

THE BIG IDEAS

Never Get High
On Your Own Supply

Addiction
So much more than personality.

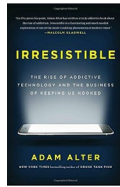
11 Years
How to add them back to your life.

Slavery
Don't sentence yourself.

6 Seconds
Until your email self-destructs.

Cucumbers + Pickles
You can't unpickle a pickle.

The Motivational Interview
How can you Optimize a little?



Irresistible

The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked

BY ADAM ALTER · PENGUIN PRESS © 2017 · 368 PAGES

“Irresistible traces the rise of addictive behaviors, examining where they begin, who designs them, the psychological tricks that make them so compelling, and how to minimize dangerous behavioral addiction as well as harnessing the same science for beneficial ends. If app designers can coax people to spend more time and money on a smartphone game, perhaps policy experts can also encourage people to save more for retirement or donate to more charities. ...

The age of behavioral addiction is still young, but early signs point to a crisis. Addictions are damaging because they crowd out other essential pursuits, from work and play to basic hygiene and social interaction. The good news is that our relationships with behavioral addictions aren't fixed. There's much we can do to restore the balance that existed before the age of smartphones, emails, wearable tech, social networking, and on-demand viewing. The key is to understand why behavioral addictions are so rampant, how they capitalize on human psychology, and how to defeat the addictions that hurt us, and harness the ones that help us.”

~ Adam Alter from *Irresistible*

Irresistible.

That's the perfect word to describe the growing array of addictive technologies that are capturing so much of our attention these days. And, it's the perfect name for the book.

Adam Alter is an associate professor of marketing at NYU's Stern School of Business. This is a great book on, as the sub-title suggests, “The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked.”

Yes. We're addicted to our smartphones. And a ton of other technology. Although that's not quite a newsflash at this point, this book pulls back the curtain on the businesses that are exploiting some vulnerabilities in our brains to maximize their share of our attention.

I got it after chatting with Cal Newport about [Digital Minimalism](#). Cal told me about the *60 Minutes* piece on [Brain Hacking](#).

Short story there: Silicon Valley entrepreneurs are deliberately hacking our attention. They are, as Bill Maher said, “tobacco farmer's in t-shirts.” But, as Maher says, the tobacco farmers just wanted our lungs. The tech entrepreneurs want our soul.

If that topic captures your interest and you'd like to learn more about what's going on behind the scenes and how it might affect you and your family, I think you'll really enjoy this book. It's a well-written, quick read. (I highly recommend the hardcover edition. It's always good to find an excuse NOT to use our smartphones. ;) Get a copy [here](#).

For now, I'm excited to share some of my favorite Ideas so let's jump in!

“According to Tristan Harris, a 'design ethicist,' the problem isn't that people lack willpower, it's that 'there are a thousand people on the other side of the screen whose job it is to break down the self-regulation you have.’”

~ Adam Alter

"Children are especially vulnerable to addiction, because they lack the self-control that prevents many adults from developing addictive habits. Regulated societies respond by refusing to sell alcohol and cigarettes to children—but very few societies regulate behavioral addictions. Kids can still play with interactive tech for hours at a time, and they can still play video games as long as their parents will allow."

~ Adam Alter

NEVER GET HIGH ON YOUR OWN SUPPLY

"At an Apple event in January 2010, Steve Jobs unveiled the iPad

What this device does is extraordinary . . . It offer the best way to browse the web; way better than a laptop and way better than a smartphone . . . It's an incredible experience . . . It's phenomenal for mail; it's a dream to type on.

For ninety minutes, Jobs explained why the iPad was the best way to look at photos, listen to music, take classes on iTunes U, browse Facebook, play games, and navigate thousands of apps. He believed everyone should own an iPad.

But he refused to let his kids use the device."

Those are the first words from the Prologue of the book.

Isn't that fascinating?

Steve Jobs wouldn't even let his own kids use the iPad he created. And, he's not alone. Adam tells us that a bunch of other tech luminaries imposed similar restrictions. From the former editor of *Wired* magazine to a founder of Blogger, Twitter and Medium. Tight restrictions.

Kinda makes you scratch your head and say, "Hmmm..." And ask, "Why?"

Well, as a guy who's built and sold two Internet companies and is creating another while staying offline as much as possible and raising a couple kids, I'll tell you why my wife and I don't allow our kids to use much technology.

