

## THE BIG IDEAS

**Productivity (Redefined)**  
Accomplishing what we intend.

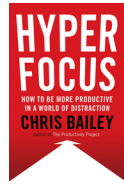
**Hyperfocus**  
You at your best = ?

**How to Hyperfocus**  
1 + 2 + 3 + 4.

**Intentions**  
Vague vs. implementation.

**Productivity Potential**  
Expanding vs. contracting.

**Attention**  
Is where it's at.



# Hyperfocus

How to Be More Productive in a World of Distraction

BY CHRIS BAILEY · VIKING © 2018 · 256 PAGES

“Above all else I began to view attention as the most important ingredient we can add if we’re to become more productive, creative, and happy—at work and at home. When we invest our limited attention intelligently and deliberately, we focus more deeply and think more clearly. This is an essential skill in today’s world, when we are so often in distracting environments doing brain-heavy work.

This book takes you on a tour through my exploration of the subject of focus. I’ll share not only the fascinating things I’ve learned but also how to actually put those ideas to use in your own life (I’ve road-tested all of them). Productivity research is great—but pretty useless when you don’t act upon it. In this way, I see *Hyperfocus* as a sort of ‘science-help’ book; one that explores the fascinating research behind how you focus but also bridges those insights with your daily life to explore ways you can manage your attention better to become more productive and creative. These ideas have already changed one life (mine), and I know they can do the same for you too. On the surface, the results can seem a bit like magic, but magic stops being magic the moment you know how it’s done.”

~ Chris Bailey from *Hyperfocus*

*Hyperfocus.*

Just looking at the cover of this book makes me smile.

I got it after [Cal Newport](#) connected me with Chris Bailey. Chris is the author of *The Productivity Project* and a full-time productivity researcher/writer/practitioner.

Although the book is called “Hyperfocus,” it’s ultimately about learning how to control our attention—turning it *on* AND *off* at will as we master the process of intentionally entering what Chris calls “Hyperfocus” (think: getting things done/being present mode) AND what he calls “Scatterfocus” (deliberately allowing our minds to wander to enter creative mode).

As per the inside flap, it’s “a practical guide to managing your attention—the most powerful resource you have to become more creative, get stuff done, and live a meaningful life.”

And, here’s a nice quote that captures the essence of the book: “Whether at work or at home, the quality of your attention determines the quality of your life. At work, the more attention you give to what’s in front of you, the more productive you become. At home, the more attention you devote to what’s in front of you, the more meaningful your life becomes.”

I really enjoyed it. If you’d like to get a great, practical overview of how to manage your most valuable asset (aka YOUR ATTENTION!), I think you’ll enjoy it as well. (Get a copy [here](#).)

Of course, it’s packed with Big Ideas. And, of course, I’m excited to share a few of my favorites we can apply to our lives TODAY, so let’s jump straight in!

*“Just as you are what you eat, you are what you pay attention to. Attention is finite and is the most valuable ingredient you have to live a good life—so make sure everything you consume is worthy of it.”*

~ Chris Bailey

## PRODUCTIVITY (REDEFINED)

*"Directing your attention to the most important object of your choosing—and then sustaining that attention—is the most consequential decision we will make throughout the day. We are what we pay attention to."*

~ Chris Bailey

"After years of researching the topic, I've found that 'productivity' has become a bit of a loaded term. What it usually connotes is a condition that feels cold, corporate, and overly focused on efficiency. I prefer a different (and friendlier) definition: productivity means accomplishing what we intend to. If our plan today is to write three thousand words, rock a presentation with our leadership team, and catch up on our email, and we successfully accomplish all of those, we were perfectly productive. Likewise, if we intend to have a relaxing day and manage to do absolutely nothing, we're again perfectly productive. Being *busy* doesn't make us productive. It doesn't matter how busy we are if that busyness doesn't lead us to accomplish anything of importance. Productivity is not about cramming more into our days but doing *the right thing in each moment.*"

Productivity.

Let's redefine it.

But, first... Let's actually look at the definition and etymology of the word, shall we?

My Apple Dictionary tells me that *productivity* is defined as "the state or quality of producing something." The word *productive* comes from the late Latin *productivus*. It literally means "brought forth."

Chris tells us: "*productivity means accomplishing what we intend to.*" He reminds us that it's NOT about being BUSY and that it's "*not about cramming more into our days but **doing the right thing in each moment.***"

Moment to moment to moment. We're either doing what we intend to do. Or not.

