraction cues and sending social cues to your friends that distraction is *not* okay.

To make someone understand that their behavior isn't appropriate, call them out on it. You don't have to be *rude* in doing this, but you do have to be *direct.* An effective approach is to ask them directly about the behavior.

- For example, you're having coffee with a few friends when one of them takes out her phone while you're trying to talk to her. You can say, "Oh, sorry. I didn't see you were on your phone. Is everything all right?"

When you pose this type of sincere, direct question about someone's behavior, you give them two options:

- If there *is* something that needs to be dealt with, the question gives her the chance to explain and excuse herself to attend to it.
- If there *isn't* any reason to be using her phone, the question reminds her how rude it is to be using her phone at that moment, prompting her to put it away.

Over time, these direct callouts will remind everyone in your social circle of the rudeness of distraction—prompting *them* to stop tolerating distraction and call others out.

Keep an Eye Out for Distraction Everywhere

Phones may be the most common way that you see distraction manifest in your gatherings, but distraction can take many forms. With your friends, communicate the importance of indistractable time together, stay on the lookout for distraction, and find ways to navigate different types of distraction together.

- For example, if you go to a restaurant that has televisions everywhere, ask the hostess to seat you in an area that makes it difficult to see the television.

One distraction that naturally becomes part of your life as you get older is your children. When you get together with other parents, you'll inevitably have children wandering into your group to ask their parents for something. Unfortunately, this often derails important, friendship-solidifying conversations—imagine your friend was just about to talk about his father's illness, but then your friend's child comes in looking for a snack. The conversation then veers toward the kids and your friend never gets to finish his thought.

- Avoid this by agreeing as a group to be indistractable and finding a way to make sure your kids won't interrupt. For example, you can put all the kids' toys and snacks in another room and communicate to them that they may *only* interrupt in case of an emergency.

Spend Indistractable Time With Your Partner

Many couples struggle with keeping a healthy balance between their devices and spending meaningful time together.

- One study showed that nearly a third of Americans would rather not have sex for a year than give up their phone for a year.

When you choose your device over your partner, you miss out on an opportunity to talk, unwind, and share intimacy. **Over time, distraction can destroy communication and closeness in your relationship.** It's not likely you'll be able to have device-free time during the day—most people use their phone and laptop for work and to manage their family's schedule. The most natural time for you and your partner to unplug is right before bed.

This might be difficult for you, especially if you have a television in your room, use your laptop in bed to stream movies, or—like 65% of Americans—sleep with your phone in or next to your bed. Make the shift to an indistractable bedtime easier by following the indistractable model:

1. **Control your internal triggers.** If you feel like using your device while you're in bed, wait for 10 minutes before doing so. Often, the pause will help you overcome the urge.
2. **Build a schedule.** Timebox your device-free bedtime so that it becomes a scheduled part of your routine rather than something that happens once you "finish up this one thing."
3. **Cut out external triggers.** Remove the temptation to reach for devices before bed by removing all devices from your bedroom. For example, instead of relying on your phone for an alarm, purchase an analog clock, and leave your phone charging in the kitchen.
4. **Create precommitments.** Plug your internet router and your computer monitors into a timer that's set to turn off at your bedtime. This creates an effort pact: If you want to use your internet during your device-free time, you'll have to get out of bed and reset your router—giving you a moment to think about whether staying online is really worth the effort.

Exercise: Commit to Indistractability With Friends

When friends spend distracted time together, they miss out on important moments and conversations that deepen their relationships.

Describe situations where you and your friends often become distracted. (For example, you always end up looking at your phones while at dinner together or your children often wander into your get-togethers and derail your conversations.)

How can you minimize these distractions? (For example, calling out inappropriate phone use or agreeing not to let children interrupt your conversations.)

Shortform Exclusive: Q&A With Nir Eyal

We recently chatted with Nir Eyal, author of *Hooked* and *Indistractable*, to discuss his work, becoming indistractable, and how to better manage our changing and increasingly distracting world.

