

THE BIG IDEAS

Traction vs. Distraction

Moving toward or away.

Causes

Root vs. Proximate.

Willpower Finite?

Nope.

Eyal's Big 3

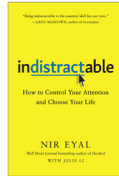
You + Relationships + Work.

B = MAT

Behavior = Motivation + Ability + Trigger.

Identity Pacts

Are super-powerful. Yours?



Indistractable

How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life

BY NIR EYAL · BENBELLA BOOKS © 2019 · 300 PAGES

“The fact is, in this day and age, if you are not equipped to manage distraction, your brain will be manipulated by time-wasting diversions.

In the next few pages, I’ll reveal my own struggle with distraction, and how I, ironically, got hooked. But I’ll also share how I overcame struggle and explain why we are much more powerful than any of the tech giants. As an industry insider, I know their Achilles’ heel—and soon you will too.

The good news is that we have the unique ability to adapt to such threats. We can take steps right now to retrain and regain our brains. To be blunt, what other choice do we have? We don’t have time to wait for regulators to do something, and if you hold your breath waiting for corporations to make their products less distracting, well, you’re going to suffocate.

In the future, there will be two kinds of people in the world: those who let their attention and lives be controlled and coerced by others and those who proudly call themselves ‘indistractable.’ By opening this book, you’ve taken the first step toward owning your time and your future.

But you’re just getting started. For years you’ve been conditioned to expect instant gratification. Think of getting to the last page of *Indistractable* as a personal challenge to liberate your mind.

The antidote to impulsiveness is forethought. Planning ahead ensures you will follow through. With the techniques in this book, you’ll learn exactly what to do from this day forth to control your attention and choose your life.”

~ Nir Eyal from *Indistractable*

“Imagine the incredible power of following through on your intentions. How much more effective would you be at work? How much more time could you spend with your family or doing the things you love? How much happier would you be? What would life be like if your superpower was being indistractable?”

~ Nir Eyal

Nir Eyal is a former lecturer at Stanford’s Graduate School of Business and Hasso Plattner Institute of Design. His first book was an international bestseller that’s influenced the product development of pretty much all of the leading tech companies on the planet. It was called *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*.

We have Nir to thank for helping make the technology we use better. And... As he says, “*But there’s also a dark side. As philosopher Paul Virilio wrote, ‘When you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck.’ In the case of user-friendly products and services, what makes some products engaging and easy to use can also make them distracting.*”

After finding HIMSELF hooked to many of the products created by designers inspired by *his* work, Eyal got himself UNHOOKED and, ultimately INDISTRactable.

In this great book, he gives us a practical look at *why* we’re so vulnerable to getting hooked in the first place and, most importantly, how to make ourselves *Indistractable* so we can control our attention and choose our lives. (Get a copy [here](#).)

As always, the book is packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share a few of my favorites... So let's jump straight in!

TRACTION VS. DISTRACTION

"Traction draws you toward what you want in life, while distraction pulls you away."

~ Nir Eyal

"Imagine a line that represents the value of everything you do throughout your day. To the right, the actions are positive; to the left, they are negative.

On the right side of the continuum is *traction*, which comes from the Latin *trahere*, meaning 'to draw or pull.' We can think of traction as the actions that draw us toward what we want in life. On the left side is *distraction*, the opposite of traction. Derived from the same Latin root, the word means the 'drawing away of the mind.' Distractions impede us from making progress toward the life we envision. All behaviors, whether they tend toward traction or distraction, are prompted by triggers, internal or external."

Traction vs. Distraction.

We think a lot about being *distracted* but I've never thought (not once!) of its opposite: TRACTION. (Have you?)

As an etymological nerd (!), I just love the origin story of these words. Let's review.

Traction. It LITERALLY means "to draw or pull." *Distraction*, on the other hand, means "drawing away of the mind." <- Fascinating.

Let's draw that metaphorical (or real!) line on the piece of paper that is our day. On the right we have all those positive things we do during the day. On the left, the negative.

Remember: Traction vs. Distraction.

The book, of course, is all about helping us get TRACTION. In other words, as per the sub-title: "How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life."

How? The Indistractable Model has four steps (which make up the first four parts of the book):
1. Master Internal Triggers; 2. Make Time for Traction; 3. Hack Back External Triggers; 4. Prevent Distraction with Pacts.