Of course, that requires us to step back long enough from the busyness of a distracted life to focus our attention via a clear intention—which is what the book is all about.

For now... What do YOU intend to bring forth Today?

What are the *three* things that, if you achieved them, would make Today awesome? As you contemplate that, may I suggest identifying the #1 thing from your Energy + Work + Love?

- **Energy:** \_\_\_\_\_
- **Work:** \_\_\_\_\_
- **Love:** \_\_\_\_\_

*"Whether at work or at home, the quality of your attention determines the quality of your life. At work, the more attention you give to what's in front of you, the more productive you become. At home, the more attention you devote to what's in front of you, the more meaningful your life becomes."*

~ Chris Bailey

For curious souls, my #1's Today: The 1.5 hours of pre-inputs Deep Work I'm doing (at 5:59 am) on this Note right now (Work) + the Trail workout I'm going to do after finishing this time block and spending some time with the fam (Energy) + the 30 minutes of dad time I'll spend with the kids (to give mom some self-care time) before going back to Deep Work session #2 (Love).

THAT is a VERY "productive" morning for me. And... It's REALLY hard to have a bad day when I start by knocking off THE most important things in my Big 3. I've won the day by 9 am.

btw: As I was typing that I was thinking about Nir Eyal's great book [Indistractable](#). His book provides some parallel wisdom. In fact, the sub-title to his book is: "How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life."

Remember his etymology lesson on *traction* vs. *distraction*?

They come from the Latin word that means "to draw or pull." As Nir says: "*Traction draws you toward what you want in life, while distraction pulls you away.*"

All of which begs the question (again): What do YOU want in life? Let's move toward it.

## HYPERFOCUS

*"One study found that when we continuously switch between tasks, our work takes 50 percent longer, compared with doing one task from start to completion."*

~ Chris Bailey

"When you hyperfocus on a task, you expand one task, project, or other object of attention ... so it fills your attentional space completely.

You enter this mode by managing your attention deliberately and purposefully: by choosing one important object of attention, eliminating distractions that will inevitably arise as you work, and then focusing on just one task. Hyperfocus is many things at once: it's deliberate, undistracted, and quick to refocus, and it leads us to become completely immersed in our work. It also makes us immensely happy. Recall how energized you were by your work the last time you found yourself in this state. In hyperfocus you might even feel more relaxed than you usually are when you work. Allowing one task or project to consume your full attentional space means this state doesn't make you feel stressed or overwhelmed. Your attentional space doesn't overflow, and your work doesn't feel nearly as chaotic. Since hyperfocus is so much more productive, you can slow down a bit and still accomplish an incredible amount in a short period of time."

Welcome to Chapter 3: "The Power of Hyperfocus."

Chris kicks this one off by encouraging us to think back to our last super-productive work day, when you accomplished a huge amount.

What were you doing? (Seriously. Spend a moment thinking about it!)

He tells us that, among other things, you were "*probably focusing on only one thing—maybe out of necessity, driven by a deadline. This one task filled your attentional space.*"

And, well, THAT is the essence of hyperfocus.

Can we put ALL (!!!) of our attention on THE #1 THING that we've decided is THE MOST IMPORTANT THING in this moment? That's the ultimate game. (Right?)

Moment to moment to moment, we're (hyper)focused on what's important now. (Unless, of course, the most important thing we can do in this moment is to deliberately engage in what Chris calls "scatterfocus"—which allows us to recover from all that hyperfocus. :)

Chris also says: "*The most important aspect of hyperfocus is that only one productive or meaningful task consumes your attentional space. This is simply nonnegotiable. Here's why: the most critical tasks, projects, and commitments benefit from every bit of extra attention.*"

One of the central themes of the book is the fact that we have a VERY limited "attentional space."

Get this: Apparently we are currently being bombarded with 11 MILLION "bits" of information in our sensory experience each second. You know how much of that we can consciously process? About 40 bits. (Not, as Chris points out, 40 million or forty thousand, but forty.)

As he says: "*There's a finite limit to how many things we can focus on. That limit is smaller than you think.*"

P.S. Let's go back to that super-epic day. What were you doing? And what were you NOT doing?

Let's channel some Josh Waitzken wisdom and [make that prior best our new baseline](#)—remembering that, if we want to consistently live as the Optimus-best version of ourselves, the little things matter. A lot.