Part 1: The Book

Shortform: Many reader reviews of this book note that a few years ago, you wrote *Hooked*—which discusses creating a product that people come back to—and then followed up with *Indistractable.* Some of these reviewers suggest that *Indistractable* is a sort of "antidote" to *Hooked*. What are your thoughts on that?

Nir Eyal: I've heard this trope a lot, and I can't say I didn't court it, because I made the books look very similar. However, I didn't title *Indistractable* as "*Unhooked*"—even though my publisher wanted to—because I didn't want to negate anything in *Hooked.*

Why? Because *Hooked* is about how to build good habits in customers' lives. It's not written for social media companies. There are no case studies of social media companies. The only case study in the entire book is of the Bible app. What I wanted to show with *Hooked* is that we can steal the secrets of the social media companies to make education products, fitness products, or connecting with Scripture habit-forming—that we can use these techniques for *good*.

But, we also have all sorts of bad habits that aren't associated with technology: not exercising when we say we will, not eating right, all kinds of distractions. So, *Indistractable* is about how we break *bad* habits, and *Hooked* is about how we build *good* habits—they're not about the same habits. We can have our cake and eat it too: We can have good tech habits, using apps that help us exercise and meditate and live better lives, *and* break the bad habits we don't want.

Shortform: One idea from the book that's surprising is how much of distraction is *internal.* It's not really about technology—if you're feeling discomfort, you'll reach for whatever is nearby. If technology isn't nearby, procrastination might manifest as flipping through books.

Nir Eyal: And it always has, right? The Facebook and Twitter and Instagram of a generation ago was television and radio and the novel. Exactly what we're saying today about technology is the same thing people were saying about novels, and the bicycle, and all of these technologies. We always think they're leading to terrible behavior and mind control and addiction—and of course, in the course of time, we laugh at those assertions.

Shortform: The chapter that discussed the way the *printing press* was seen as something evil and leading people astray was so interesting—it's hard to believe people were worried about it, but 50 years from now we might be saying the same thing about Facebook.

Nir Eyal: Right, and it's not that there aren't negative consequences, of course. There's that Paul Virilio quote: "When you invent the ship, you invent the shipwreck." So clearly, there are negative implications. Not everything that happens on social media is good. What I want to do is give us the good parts while fixing the bad parts. So that's what *Indistractable* is all about—why would we wait for the tech companies to fix this problem for us, when there's so much we can do right now for ourselves?

Shortform: And the tech companies aren't motivated to stop the problem—they're getting money

from it. And that brings up my next question: Tech use as a distraction is so pervasive and, as you discuss in the book, so normalized. So there are probably many people who think the way they use tech is perfectly fine, but don't realize they're missing small, important moments. You had this moment with your daughter—she asked you a question and you didn't hear her because you were distracted by your phone. This caused a sort of "aha moment" where you realized what you were missing and set out on your indistractable journey. Not everybody has had that moment to reveal their need for indistractability—is there any way that someone can "test" themselves and become more aware of how distracted they really are?

Nir Eyal: As you mentioned earlier, distraction is not just in our technologies...we just haven't had much time to adapt to the downsides of [technology]. I think the question is: Are you as honest with yourself as you are with other people? I think, by and large, most people are pretty honest. They wouldn't tell a bald-faced lie to their loved ones. We know being called a liar is a terrible put-down. We would never want to be accused of lying to someone. And yet, most of us, me more than anyone, lie to ourselves every day. I wouldn't lie to my child or my good friend, but I would lie to myself. So really what the book is about is *personal integrity*. When nobody's looking, do you keep your commitment to yourself? If you say you're going to exercise or work on this project at work or be fully present with the people around you, do you do it? Or, do you do something else?

That's what it's all about: the difference between traction and *dis*traction. It's not about using or not using technology, per se—it's about doing what you want to do with your time. If what you want to do with your time is play video games all day, no problem. I'm not going to tell you not to if that's what *you* want to do with your time.

> "Really what the book is about is personal integrity. When nobody's looking, do you keep your commitment to yourself?"

Shortform: So how could someone stop lying to themselves? Do you think tracking what they do all day could spark one of these aha moments like the one you had? Or is it just not possible to *create* a similar moment of realization?

