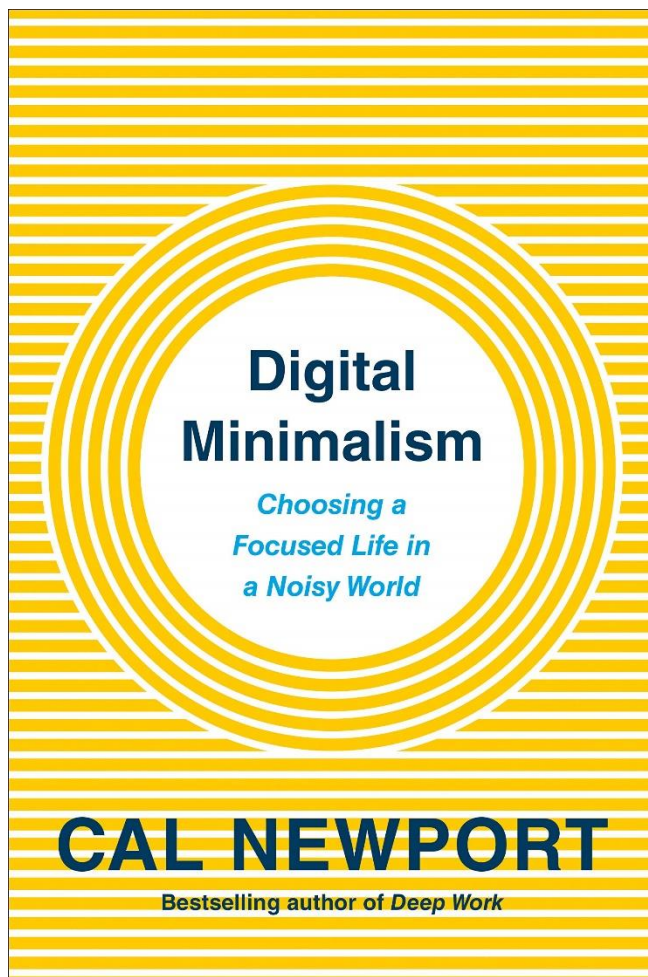# Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World by Cal Newport

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PART 1: Foundations

We added new technologies to the periphery of our experience for minor reasons, then woke one morning to discover that they had colonized the core of our daily life.

What's making us uncomfortable is this **feeling of losing control**
Most people who struggle with the online part of their lives are not weak willed or stupid.

Earlier I noted that we seem to have stumbled backward into a digital life we didn't sign up for. As I'll argue next, it's probably more accurate to say that we were pushed into it by the high-end device companies and attention economy conglomerates

"The tycoons of social media have to stop pretending that they're friendly nerd gods building a better world and admit they're just tobacco farmers in T-shirts selling an addictive product to children. Because, let's face it, checking your "likes" is the new smoking." – Bill Maher

Until recently, it was assumed that addiction only applied to alcohol or drugs: Growing evidence suggests that behavioral addictions resemble substance addictions in many domains.

Intermittent positive reinforcement: The whole social media dynamic of posting content, and then watching feedback trickle back unpredictably, seems fundamental to these services

The second force that encourages behavioral addiction: the drive for social approval

If lots of people click the little heart icon under your latest Instagram post, it feels like the tribe is showing you approval—which we're adapted to strongly crave.

Our Paleolithic brain categorizes ignoring a newly arrived text the same as snubbing the tribe member trying to attract your attention by the communal fire: a potentially dangerous social faux pas.

we must fight. But to do so, we need a more serious strategy, something custom built. Digital minimalism is one such strategy.

Digital Minimalism

These types of articles are common in the world of technology journalism. The author discovers that his relationship with his digital tools has become dysfunctional. Alarmed, he deploys a clever life hack, then reports enthusiastically that things seem much better. I'm always skeptical about these quick-fix tales.

The underlying behaviors we hope to fix are ingrained in our culture, and they're backed by powerful psychological forces that empower our base instincts.

What all of us who struggle with these issues need—is a philosophy of technology use, something that covers from the ground up which digital tools we allow into our life, for what reasons, and under what constraints

Digital Minimalism Definition: A philosophy of technology use in which you focus your online time on a small number of carefully selected and optimized activities that strongly support things you value, and then happily miss out on everything else.

Even when a new technology promises to support something the minimalist values, it must still pass a stricter test: **Is this the best way to use technology to support this value?**

this minimalist philosophy contrasts starkly with the maximalist philosophy that most people deploy by default—a mind-set in which any potential for benefit is enough to start using a technology that catches your attention.

minimalists don't mind missing out on small things; what worries them much more is diminishing the large things they already know for sure make a good life good.

THE PRINCIPLES OF DIGITAL MINIMALISM

Before I can ask you to experiment with digital minimalism in your own life, however, I must first provide you with a more thorough explanation for why it works.