Short story: Science is unequivocal. Our ATTENTION is our most precious asset. Our ability to put our attention where we want, when we want, for how long we want is a key attribute to flourishing. Therefore, being committed to helping our kids actualize their potential, we've prioritized protecting and cultivating that ability to focus their attention.

And, the only logical next step (as we see it) with that intention is to DRAMATICALLY limit the amount of screen time our little ones have.

Our 5-year-old Emerson thinks the movie *Frozen* is the 3-minute YouTube video of *Let It Go*. He's never watched an animated movie. Or cartoon. Or looked at an iPad. The longest video he's watched is a TED Talk. Or maybe it was a cooking class.

Back to Jobs, et al. As Adam says: *"It seemed as if the people producing tech products were following the cardinal rule of drug dealing: never get high on your own supply. This is unsettling. Why are the world's greatest public technocrats also its greatest private technophobes? Can you imagine the outcry if religious leaders refused to let their children practice religion?"*

SO MUCH MORE TO IT THAN AN "ADDICTIVE PERSONALITY"

"... there's so much more to it than an *addictive personality*. Addicts aren't simply weaker specimens than non-addicts; they aren't morally corrupt where non-addicts are virtuous. Instead, many, if not most of them are unlucky. Location isn't the only factor that influences your chances of becoming an addict, but it plays a much bigger role than scientists once thought. Genetics and biology matter as well, but we've recognized their role for decades. What's new, and what only became clear in the 1960s and 1970s, is that addiction is a matter of environment, too. Even the sturdiest of our ranks—the young G.I.s who were free of addiction when they left Vietnam—are prone to weakness when they find themselves in the wrong setting. And even the most determined addicts-in-recovery will relapse when they revisit people and places that remind them of the drug."

That's from a powerful chapter called "The Addict in All of Us."

We ALL have our own little or big addictions. Period.

Adam makes the point that it's less about "addictive personalities" and more about a confluence of factors at play. One of the biggest factors? Our environment. He tells some fascinating stories about how powerfully our environment affects us and why it's so important to stay away from the people and places and things that tempt us as we let go of addictions.

This is pretty much EXACTLY what the willpower gurus say. ([Check out the Willpower Wisdom Pack.](#)) As [Roy Baumeister](#) says, we need to play *offense* not defense. And, as [Tom Rath](#) says, we need to buy our willpower at store.

Addicted to Cheetos? Don't buy them at the store and hope to not eat them when they're in your kitchen. Addicted to the Internet or your phone? Unplug the wi-fi. Bury your phone in your closet when you want to go deep. (My preferred way to deal with my addictions!)

What little thing can you do to Optimize your environment today?

HOW TO ADD 11 MORE YEARS TO YOUR LIFE

"Phones are disruptive by their mere existence, even when they aren't in active use. They're distracting because they remind us of the world beyond the immediate conversation, and the only solution, the researchers wrote, is to remove them completely."

~ Adam Alter

"Most people spend between one and four hours on their phones each day—and many far longer. This isn't a minority issue. If, as guidelines suggest, we should spend less than an hour on our phones each day, 88 percent of Holesh's users were overusing. They were spending an average of a quarter of their waking lives on their phones—more time than any other daily activity, except sleeping. Each month almost one hundred hours was lost to checking email, texting, playing games, surfing the web, reading articles, checking bank balances, and so on. Over the average lifetime, that amounts to a staggering *eleven years*. On average they were also picking up their phones about three times an hour. This sort of overuse is so prevalent that researchers have coined the term 'nomophobia' to describe the fear of being without mobile phone contact."

My jaw dropped a couple times reading that.

First, *nomophobia*. It's short for "no-mobile-phobia." As in, "I'm absolutely freaking out because I'm not currently connected to my phone." That type of withdrawal pain is gonna happen to anything you reach for three times an hour, eh?

Then we have the handy-dandy foolproof way to get up to ELEVEN YEARS of our lives back. (ELEVEN!!!)

Reclaim some of the 100 (!!!) hours we spend every month "checking email, texting, playing games, surfing the web, etc."

100 hours per month. Over the course of our lives. Equals ELEVEN YEARS.

What could you do with 100 (!) hours of your time back each month? Seriously. Think about that for a moment. It's staggering.