Nir Eyal: I don't think there's any way to become indistractable *without deciding what you want to do with your time*. One of the most important mantras of the book is that you can't call something a distraction unless you know what it's distracting you *from*.

I talk to so many people who tell me, "The world is so distracting! Here's why can't focus or do this or that" and give every excuse in the book—distracted, underprivileged, their boss, their kids, their this, their that. But when you look at their calendar, you say, "What did you get distracted *from*, exactly? What was it that you intended to do that you didn't do?" Their calendar is blank.

So you *have* to decide in advance how you want to spend your time. **The difference between traction and distraction is *intent,* forethought.** If you [try to decide] in the moment, you'll lose because you'll rationalize: "Sure, I meant to do that, it was kind of important." No! That's a distraction because it's not what you planned to do with your time in advance.

> "You have to decide in advance how you want to spend your time. The difference between traction and distraction is intent, forethought."

Shortform: So when you decide what you want to do and then try to do it, there are going to be slip-ups—you're going to get distracted, you're not going to do what you said you were going to do. And here, you discuss the key aspect of self-compassion: forgiving yourself and trying again, because beating yourself up will only create discomfort that causes further distraction. This makes sense to me with short-term slip-ups, but I think there's currently a lot of underlying—and hard to pinpoint—anxiety and discomfort—that's *repeatedly* pushing people into distracted behaviors. How do you suggest continuing self-compassion in times like this, when people are repeatedly getting off-track but can't necessarily pinpoint the reasons why?

Nir Eyal: Self-compassion is not the *solution*—self-compassion is an overarching *attitude*. So self-compassion will not make you indistractable...What will make you indistractable is learning from what happened, what got you distracted, and doing something today to prevent it from happening again in the future.

This is the difference between someone who's distractable and someone who's indistractable. Being indistractable doesn't mean you *never* get distracted. That's impossible. Everyone gets distracted from time to time. Even I get distracted from time to time. The difference is, I don't let myself *keep* getting distracted again and again. Paolo Cohelo has a wonderful quote—he says, "A mistake repeated more than once is a decision." How many times can we keep getting distracted by the same shit? Facebook, again? Email, again? The news, again? How many times do we keep getting distracted before we say, "Wait a minute, I'm noticing this is happening more than once." This is not a problem of, "people just can't stop." Of course, they can stop if they pause for a moment to think and say, "What is the *problem*?"

Every distraction only has three potential causes: It's an internal trigger, an external trigger, or a planning problem. That's it. Every single time. Use the principles in the book: "Okay, I got distracted once. Shame on you, distraction, for tricking me. What am I going to do *now* to make sure it doesn't happen again?"

- **Was it a feeling?** 90% of the time it's those pesky internal triggers: boredom, uncertainty, fatigue, loneliness, anxiety, stress. 90% of the time it's an uncomfortable feeling...and the inability to deal with discomfort. But if we *know that*, we can say, "Okay, next time I feel stress or anxiety or loneliness, I've got an arrow in my quiver that's going to be ready for me to pull out as soon as I feel that discomfort." The 10-minute rule, reimagining the task, reimagining the trigger, reimagining your temperament—all these techniques in that most important, critical chapter around mastering internal triggers need to be ready at our side.
- **Was it an external trigger?** That's super easy. An external trigger is if your phone buzzed or beeped or booped. Why does it keep doing that? At some point, it's time to just turn [the triggers] off. Is Zuckerberg going to reach into your phone and turn notifications back on? No! Again, how many times can we keep getting distracted by the same shit? Turn it off!
- **Was it a planning problem?** This is when you plan your time and say, "I needed an hour and a half, but I only allotted an hour." Okay, next time allocate an hour and a half. Or, "I planned this amount of time for traffic, but it took more time than that." No problem—next time, budget your time differently. That's how we fix the planning problem.

So there is no distraction we can't overcome if we plan ahead...the most important mantra in the book is that the antidote to impulsiveness is forethought. Distraction is a problem of impulse control. At the end of the day, that's all it is. In the moment, we do something that later we're going to regret because of an impulse. If it happens once, shame on distraction. If it happens more than once, shame on me because I didn't do something to prevent it.