Three core principles:

- Principle #1: **Clutter is costly.** cluttering their time and attention with too many devices, apps, and services creates an overall negative cost that can swamp the small benefits that each individual item provides in isolation.
- Principle #2: **Optimization is important.** To truly extract its full potential benefit, it's necessary to think carefully about how they'll use the technology.
- Principle #3: **Intentionality is satisfying.** Digital minimalists derive significant satisfaction from their general commitment to being more intentional about how they engage with new technologies.

AN ARGUMENT FOR PRINCIPLE #1: THOREAU'S NEW ECONOMICS

[Thoreau](#)'s "new economics," a theory that builds on the following axiom, which Thoreau establishes early in Walden:
"The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run."

When people consider specific tools or behaviors in their digital lives, they tend to focus only on the value each produces.

Standard economic thinking says that such profits are good, and the more you receive the better. It therefore makes sense to clutter your digital life with as many of these small sources of value as you can find,

Thoreau's new economics, however, demands that you balance this profit against the costs measured in terms of "your life."

AN ARGUMENT FOR PRINCIPLE #2: THE RETURN CURVE

the law of diminishing returns can apply to the various ways in which we use new technologies to produce value in our personal lives.

most people's personal technology processes currently exist on the early part of the return curve—the location where additional attempts to optimize will yield massive improvements.

if you think of these services as offering a collection of features that you can carefully put to use to serve specific values, then almost certainly you'll spend much less time using them. **This is why social media companies are purposely vague in describing their products.**

AN ARGUMENT FOR PRINCIPLE #3: THE LESSONS OF THE AMISH HACKER

[The Amish] start with the things they value most, then work backward to ask whether a given new technology performs more harm than good with respect to these values.

Their gamble is that intention trumps convenience.

Their example leaves open the question of whether this value persists even when we eliminate the more authoritarian impulses of these communities.

Fortunately, we have good reasons to believe it does.

Laura's satisfaction with her smartphone-free life **comes from the choice itself**. "My decision [to not use a smartphone] gives me a sense of autonomy," she told me. "I'm controlling the role technology is allowed to play in my life." **Outsourcing your autonomy to an attention economy conglomerate is the opposite of freedom**, and will likely degrade your individuality.

Chapter 3 The Digital Declutter

In my experience, gradually changing your habits one at a time doesn't work well.

I recommend instead a rapid transformation.

The Digital Declutter Process: Put aside a thirty-day period during which you will take a break from optional technologies in your life. During this thirty-day break, explore and rediscover activities and behaviors that you find satisfying and meaningful. At the end of the break, reintroduce optional technologies into your life, starting from a blank slate. For each technology you reintroduce, determine what value it serves in your life and how specifically you will use it so as to maximize this value.

A typical culprit, for example, was technology restriction rules that were either too vague or too strict.

Another mistake was not planning what to replace these technologies with during the declutter period.

Those who treated this experiment purely as a detox, where the goal was to simply take a break from their digital life before returning to business as usual, also struggled.

A temporary detox is a much weaker resolution than trying to permanently change your life

STEP #1: DEFINE YOUR TECHNOLOGY RULES

The first step of the declutter process, therefore, is to define which technologies fall into this "optional" category.

When I say technology in this context, I mean the general class of things we've been calling "new technologies" throughout this book, which include apps, websites, and related digital tools.

Text messaging, Instagram, and Reddit are examples of the types of technologies you need to evaluate when preparing for your digital declutter; your microwave, radio, or electric toothbrush are not. An interesting special case brought

Consider the technology optional unless its temporary removal would harm or significantly disrupt the daily operation of your professional or personal life.

My final suggestion is to use operating procedures when confronting a technology that's largely optional, with the exception of a few critical use cases.

These procedures specify exactly how and when you use a particular technology, allowing you to maintain some critical uses without having to default to unrestricted access.

STEP #2: TAKE A THIRTY-DAY BREAK
"As time wore on, the detox symptoms wore off and I began to forget about my phone"

This detox experience is important because it will help you make smarter decisions at the end of the declutter when you reintroduce some of these optional technologies to your life.

The goal is not to simply give yourself a break from technology, but to instead spark a permanent transformation of your digital life.

For this process to succeed, you **must also spend this period trying to rediscover what's important to you** and what you enjoy outside the world of the always-on, shiny digital. Figuring this out before you begin reintroducing technology at the end of this declutter process is crucial.

STEP #3: REINTRODUCE TECHNOLOGY
This reintroduction is more demanding than you might imagine.

The goal of this final step is to start from a blank slate and only let back into your life technology that passes your strict minimalist standards

Does this technology directly support something that I deeply value?
Is this technology the best way to support this value?
How am I going to use this technology going forward to maximize its value and minimize its harms?
Digital minimalists combat this by maintaining standard operating procedures that dictate when and how they use the digital tools in their lives.