That's precisely the game I'm playing. My #1 "not doing it anymore" habit is completely eliminating all Internet usage beyond the absolute essential for our biz. InDesign for these PDFs, Google Sheets and Dropbox Paper to capture some stuff with the team. iMessages to chat with two people on our team. Amazon for the absurd amount of books and stuff we buy. And, well, that's close to it. No email. No social media. No news. No sports. No entertainment.

Aside from the truly essential stuff that makes it possible for me to connect with you (which, of course, is a MIRACLE), I'm trying to live like it's 1899. Even 1999 would do the trick.

How about YOU? How many times do you check your phone per day? Your email? Hop online to surf the web/check news/sports/etc.?

And, most importantly: How can you Optimize? Let's reclaim a ton of wasted energy.

And remember Aristotle's wisdom: *"We live in deeds, not years; In thoughts not breaths; In feelings, not in figures on a dial. We should count time by heart throbs."*

(Shaking my head imagining what HE would say about our modern (mis)use of time!)

BEING SENTENCED TO SLAVERY

"Sixty-one percent of these people [in a Netflix study] reported some degree of binge-watching, which most respondents defined as 'watching between two and six episodes of a TV show in one sitting.'"

~ Adam Alter

"Addiction originally meant a different kind of strong connection: in ancient Rome, being addicted meant you had just been sentenced to slavery. If you owed someone money and couldn't repay the debt, a judge would sentence you to *addiction*. You'd be forced to work as a slave until you'd repaid your debt. This was the first use of the word addiction, but it evolved to describe any bond that was difficult to break."

Addiction.

The etymology of the word brings us back to ancient Roman times when it meant you had just been sentenced to SLAVERY.

Keep that in mind the next time you reach for your smartphone. (Or whatever it is that tugs at your attention.)

Here's to your freedom!

P.S. An antonym for addiction? Indifference. I like that.

And, any time I see the word "indifference" I think of Epictetus as indifference to material things (and all things outside of our control) is the essence of [Stoicism](#). And, Epictetus just so happens to be a former Roman slave turned historically great philosopher so his wisdom is even more relevant in this context.

In [Discourses](#) he says: *"Material things per se are indifferent, but the use we make of them is not indifferent. The question, then, is how to strike a balance between a calm and composed attitude on the one hand, and a conscientious outlook that is neither slack nor careless on the other. Model yourself on card players. The chips don't matter, and the cards don't matter; how can I know what the deal will be? But making careful and skillful use of the deal—that's where my responsibility begins. So in life our first job is this, to divide and distinguish things into two categories: externals I cannot control, but the choices I make with regard to them I do control. Where will I find good and bad? In me, in my choices. Don't ever speak of 'good' or 'bad,' 'advantage' or 'harm,' and so on, of anything that is not your responsibility."*

P.P.S. Want to know a big reason why you binge watch TV shows? It's because of cliff hangers that trigger the Zeigarnik Effect—making you compulsively want to "finish" the open loop. Don't want to be enslaved that way? Either just completely turn off those deliberately irresistible shows or start the next episode and turn it off once the prior cliffhanger is resolved.

HURRY! 6 SECONDS UNTIL YOUR EMAIL EXPLODES

"How long do you think the average office email goes unread? I guessed ten minutes. The truth is just six seconds. In reality, 70 percent of office emails are read within six seconds of arriving. Six seconds is less time than it's taken you to read this paragraph so far, but it's long enough for the average worker to disrupt whatever he's doing to open his email program and click on the incoming email. This is hugely disruptive: by one estimate, it takes up to twenty-five minutes to become re-immersed in an interrupted task. If you open up just twenty-five emails a day, evenly spaced across the day, you'll spend literally no time in the zone of maximum productivity."

I can't resist sharing another stat on just how much time we waste and just how compulsively we do things like check email.

70% of office emails are read within six seconds of arriving? That'd be funny if it wasn't so nutty.

"Sluggishness is the enemy of addiction, because people respond more sharply to rapid links between action and outcome. Very little about our world today—from technology to transport to commerce—happens slowly, and so our brains respond more feverishly."

~ Adam Alter

And I love the math that, by evenly spacing out your 25 email check-ins every 25 minutes you'd perfectly optimize your complete lack of optimal productivity. (Laughing.)

Alternatively, we can tame that beast that is email and follow Cal Newport's genius [Deep Work](#) wisdom: "Don't take breaks from distraction. Instead take breaks from focus."

Plus: "I propose an alternative to the Internet Sabbath. Instead of scheduling the occasional break *from distraction* so you can focus, you should instead schedule the occasional break *from focus* to give in to distraction."