Shortform: Right, and there's so much *internal* discomfort so it makes sense that people are getting

off track—but your self-compassion is about saying, "*That's fine, but...*" There are a lot of tools for reducing the discomfort. There's no way to get rid of the anxiety swirling around right now, but there are plenty of ways to plan for it...

Nir Eyal: And deal with it. The goal shouldn't be to squash those emotions. One of the things I rally against is this idea that feeling bad is bad. We know that the research literature tells us that trying to *escape* discomfort and thinking that you *shouldn't* feel these feelings actually makes it worse. It makes us enter into a rumination loop.

Of course, the self-help industry tells people, "You're supposed to be happy all the time. You're not supposed to feel bad, ever." That's ridiculous. What we have to do is *use* that discomfort as rocket fuel to make us better. So when we feel stress we can either say: "I need to stop feeling stressed, let me go watch Netflix, or go take a drink, or just scroll Facebook for a minute," which are acts of distraction or escape from discomfort. Or, we can say: "This stress must signal to me that this is really important to me. This is my body rising to the challenge."

It's about changing the conversation to stop buying into this myth that feeling bad is bad. Feeling bad is *not* bad. Feelings are signals that we can interpret however we want and respond to in a way that serves us, as opposed to us serving them.

> "The self-help industry tells people, 'You're supposed to be happy all the time. You're not supposed to feel bad, ever.' That's ridiculous. What we have to do is use that discomfort as rocket fuel to make us better...we can say: 'This stress must signal to me that this is really important to me. This is my body rising to the challenge.'"

Part 2: Eyal's Personal Experiences

Shortform: In your experience of becoming indistractable, did you encounter people who were dismissive or who pushed back against your new way of doing things?

Nir Eyal: I guess the biggest objection was something to the effect of, "Well, it's not always easy to do that." That was probably the biggest concern. I'm curious actually what you've heard?

Shortform: A common one is in regards to the timeboxed schedule: the response that, "Well, that's not how the day goes. There are always unexpected things that are going to happen." Or, "It seems inconvenient for others if your plan of what the day's going to look like is different from what they want to do."

Nir Eyal: That is a common one, but I think there's the misperception that your entire day needs to be what we call "reflective work" rather than "reactive work." What I advocate for is this: If your job requires you to be reactive—for example, if you're a call center employee, your job is to sit at a desk and react and answer the phone if it rings—you need to react.

All of our jobs require some sort of reactive work, whether it's our boss needing something, email, Slack notifications—and that's fine. The problem is, most people spend their *entire day* doing reactive work and they allocate no time to reflective work—the kind of work you do that requires you to work without distraction. Creative work, strategizing, planning, thinking—all of these things require you to work without distraction.

Unless you're a 100% reactive employee, such as if you worked at a call center or were a sous-chef or something, if your job requires you to allocate your time and attention to yourself being a schedule-maker as opposed to a schedule-taker, you need to allocate at least *some* time in your day to reflective work. I'm not saying you need to spend your entire day in a cave, away from everyone else, concentrating. Some jobs do—I work with a lot of computer programmers, and their job is almost 100% reflective work, because the more interruptions a software team faces, the more bugs in the software.

But all knowledge workers need at least *some* time—30 minutes, 40 minutes, an hour—in their day. *Some* sacred part of your day needs to be planned ahead and reserved for that reflective work—*that's* what I'm advocating for.

Shortform: So the day doesn't always go as planned, but the timeboxed schedule *does* allow for interruptions—you can schedule time for them.

Nir Eyal: Here's the beautiful thing about a timeboxed schedule. You might think, "I need to be on call because my boss demands it." What I propose is the idea of *schedule syncing*: You can go to your boss with your timeboxed schedule and show them that you think you *need* to be on call all day. Your schedule looks like 30 minutes of reflective work, seven and a half hours of reactive work.

Your boss is going to say, "What do you need to be on call all day for?" and you'll respond, "Well boss, don't you *need* me to be available all day?" You know what the boss is going to say? "No, I want you to do your work! You don't need to check your email every five minutes."