An interesting experience shared by some participants was that they eagerly returned to their optional technologies only to learn they had lost their taste for them.

PART 2 Practices

Practice: Spend Time Alone

Kethledge…often working at a simple pine desk in a barely renovated barn with no internet connection. "I get an extra 20 IQ points from being in that office," he explains.

Erwin: "running is cheaper than therapy."

Kethledge and Erwin decided to [co-write a book](#) on the topic of solitude.
Solitude is about what's happening in your brain, not the environment around you.
You can enjoy solitude in a crowded coffee shop, on a subway car, or, as President Lincoln discovered at his cottage, while sharing your lawn with two companies of Union soldiers, so long as your mind is left to grapple only with its own thoughts.

Solitude can be banished in even the quietest setting if you allow input from other minds to intrude.

Solitude requires you to move past reacting to information created by other people and focus instead on your own thoughts and experiences—wherever you happen to be.

"All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone" – Blaise Pascal

Canadian social critic named Michael Harris in his 2017 book, also titled [Solitude](#). Harris is concerned that **new technologies help create a culture that undermines time alone with your thoughts**
three crucial benefits provided by solitude: * new ideas * an understanding of the self * and closeness to others.
Calmly experiencing separation, he argues, builds your appreciation for interpersonal connections when they do occur.

Regular doses of solitude, mixed in with our default mode of sociality, are necessary to flourish as a human being.

For the first time in human history solitude is starting to fade away altogether.

the iPod provided for the first time the ability to be continuously distracted from your own mind.

The smartphone provided a new technique to banish these remaining slivers of solitude: the quick glance.

It's now possible to completely banish solitude from your life.

The average [Moment](#) user spends right around three hours a day looking at their smartphone screen, with only 12 percent spending less than an hour. The average Moment user picks up their phone thirty-nine times a day.

When you avoid solitude, you miss out on the positive things it brings you: the ability to clarify hard problems, to regulate your emotions, to build moral courage, and to strengthen relationships.

2015 study by [Common Sense Media](#) found that teenagers were consuming media—including text messaging and social networks—**nine hours per day on average.**

Head of mental health services at a well-known university told me that everyone seemed to suddenly be suffering from anxiety or anxiety-related disorders.

The sudden rise in anxiety-related problems coincided with the first incoming classes of students that were raised on smartphones and social media.

But starting around 2012, she noticed a shift in measurements of teenager emotional states that was anything but gradual: The gentle slopes of the line graphs [charting how behavioral traits change with birth year] became steep mountains and sheer cliffs, and many of the distinctive characteristics of the Millennial generation began to disappear. In all my analyses of generational data—some reaching back to the 1930s—I had never seen anything like it.

Young people born between 1995 and 2012, a group Twenge calls "iGen," exhibited remarkable differences as compared to the Millennials that preceded them.

"Rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed," Twenge writes, with much of this seemingly due to a massive increase in anxiety disorders.

Denizet-Lewis assumed that the teenagers themselves would dismiss this theory as standard parental grumbling, but this is not what happened. **"To my surprise, anxious teenagers tended to agree."**
The only factor that dramatically increased right around the same time as teenage anxiety was the number of young people owning their own smartphones.

When an entire cohort unintentionally eliminated time alone with their thoughts from their lives, their mental health suffered dramatically.
These teenagers have lost the ability to process and make sense of their emotions, or to reflect on who they are and what really matters, or to build strong relationships, or even to just allow their brains time to power down their critical social circuits

We need solitude to thrive as human beings, and in recent years, without even realizing it, we've been systematically reducing this crucial ingredient from our lives.

PRACTICE: LEAVE YOUR PHONE AT HOME

I recommend that you try to spend some time away from your phone most days.

Succeeding with this strategy requires that you **abandon the belief that not having your phone is a crisis.**
This practice is not about getting rid of your phone—most of the time, you'll have your phone with you and enjoy all of its conveniences. It does aim, however, to convince you that it's completely reasonable to live a life in which you sometimes have a phone with you, and sometimes do not.

PRACTICE: TAKE LONG WALKS

"Only thoughts reached by walking have value." – [Nietzsche](#)

Nietzsche began to walk up to eight hours a day. During these walks he would think, eventually filling six small notebooks with the prose that became [The Wanderer and His Shadow](#)

key property of walking: it's a fantastic source of solitude.

The details of this practice are simple: On a regular basis, go for long walks, preferably somewhere scenic. Take these walks alone, which means not just by yourself, but also, if possible, without your phone.

If you're wearing headphones, or monitoring a text message chain, or, God forbid, narrating the stroll on Instagram—you're not really walking

The hardest part of this habit is making the time.

It also helps if you learn to broaden your definition of "good weather." You can walk on cold days, or when it's snowing, or even during light rain

I'm quite simply happier and more productive—by noticeably large factors—when I'm walking regularly.