As Josh says in [The Art of Learning](#): "*One thing I have learned as a competitor is that there are clear distinctions between what it takes to be decent, what it takes to be good, what it takes to be great, and what it takes to be among the best. If your goal is to be mediocre, then you have considerable margin for error. You can get depressed when fired and mope around waiting for someone to call with a new job offer. If you hurt your toe, you can take six weeks watching television and eating potato chips.*"

*"The quality of attention is so integral to productivity that increasing it even slightly makes a remarkable difference in how much we accomplish."*

~ Chris Bailey

*"The most important aspect of hyperfocus is that only one productive or meaningful task consumes your attentional space. This is simply nonnegotiable. Here's why: the most crucial tasks, projects, and commitments benefit from every bit of extra attention."*

~ Chris Bailey

## HOW TO GET INTO HYPERFOCUS

"The science suggests we pass through four states as we begin to focus. First, we're focused (and productive). Then, assuming we don't get distracted or interrupted, our minds begin to wander. Third, we make note of this mind wandering. This can take awhile, especially if we don't frequently check what is consuming our attentional space. (On average, we notice about five times an hour that our mind has wandered.) And fourth, we shift our focus back to our original object of attention."

The four stages of hyperfocus are modeled on this framework."

There are four steps to hyperfocusing. The quick recap: "To hyperfocus, you must

1. choose a productive or meaningful object of attention;
2. eliminate as many external and internal distractions as you can;
3. focus on that chosen object of attention; and
4. continually draw your focus back to that one object of attention."

Note: The first step is the most important: Decide what you're going to focus on.

Then we eliminate the distractions. Focus. Bring your mind back when it inevitably wanders.

Repeat.

## VAGUE INTENTIONS —> IMPLEMENTATION INTENTIONS

"Some students set a vague intention while others set what [Peter] Gollwitzer calls an 'implementation intention.' As he explains the term: 'Make a very detailed plan on how you want to achieve what you want to achieve. What I'm arguing in my research is that goals need plans, ideally plans that include when, where, and which kind of action to move towards the goal.' In other words, if a student's vague goal was to 'find an apartment during Christmas break,' his implementation intention could be 'I will hunt for apartments on Craigslist and email three apartment landlords in the weeks leading up to Christmas.'"

Comparing Gollwitzer and Brandstätter's two participant groups is where things get interesting. A remarkable 62 percent of students who set a specific implementation intention followed through on their goals. The group that did not set an implementation intention fared a lot more poorly, following through on their original intention a third as often—a paltry 22 percent of the time. This effect, which subsequent studies validated further, was positively staggering. **Setting specific intentions can double or triple your odds of success.**

With that in mind, let's quickly turn my three vague intentions into implementation intentions:

1. 'Go to the gym' becomes 'Schedule and go to the gym on my lunch break.'
2. 'Quit working when I get home' is reframed as 'Put my work phone on airplane mode and my work laptop in another room, and stay disconnected for the evening.'
3. 'Get to bed by a reasonable time' becomes 'Set a bedtime alarm for 10:00 p.m., and when it goes off, start winding down.'"

Want to DOUBLE or TRIPLE your odds of success?

Set some implementation intentions. The trick? Move from kinda-sorta vague targets to much more specific targets. It's not rocket science but it \*is\* rocket FUEL for rockin' it.

We have Peter Gollwitzer to thank for his research in the field of intention. (Fun fact: Gollwitzer is married to our beloved Gabriele Oettingen, creator of WOOP and author of [Rethinking Positive Thinking](#). #powercouple)

*"The concept of hyperfocus can be summed up in a single tranquil sentence: keep one important, complex object of attention in your awareness as you work."*

~ Chris Bailey

*"Attention without intention  
is wasted energy."*

~ Chris Bailey

Basic idea with [implementation intentions](#): Decide in advance what you're going to do to achieve your desired outcome. And be pretty specific about it.

Basically: Move from a VAGUE Intention to a specific Implementation Intention.

For example, for my Big 3 #1's above, the *vague* intentions for my day would be something like:

- **Energy**: "Work out."
- **Work**: "Do some Deep Work"
- **Love**: "Spend some time with the kids."