People *think* their bosses want them to be available all the time. No, your boss wants you to finish your work. So sit down with your boss—because timeboxing isn't enough, it's also about schedule syncing—and say, "This is how I spend my time. Is this correct? Is this how you *want* me to spend time?" It's not about output, but input of time and attention.

Shortform: And how do you suggest that someone trying to create their schedule *outside* an office setting—such as a stay-at-home mom, someone who's going to have interruptions all day and doesn't have anyone to schedule sync with—goes through this process of building a schedule that allows both what she wants to do and the distractions that naturally come up?

Nir Eyal: So this is where it comes to living life according to your values. If one of your values as a parent is to take care of your kids, take care of your kids. Part of the problem is that we expect ourselves, and other people, to do everything. When we try to do everything, what ends up happening is that we do *nothing* well.

As a parent, you need to ask yourself, "What are my values? How should I spend my time?" And I'm not going to say that every parent, particularly women, needs to be a homemaker. A woman or man can have a child and say, "I don't want to spend all day with my child." That's fine—if your values are spending time at work on your professional ambitions, no problem. But make those expectations clear because the problem happens when we say, "I want to work and exercise and watch TV and check Facebook and watch my kids, all at the same time." It's impossible, even though there's plenty of time in the day for the average American. For all the whining about there not being enough time in the day, the average American spends *six hours a day* watching television. Don't tell me there's not enough time! There's tons of time in our day for our kids *and* our work, as long as we don't try to do everything all at the same time.

> "Part of the problem is that we expect ourselves, and other people, to do everything. When we try to do everything, what ends up happening is that we do nothing well."

Shortform: Since writing *Indistractable*, have you adopted any new anti-distraction behaviors, read interesting research, or found useful tools that have been helping you?

Nir Eyal: The book is very autobiographical—I utilize everything. Anything that I talk about in the book, it came through this trial and error process of not only making sure that the techniques are backed by good research, but also that they worked for me in my own life. So yeah, I actually use all that stuff on a daily basis.

Is there anything *different* that's come out since the book? There's been some really interesting studies—and I didn't know these studies were being done—about how important internal triggers are. I didn't have this research available when I wrote the book, but there was a study that came out a little while ago that showed that *90% of the time* you check your phone, you don't check because of an external trigger as most people think. Actually, 90% of the time we check our phones because of an internal trigger, an emotional state. That was something I had hypothesized around but didn't actually have the data to show that it had such an impact. I wouldn't have even guessed it would've been *that* high.

So that was pretty interesting. And there's actually been many tools that have come out [since the book's publication], as well. I keep a running list of different tools that help people become indistractable. There was actually a student that read my book and built a Chrome extension called "Indistractable" to help people stay focused. There's been all sorts of new technology that have come out since I wrote the book to help people manage distraction, so that's pretty cool.

Shortform: That is cool. What does the Chrome extension do?

Nir Eyal: I think it's a free app to block certain websites during certain times of the day. So you can say, "Don't give me access to email, Facebook, Reddit, or whatever when I'm trying to do work."

Shortform: That's a great idea—I know there are lots of apps to block certain apps or websites, but you have to set it yourself when you start working. But, but when you go to block the website, it's easy to say, "Well, I can just look at it quickly before I block it." It's a great idea to have it blocked automatically at certain times [to remove that temptation].

Nir Eyal: It's just the tip of the iceberg! There are so many interesting technologies, and I'm a huge believer in using technology to *improve* technology. That's what technology always does—the downsides of one generation of technology are an *opportunity* for the next generation [to improve].

Part 3: Dealing With Current Events

Shortform: In the book, you talk about how it's very easy to get distracted by news articles. You suggest "temptation bundling," which is when you listen to articles in text-to-speech format while you're doing something else, like exercising.

However, it seems that these days, there are a hundred important news stories breaking per hour, and our society really places a lot of value on being up-to-date on information, knowing what's going on with different social issues, et cetera. There's just too much information to consume, even with temptation bundling. How do you propose striking a balance here? How can we stay informed about numerous important issues without becoming totally overwhelmed and driving ourselves deeper into the distraction cycle?