Let's take a quick look.

CAUSES: ROOT VS. PROXIMATE

"Consider the game of pool. What makes the colored balls go into the pockets? Is it the white ball, the stick, or the player's actions? We understand that while the white cue ball and stick are necessary, the root cause is the player. The white cue ball and stick aren't the root causes; they are the proximate causes of the resulting event.

In the game of life, it's often hard to see the root cause of things. When we're passed over for a promotion, we might blame that cunning coworker for taking our job instead of reflecting on our lack of qualifications and initiative. When we get into a fight with our spouse, we might blame the conflict on one tiny incident, like a toilet seat left up, instead of acknowledging years of unresolved issues. And when we scapegoat our political and ideological opponents for the world's troubles, we choose not to seek to understand the deeper systemic reasons behind the problems.

These proximate causes have something in common—they help us deflect responsibility onto something or someone else. It's not that the cue ball and stick don't factor into the equation, just like the coworker or toilet seat, but they certainly aren't responsible for the outcome. Without understanding and tackling the root causes, we're stuck being helpless victims in a tragedy of our own creation.

"It's good to know that feeling bad isn't actually bad; it's exactly what survival of the fittest intended."

~ Nir Eyal

The distractions in our lives are the result of the same forces—they are proximate causes that we think are to blame, while the root causes stay hidden. We tend to blame things like television, junk food, social media, cigarettes, and video games—but these are proximate causes of our distraction."

Welcome to the first chapter in Part 1: "Master Internal Triggers." Eyal kicks the party off by asking us, "What motivates us, really?"

He answers the question by citing Epicurus, who told us: "By pleasure, we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul."

Eyal then tells us: "Simply put, the drive to relieve discomfort is the root cause of all of our behavior, while everything else is a proximate cause."

So, we have another distinction: Root causes vs. Proximate causes.

The smartphone? Television? Video games?

Those aren't the ROOT cause of your distraction. They're simply the PROXIMATE causes.

The root cause? Well... That's basically our inability to deal with emotional discomfort in our lives. Which is why Eyal dedicates the first part of the book to "Mastering Internal Triggers."

He provides some great ideas on how to go about doing that—including some Acceptance and Commitment Therapy ideas. For now, know this: "Unless we deal with the root causes of our distraction, we'll continue to find ways to distract ourselves. Distraction, it turns out, isn't about distraction itself; rather, it's about how we respond to it."

And... Remember: You're the guy (or gal) with the cue stick in your hand.

WILLPOWER: FINITE? NOPE.

"Recently, however, scientists have examined the theory [that willpower is finite] more critically, and several have soured on the idea. Evan Carter at the University of Miami was one of the first to challenge Baumeister's findings. In a 2010 meta-analysis (a study of studies), Carter looked at nearly two hundred experiments that concluded ego depletion was real. Upon closer inspection, however, he identified a 'publication bias,' in which studies that produced contradictory evidence were not included. When factoring in their results, he concluded there was no firm evidence supporting the ego depletion theory. Furthermore, some of the more magical aspects of the theory, like the idea that sugar can increase willpower, have been thoroughly debunked."

That's from another chapter from Part 1. Eyal tells us that if we want to "Master Internal Triggers" we need to "Reimagine Your Temperament."

Specifically... Quit telling yourself that your willpower is finite. That story isn't true or helpful.

We've discussed both sides of this scientific debate. First, in our Notes on [Willpower](#) by Roy Baumeister (whose research that meta study confronts) and then in our Notes on [The Marshmallow Test](#) by Walter Mischel.

"People who did not see willpower as a finite resource did not show signs of ego depletion."

~ Nir Eyal

Mischel says: "If you believe that persisting on tough tasks is energizing rather than depleting, will it protect you from fatigue? Indeed yes: when people are led to think that effortful tasks will invigorate rather than drain them, they improve their performance on a later task."

Plus, Mischel cites the same research Eyal references when he tells us: "At Stanford University, Carol Dweck and her colleagues found that those who believed that their stamina fueled itself after tough mental exertion did not show diminished self-control after a depleting exercise. In contrast, those who believed that their energy was depleted after a strenuous experience did show diminished self-control and had to rest to refuel."

So... Let's tell ourselves a MUCH better story.

"Being indistractable means striving to do what you say you will do. ... If you care about your work, your family, and your physical and mental well-being, you must learn how to become indistractable."