The *specific* implementation intentions for my Masterpiece AM Bookend are more like this:

- **Work**: "After waking up, meditate for 20 minutes then work for 90 minutes pre inputs."
- **Energy**: "Then spend 15-30 minutes with the fam then hit the Trail for a workout."
- **Love**: "When you're back from the Trail, give mom 30 minutes of alone time as you enjoy one-on-two time with the kids."

Guess what?

Science says I'm TWO to THREE (!!!) times more likely to actually do what I say I want to do when I get specific. My experience confirms this. (Yours?)

Back to you.

Got any VAGUE intentions in your life? How can you make them more SPECIFIC?

btw: Going back to our prior chat about making our best our new baseline... When we figure out something that works we want to use our [Willpower](#) wisely to install [Algorithm-Habits](#) that run on autopilot with as little conscious thought as possible. (If this... THEN that...)

P.S. Speaking of intention/attention: I think this is my favorite line in the whole book:

***"Attention without intention is wasted energy."***

## EXPANDING AND CONTRACTING YOUR PRODUCTIVITY POTENTIAL

"Research shows that attentional space expands and contracts in proportion to how much mental energy we have. Getting enough sleep, for example, can increase the size of attentional space by as much as 58 percent, and taking frequent breaks can have the same effect. This impacts productivity: when attentional space is approximately 60 percent larger, productivity can grow by just as much, especially when working on a demanding task. The better rested we are, the more productive we become."

One of the key themes of the book is that we need to be good custodians of what Chris calls our "attentional space" (what cognitive scientists call our "working memory capacity"). Our attentional space can easily get overwhelmed by too many inputs and too little breaks—diminishing our ability to get into and sustain "hyperfocus."

We take good care of our productivity potential by setting clear intentions, reducing/eliminating distractions and bringing our focus back to our #1 thing when it inevitably (!) wanders.

We also make sure we honor our ultradian rhythms by taking good breaks (~20 minutes for every 90 minutes of focus).

And... One of the most powerful things we can do to take care of our attentional space? SLEEP!!!

Think about that stat for a moment: Getting a good night of sleep can increase the size of your attentional space by nearly 60%!!! That's crazy. And that's why (echo!) we spend so much time making sure we're nailing our fundamentals to make sure our Energy is Optimized.

*"Another of my favorite  
quotes is from Abraham  
Lincoln, who said, 'Give me  
six hours to chop down a  
tree and I will spend the  
first four sharpening the  
axe.'"*

~ Chris Bailey

*"It's not a coincidence that so many of the tactics in this book involve making your work and life less stimulating—the less stimulated you are, the more deeply you can think. Each time we eschew boredom for stimulation, we fail to plan, unearth ideas our mind has incubated, or recharge so we can work later with greater energy and purpose."*

~ Chris Bailey

P.S. Can you guess what other practice has been shown to Optimize our attentional space? MEDITATION!

*"There is one practice that has been proven in study after study to increase working memory capacity: meditation. ... Like hyperfocus, meditation involves continually returning your focus to a single object of attention—usually your breath—as soon as you notice your mind has wandered from it. ... Each time you return your wandering mind to the details of your breath, you heighten your executive functioning: how much control you have over your attention."*

## HYPERFOCUS + SCATTERFOCUS

"Hyperfocus can help you get an extraordinary amount done in a relatively short period of time. Scatterfocus lets you connect ideas—which helps you unearth hidden insights, become more creative, plan for the future, and rest. Together they will enable you to work and live with purpose.

Your attention is the most powerful tool at your disposal to live and work with greater productivity, creativity and purpose. Managing it well will enable you to spend more time and energy on your most purposeful tasks and to work more often with intention, focus for longer periods, and stumble into fewer unwanted daydreams.

I hope you spend it wisely."

Those are the final words of the book.

One more time: Want a great life?

Optimize your attention.

Master the ability to shine the spotlight of your attention where you want, when you want, for how long you want.

TODAY.

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Philosopher in Residence*

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## About the Author of "Hyperfocus"

CHRIS BAILEY



Chris Bailey has been intensively researching and experimenting with productivity since he was a young teenager, in an effort to discover how to become as productive as humanly possible. To date, he has written hundreds of articles on the subject, and has garnered coverage in media as diverse as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *GQ*, *The Huffington Post*, *New York Magazine*, *Harvard Business Review*, *TED*, *Fast Company*, and *Lifehacker*. The author of *The Productivity Project*, Chris lives in Kingston, Canada.

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at [optimize.me](https://optimize.me).