Nir Eyal: So, where this is coming from is your *values*. One of your values is to be an informed citizen (at

least, that's what I'm guessing is one of your values). *Why* is that one of your values? Because you want to make sure you play a responsible role in society to improve the world. I think that's a great value to have. But you need to realize that there will always be more information in the world, and more suffering in the world, than you will *ever* have the ability to deal with.

There's no way, even if you have limitless time, to cover everything that is made every second of the day, the suffering that is out there that you aren't aware of, let alone your ability to *act* on that suffering is impossible. So the first step is to admit defeat with the ridiculous ideal of "staying up to date." You'll never be able to stay up to date. Once we admit that fact, we then need to ask ourselves, "How much time is *enough*?"

This is where we go back to our timeboxed calendar. We ask ourselves, "How much time does the person *I want to become* spend on staying up to date?" It can't be 24 hours of the day, because we have other priorities: We have to take care of ourselves, we have to take care of our relationships, we have jobs. We have all this stuff we need to do other than consuming news all day. So how much time should we spend?

Let alone, as you mentioned earlier, which I think is a really astute point, is that the media companies are not in the business of keeping you informed. That's not their job. Their job is to keep you on their website as long as you will keep clicking on ads. And I don't care if it's The New York Times or Fox News or CNN or BBC—they all have the same business model. They sell ads. You cannot rely upon them to be the editor of your time and attention, because that's not their incentive.

You have to decide how much time is good for *you* based on *your* values. Half an hour a day, an hour a day, two, three hours a day—make that time in your schedule and timebox it like everything else while admitting to yourself, "I'm not ever going to be able to digest all of it. There's just no way." Over time, if you have way more news than you have time to consume, you can either make more time in your day if being more well-informed is aligned with your values, or—as you're probably going to do, and it's the healthier approach—say, "It's too much. I'm subscribed to too many newsletters and spending too much time watching news. I need to cut down to only the high-value stuff."

> "The media companies are not in the business of keeping you informed. That's not their job. Their job is to keep you on their website as long as you will keep clicking on ads. And I don't care if it's The New York Times or Fox News or CNN or BBC—they all have the same business model. They sell ads. You cannot rely upon them to be the editor of your time and attention, because that's not their incentive...You have to decide how much time is good for you based on your values."

Shortform: This fits into a theme you've come back to a few times, which is *honesty*. That is, being honest enough with yourself to admit that you don't have the ability to do everything. It's an interesting point that I don't think I would have connected to this problem of over-information—it can be tackled with honesty and being frank enough with ourselves to admit that it's just not possible to care about everything we'd like to.

Nir Eyal: I would say not only is it impossible, it's actually *harmful*. One of your values is to stay informed, and another one of your values is likely to *act*—being informed has to come at the cost of something else. If you're constantly worrying about other people's problems instead of actually thinking about what you can *do* with your time, that's the cost. *The cost of reading too much is that you act too little.*

Shortform: And that makes the link with values clearer as well. If you find you're spending too much time reading, you're forced to narrow your values a bit and ask, "Okay, how much of this is news I

truly *want to* and *can* act on?" If you're trying to care about everything all the time, you're spreading yourself too thin and can't meaningfully work with the information. It just becomes static.

Nir Eyal: Exactly. And that's why I recommend people pick something they can *do* something about. Where is your highest point of agency? You're not going to be able to fix the environment as well as run town council meetings as well as national elections and so on.

Pick the thing where you can effect the most change. I think a good metric for that is *impact* and *ease*. Ask yourself: Where can I have the biggest impact with the least amount of work? And just do that. Whatever it is, pick your issue. You just cannot do it all.

I think national politics is a great example of that—you know, we all have very little sway in the things people care the most about. How much time do we spend talking about stupid Donald Trump as opposed to something we *can* do something about, like the local school board? We could actually effect change there, but we worry about stuff we can't do anything about because it absolves us of responsibility: "Oh, I'm spending all my time reading the news so I'm up to date about the protest and the this and the that." But what about something you could *actually do something about*? That's a missed opportunity.