~ Nir Eyal

EYAL'S BIG 3: YOU + RELATIONSHIPS + WORK

"Whatever our values may be, it's helpful to categorize them into various life domains, a concept that is thousands of years old. The Stoic philosopher Hierocles demonstrated the interconnected nature of our lives with concentric circles illustrating a hierarchical balance of duties. He placed the human mind and body at the center, followed by close family in the next ring, then extended family, then fellow members of one's tribe, then inhabitants of one's town or city, fellow citizens and countrymen next, finishing with all humanity in the outermost ring.

Inspired by his example, I created a way to simplify and visualize the three life domains where we spend our time... you, relationships, and work.

These three domains outline where we spend our time. They give us a way to think about how we plan our days so that we can become an authentic reflection of the people we want to be."

Welcome to Part 2: "Make Time for Traction."

The first chapter in this section is called "Turn Your Values into Time."

The strangest thing happened when I flipped open to this section. The moment I started reading it, a choir of angels leaped off the page and started singing. No joke. :)

Why? Well... Because Eyal basically tells us we need to create Masterpiece Days by starting with our Big 3. He arrived at his Big 3 in a slightly different way and describes how to Optimize them in a slightly different way, but... It's basically exactly what we talk about all the time.

Eyal's Big 3 origin story involves Hierocles's concentric circles. Our Big 3 origin story involves Covey's Roles and Goals mashed up with Tony Robbins's Categories of Improvement run through Freud's filter of Work and Love preceded by the engine for all that awesome: Energy.

Eyal tells us that we need to get clarity on our "values." We'd call those "Virtues." As he says: "Does your calendar reflect your values? To be the person you want to be, you have to make time to live your values." <- Amen.

So... Does YOUR calendar reflect your values? Who are YOU at your Energy + Work + Love best? What virtues do you embody in each of those domains? And... What's the #1 thing you can do to be in integrity with those virtues? TODAY!

B = MAT

"In 2007, B.J. Fogg, founder of Stanford University's Persuasive Technology Lab, taught a class on 'mass interpersonal persuasion.' Several of the students in attendance would later pursue careers applying his methods at companies like Facebook and Uber. Mike Krieger, a cofounder of Instagram, created a prototype of the app in Fogg's class that he eventually sold for \$1 billion.

As a student at Stanford's business school at the time, I attended a retreat at Fogg's home, where he taught his methods of persuasion in more depth. Learning from him firsthand was a turning point in my understanding of human behavior. He taught me a new formula that changed the way I viewed the world.

The Fogg Behavior Model states that for a behavior (B) to occur, three things must be present at the same time: motivation (M), ability (A), and a trigger (T). More succinctly, B = MAT.

Motivation is 'energy for action,' according to Edward Deci, professor of psychology at the University of Rochester. When we're highly motivated, we have a strong desire, and the requisite energy, to take action, and when we're not motivated, we lack the energy to perform a task. Meanwhile, in Fogg's formula, ability relates to facility of action. Quite simply, the harder something is to do, the less likely people are to do it. Conversely, the easier something is to do, the more likely we are to do it.

When people have sufficient motivation and ability, they're primed for certain behavior. However, without the critical third component, the behavior will not occur. A trigger to tell us what to do next is always required. We discussed internal triggers in a previous section, but when it comes to the products we use every day and the interruptions that lead to distraction, external triggers—stimuli in our environment that prompt us to act—play a big role.”

Welcome to Part 3: Hack Back External Triggers. The first chapter in *that* section? “Ask the Critical Question.” We'll get to that question in a moment.

First... Want to know how all the best tech companies hack your attention? Well, Eyal tells us that Facebook's first president, Sean Parker, puts it pretty clearly when he “*described how the social network was designed to manipulate our behavior. ‘It’s a social-validation feedback loop,’ he said. ‘Exactly the kind of thing that a hacker like myself would come up with, because you’re exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology.’*”

<- Cue the [60 Minutes episode on Brain Hacking](#) for an exposé on said practices!!!

Now, let's take a look at that equation: Behavior = Motivation + Ability + Trigger. **B = MAT.**

Reminds me of our take on James Clear's take on habit loops (via his great book [Atomic Habits](#)). Recall: If we want to INSTALL a good habit, we need to make it “obvious” + “easy” + “awesome.” Want to DELETE a bad habit? Awesome. Just make it “invisible” + “hard” + “awful.”