In Productivity 101 we talk about the power of consolidating our precious time into, as Peter Drucker says in [The Effective Executive](#), "the largest quantum of time."

Let's be CREATIVE before we're reactive. And, take breaks from FOCUS not from distraction.

CUCUMBERS AND PICKLES

"Cash invited me to participate in a group discussion with the centers' inpatients. As the session began, she repeated a mantra that I'd heard a couple of times already: 'Remember: once your cucumber brain has become pickled, it can never go back to being a cucumber.' The phrase was designed to discourage inpatients from doing what Vaisberg had done when he left the center: believing that they could play just one more game without their addictions returning. Cash was trying to explain that the inpatients' brains were forever pickled, in a sense, and that their addictions were always on the cusp of being rekindled. The mantra was a cute way of saying something very confronting: that it's impossible to ever completely escape the aftereffects of addiction."

Well that's a powerful way to think about addictions, eh? —> Cucumber to pickle.

Let's make sure we have that image solidly in our minds. How about a little pickling recipe a la [kitchn.com](#)? Here's how to pickle a cucumber: "Pack them in as tightly as you can without smashing the cucumbers. Bring the pickling brine to a boil: Combine the vinegar, water, and salt in a small sauce pan over high heat. Bring to a rolling boil. Pour the brine over the pickles, filling each jar to within 1/2-inch of the top."

There ya go. Cucumber to pickle. Now imagine your brain doing whatever it is you are addicted to. Pack it all in tight. Add the secret sauce. And... Voilà! Cucumber brain —> Pickled brain.

And... Guess what? You can't UNPICKLE a pickle.

So... Spotlight on your pickles. What addictive behaviors do you currently have or used to have?

My top three pickles are:

1. _____ + 2. _____ + 3. _____

Respect your addictions. God bless the people who DON'T have addictive tendencies for the things you do (+God bless YOU for the things that don't tempt you), but we need to acknowledge the confronting fact "that it's impossible to ever completely escape the aftereffects of addiction."

And, remember this wisdom shared by one of the guys Adam interviewed for the book, "The most dangerous time for an addict is the first moment when things are going so well that you believe you've left the addiction behind forever."

Feeling great? Fantastic. Keep it that way. Be nice to your pickle brain.

P.S. Back to Cal Newport. Here's another facet to the pickle: "To make matters worse for depth, there's increasing evidence that this shift toward the shallow is not a choice that can easily be reversed. Spend enough time in a state of frenetic shallowness and you *permanently* reduce your capacity to perform deep work."

"Isaac told me that the most dangerous time for an addict is the first moment when things are going so well that you believe you've left the addiction behind forever."

~ Adam Alter

THE MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEW

"The technique's effectiveness is explained by one of the dominant theories in motivation research: Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT explains that people are naturally proactive, especially when a behavior activates one of three central human needs: the need to feel in command of one's life (autonomy); the need to form solid social bonds with family and friends (relatedness); and the need to feel effective when dealing with the external environment (competence). Though addictive behaviors are designed to soothe psychological discomfort, they also tend to frustrate one or more of these needs. A motivational interview makes that frustration clear: if you're asked how your Instagram use affects your well-being, you're going to see that it's compromising your productivity, your relationships, or both. Far from rendering a person powerless in the face of her addiction, she's left to feel both motivated and capable of changing for the better."

That's from a chapter called "Nipping Addictions at Birth." One of the ways to do that? What experts call a "motivational interview." A script for that interview (conducted by an addiction counselor or anyone supporting someone in getting a handle on their addictions) goes like this:

"I'm not here to preach to you or tell you what you 'should' do; how would I know, it's your life and not mine. I believe people know what's best for them.

I don't have an agenda, just a goal: to see if there is anything about the way you take care of your health that you would like to change, and if so, to see if I can help you get there.

How does that sound to you?"

Well... Whaddya say? Is there anything you can do to Optimize? :)

Here's to determining your self's actualization via autonomy, relatedness and mastery!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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About the Author of "Irresistible"

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Adam Alter is an Associate Professor of Marketing at New York University's Stern School of Business. Adam is the NYT bestselling author of two books: *Irresistible*, which considers why so many people today are addicted to so many behaviors, from incessant smart phone and internet use to video game playing and online shopping, and *Drunk Tank Pink*, which investigates how hidden forces in the world around us shape our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Connect: adamalterauthor.com

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at optimize.me.