> "The cost of reading too much is that you act too little...Pick the thing where you can effect the most change. I think a good metric for that is impact and ease. Ask yourself: Where can I have the biggest impact with the least amount of work? And just do that. Whatever it is, pick your issue. You just cannot do it all."

Shortform: I agree that there's a missing opportunity in thinking only about the incoming information, rather than about narrowing our values to something we can do something about. I wish I'd had this advice before the election! I spent all of election week watching the results, just to be "up to date." It wasn't going to make a difference at that point.

Nir Eyal: As long as you're honest about why you're doing it. Look, I also watched way too much election coverage, but I knew I was doing it for entertainment. It was a soap opera. But I didn't fool myself into thinking, "I'm an informed citizen. I need to do this." No, I didn't—it was a soap opera. That's all it was! I voted, I gave some money, and that's all I could do. The point where I have the most leverage in the world to effect positive change is not national politics.

Shortform: It *was* a soap opera. I was totally sucked in, watching the map and the constant updates.

Nir Eyal: Well that's what the media companies want! They make money that way. I mean, they hate that Trump is out of office now because it's so much less interesting to watch...which is wonderful for our democracy but bad for their bottom line.

Shortform: My next question brings us further into current events: Children's school days look very different in the context of the pandemic, and I wanted to get your thoughts here. You mention that many schools are *way* over-structured for children, and this removes the ability to develop feelings of autonomy and competence that children should be developing. But at the same time, school has traditionally been a place for children to develop critical interpersonal relationship skills and serves as a built-in respite from technology—and there's recess, a sort of built-in free play.

This past year has been tumultuous for many school-age children and many have had to move their entire lives online—for example, school via Zoom and playtime via video games or video chat. It

seems like it's become impossible to maintain a balance between online interaction and face-to-face interactions that are critical for development. How do you think that this lack of balance between online life and real life may be affecting children?

Nir Eyal: I'm not anti-school. I'm anti-bad *school.* School is a technology. People forget that school is a relatively new phenomenon. Public education is 150 years old—pretty darn new. For thousands and thousands of years, children did not go to formalized school and sit at desks and listen to teachers drone on and on. That's a new invention. It's not necessarily a *bad* invention, but what I'm against is this ridiculous "teaching toward the test" and determining teacher pay based on how well their kids perform on some standardized test. I think that has some negative repercussions.

And you mentioned recess—I'm all for recess, but look how much time kids have for recess or physical education. It's at record lows. It's ridiculous. I would love for school to have more of what they used to have, which is more time for free play and more time for physical activity. It doesn't exist like it used to. So, I'm not anti-school—I'm anti-*jail*. I'm against a school that looks like a prison, where all we do is shove facts in kids' brains and expect them to regurgitate them on a page. That's humiliating and boring and pointless. So, I'm all for good school and I think we can get to a place where we have quality education that isn't so dependent on these types of tactics that are frankly, pretty inhumane and definitely breed people who don't lust for education. That's the real tragedy, that school breeds all the joy of learning out of you.

And to come to the second part of your question—what do we do now that kids are home? First of all, it's not all bad. We know that rates of childhood depression have gone *down* during the quarantine, surprisingly enough. It's fascinating—kids aren't using technology less. If anything they're using technology *more.* What's changed is that they're getting more sleep. Studies have found that kids are getting more sleep during this period at home because one of the terrible aspects of modern education in the United States is that we force our kids to get up at ungodly hours to catch a bus to drive an hour to get to school. Mental health requires proper rest—when kids don't have enough time for sleep, a lot of bad things happen. So, it's actually not the technology that's causing mental health issues, it's the lack of sleep.

So I think there are some beneficial aspects of kids learning from home, principally that they don't have to spend so much time commuting and getting up crazy early. They spend more time with their families, which is probably also affecting their mental health in a positive way. When I was in school, there were all kinds of bad mental health stuff that came from being around bullies—it's not like 8th grade is a bastion of harmony. It can be pretty awful for a lot of kids...it certainly was for me. It turns out that when kids spend more time with their parents, they have better mental health. There are a lot of upsides to kids *not* being in formal school, but that doesn't mean we can't make school better. It's just another technology.