Eyal focuses on the “Trigger” component of the equation. Think: Push notifications, etc.

All of which leads us to the question: “***Is this trigger serving me, or am I serving it?***”

<- There ya go. Eyal tells us that's THE easiest way to get the best out of our technology while leaving the rest. As he says: “*Viewed through the lens of this critical question, triggers can now be identified for what they are: tools.*”

Take a quick inventory of YOUR triggers. Are they serving you?

IDENTITY PACTS

“With that in mind, what identity should we take on to help fight distraction? It should now be clear why this book is called *Indistractable*. Welcome to your new moniker! By thinking of yourself as indistractable, you empower yourself through your new identity. You can also use this identity as a rationale to tell others why you do ‘strange’ things like meticulously plan your time, refuse to respond to every notification immediately, or put a sign on your screen when you don't want to be disturbed. These acts are no more unusual than other expressions of identity, like wearing religious garb or eating a particular diet. It's time to be indistractable and proud!”

Welcome to Part 4: “Prevent Distraction with Pacts.” This section kicks off with the power of precommitments. Eyal shares the story of Ulysses and his precommitment with the sirens. Recall: His sailors avoided their tempting songs by plugging their ears with bees wax. Ulysses wanted to hear their songs, so he kept his ears clear BUT he had himself tied to the mast!

That passage is from a chapter on one type of precommitment strategy I particularly love called: “Prevent Distraction with Identity Pacts.” Our self-image or *identity* is REALLY important.

Let's go back to James Clear and his *Atomic Habits* for a moment.

His articulation of the etymology of the word *identity* is one of those gems permanently tattooed on my consciousness.

As he puts it: “*The more you repeat a behavior, the more you reinforce the identity associated with that behavior. In fact, the word identity was originally derived from the Latin word essentitas, which means being, and identidem, which means repeatedly. Your identity is literally your ‘repeated beingness.’*”

"By aligning our behaviors to our identity, we make choices based on who we believe we are."

~ Nir Eyal

Eyal encourages us to discover RITUALS that help us integrate that identity. He cites a Harvard study in which people Optimized their health by doing almost-silly stuff before eating. He quotes the lead researcher who tells us that "rituals 'may seem like a waste of time. Yet, as our research suggests, they are quite powerful.' She continues, 'Even when they are not embedded in years of tradition, simple rituals can help us build personal discipline and self-control.'"

Now... Let's go back to the Big 3 we discussed above: Energy + Work + Love.

To get TRACTION in pursuit of the most important goal in our lives (the summum bonum!!) of becoming our optimus-best, eudaimonically heroic selves, I suggest that we want to start each day with a little journaling ritual—reminding ourselves of who we are committed to being.

Start by writing down your optimus-best IDENTITY Energy + Work + Love-wise. (For me, it's "ATHLETE" + "LEADER" + "FATHER.")

What VIRTUES does *that* version of you embody? (For me, each has its own set, including: Disciplined + Strong + Grounded; Calm + Confident + Euthymic; Present + Loving + Fun!)

And... What's the #1 BEHAVIOR you will engage in Today to be in integrity with that Identity and those Virtues? That's our Big 3 x 2. It's a surprisingly potent Identity-ritual.

Back to Eyal: "By making identity pacts, we are able to build the self-image we want. Whether the behavior is related to what we eat, how we treat others, or how we manage distraction, this technique can help shape our behavior to reflect our values. Though we often assume our identity is fixed, our self-image is, in fact, flexible and is nothing more than a construct in our minds. It's a habit of thought, and, as we've learned, habits can be changed for the better."

So...What Identity-pacts will YOU make Today?

Here's to being Indistractably, eudaimonically heroic! (TODAY!!)

B

Brian Johnson,
Optimize, Founder + Leader

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[Why We Do What We Do](#)

About the Author of "Indistractable"

NIR EYAL



Nir Eyal lectured at Stanford's Graduate School of Business and Institute of Design. His first book, *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*, is an international bestseller and taught Silicon Valley how to design user behavior. His second book, *Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life*, reveals the Achilles' heel of distraction and provides a guidebook for getting the best of technology without letting it get the best of us. Nir writes, consults, and teaches about the intersection of psychology, technology, and business at NirAndFar.com and his writing has been featured in *Harvard Business Review*, *TechCrunch*, *Time*, *The Week*, *Inc.*, and *Psychology Today*.

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.