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Shortform: So, many kids are doing better by spending a lot of time with their families. On the other hand, do you think that not spending very much face-to-face time with their peers is affecting them? Is there a crucial aspect of development missing for them?

Nir Eyal: What we call "free play" is very, very important. The problem is, what's happened today is that kids whose parents have any kind of money send their kids to hours and hours of after-school programs, whether it's ballet or test prep or football or basketball—all this stuff to get them college scholarships and

prepare them for this far-off, competitive future. This means they have no time to do what kids should be doing, which is *play*. Just being with peers. And I think that's a huge problem.

Shortform: During quarantine, kids *couldn't* go see their peers and experience free play—they were stuck at home. In these kinds of cases, can parents do anything to replicate the experience for them?

Nir Eyal: I would say, "Where's the alternative?" Right now, the alternative to being stuck at home playing by yourself online is playing with other people online. My daughter has regular playdates with other kids, some of them all over the world, and I think it's wonderful. She draws with them, she plays games, she learns with them—there are all sorts of things kids can do. Thank *goodness* we have this technology. If you want to propose a scenario where life would really be miserable for kids, it would be this quarantine without this technology. I would say for the time being, as long as it's age-appropriate content, being online in the right way can be wonderful for them...Would I want my kid doing nothing else? No. But a few hours a day playing with a friend online? I think it's fantastic.

Shortform: This past year has driven adults online for everything, too. We've now spent a year realizing that we can do virtually anything from home, such as work, hobbies, starting businesses, and so on. Do you think it's been a good thing for us to realize how much of our lives we can live online? Or do you think having everything in the same place is going to drive people further into distraction?

Nir Eyal: I'm pretty optimistic. I think that we're pretty good at figuring out, in the course of time, what things hurt us and what things serve us. This is what human beings have always done: They adapt and they adopt. They adapt their behaviors and they adopt new technologies to fix the last generation of technology. So I'm pretty optimistic that we're going to be okay.

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Shortform: I think it blurs a lot of boundaries between our lives where boundaries were really clear before: work at work and home things at home. Now, we're in this place where we have all these external triggers that didn't exist before, like your washing machine beeping at you during work. And there are a lot of internal triggers [and discomfort] that come with blurred boundaries as well. But from what I'm hearing you say is that while it feels a little tumultuous right now, people will figure it out.

Nir Eyal: I would say that the triggers have changed. I don't know if they're better or worse—they're different. It used to be Bob from accounting stopping by your desk or Jenny coming by to talk about some office gossip. So, working from home doesn't necessarily mean all the triggers are bad. Some triggers went away—so in that respect, it's great! There are a lot of things that are actually wonderful about working from home. Hopefully what we'll do in the course of time is figure out how to keep the good stuff in and the bad stuff out.

Shortform: At the beginning of this year's pandemic, a lot of people went into it thinking, "My office could never manage this. I just don't know how we're going to do everything from home." And now, many are liking it and many organizations are thinking about shutting down their offices in favor of a remote setting. So, do you think this will become the norm, now that we've started to figure out

how to work from home? Or, do you think a lot of people are going to be chomping at the bit to get back into the office instead?

Nir Eyal: Technology doesn't tend to die—it tends to find a niche. It's kind of like Darwin's finches: Species don't go extinct completely, they tend to evolve into specific niches. I think that's what we're going to find with working from home and the technologies that enable working from home. For some jobs and some niches, working from home is going to be great. For others, it's not going to be great, and we're going to go back to the way things used to be.

But a lot of people who otherwise wouldn't have tried working from home are now trying it, which I think is a net positive. There are lots and lots of benefits to this, like the freedom that it provides for caregivers who now save all this time and are accessible in case of an emergency for their kids, parents, or whomever they might be taking care of.

There are so many benefits, but it really depends on the job. I mean, an airline mechanic can't do their job from home, but a lot of other types of jobs can. Again, I think this is going to be a net positive when all is said and done. Nobody would have wished it, but now that's happened, there are definitely silver linings.