PRACTICE: WRITE LETTERS TO YOURSELF

Every time I started a new Moleskine notebook, I would begin by transcribing my current list of values, underneath the heading "The Plan," in the notebook's first pages.

These notebooks play a different role: they provide me a way to write a letter to myself when encountering a complicated decision, or a hard emotion, or a surge of inspiration. By the time I'm done composing my thoughts in the structured form demanded by written prose, I've often gained clarity.

It's the act of writing itself that already yields the bulk of the benefits.
The regions of the brain that defined the default network are "virtually identical" to the networks that light up during social cognition experiments.

When given downtime, in other words, our brain defaults to thinking about our social life.

The loss of social connection, for example, turns out to trigger the same system as physical pain. Over-the-counter painkillers reduced social pain.

THE SOCIAL MEDIA PARADOX

when users received "targeted" and "composed" information written by someone they know well (e.g., a comment sent by a family member), they felt better. On the other hand, receiving targeted and composed information from someone they didn't know well, or receiving a "like," or reading a status update broadcast to many people didn't correlate with improved well-being.

the researchers found that the more someone used social media, the more likely they were to be lonely.

"Our results show that overall, the use of Facebook was negatively associated with well-being." They found, for example, that if you increase the amount of likes or links clicked by a standard deviation, mental health decreases by 5 to 8 percent of a standard deviation.

RECLAIMING CONVERSATION

Connection: the low-bandwidth interactions that define our online social lives

Conversation: the much richer, high-bandwidth communication that define our social lives

"My argument is not anti-technology…it's pro-conversation"

a philosophy of sorts for socializing in a digital age: **Conversation-Concentric Communication**
Many people think about conversation and connection as two different strategies for accomplishing the same goal of maintaining their social life.

Conversation-Concentric Communication argues that conversation is the *only* form of interaction that in some sense *counts* toward maintaining a relationship
Anything textual or non-interactive doesn't count as conversation

connection is downgraded to a logistical role

If you adopt this philosophy, you'll almost certainly reduce the number of people with whom you have an active relationship.

the richness of analog interactions will far outweigh what you're leaving behind

Our sociality is simply too complex to be outsourced to a social network or reduced to instant messages

Practice: Don't click "Like"

Don't click "Like." Ever. stop leaving comments on social media posts as well.

They teach your mind that connection is a reasonable alternative to conversation.

If you eliminate these trivial interactions cold turkey, you send your mind a clear message: conversation is what counts.

If you feel that not leaving a comment would be noted as an omission, invest the time to setup a real conversation.

Practice: Consolidate Texting

Keep your phone in Do Not Disturb mode by default

Schedule specific times for texting

When your friends and family are able to instigate meandering pseudo-conversations with you over text at any time, it's easy for them to become complacent about your relationship

Being less available over text has a way of strengthening your relationship

Practice: Hold conversation office hours

Put aside set times on set days during which you're always available for conversation. Promote these times to the people you care about

Variation: coffee shop hours. Pick a time each week where you're at a coffeeshop, let people know you are there.

Chapter 6 Reclaim Leisure

Leisure and the Good Life

"Contemplation is an "activity that is appreciated for its own sake" – Aristotle

More and more people are failing to cultivate high-quality leisure, crucial for human happiness.

This leaves a void that would be near unbearable if confronted, but that can be ignored with the help of digital noise.

When individuals in the FI community are provided large amounts of leisure time, they often voluntarily fill these hours with strenuous activity.

"One of the chief things which my typical man has to learn is that the mental faculties are capable of a continuous hard activity; they do not tire like an arm or a leg. All they want is change–not rest, except in sleep" – Bennett

Leisure Lesson #1: Prioritize demanding activity over passive consumption

"craft" describes any activity where you apply skill to create something valuable

Craft is a good source of high-quality leisure

"Long ago we learned to think by using our hands, not the other way around" – Rogowski, "Creative Focus in the Age of Distraction"

"We live in a world that is working to eliminate touch as one of our senses, to minimize the use of our hands to do things except poke at a screen."

The result is a mismatch between our equipment and our experience

people lose the outlet for self-worth established through unambiguous demonstrations of skill

Leisure Lesson #2: Use skills to produce valuable things in the physical world

Playing games also provides permission for what we can call *supercharged socializing*–interactions with higher intensity levels than are common in polite society
Board games, social fitness, recreational sports leagues, volunteer activities

Leisure Lesson #3: Seek activities that require real-world structured social interactions

The internet is fueling a *leisure renaissance* by providing the average person more leisure options than ever before. helps people find communities related to their interests, provides easy access to obscure information needed to pursue specific pursuits.
Digital technology is present, but subordinated to a support role

New technology, when used with care and intention, creates a better life than either Luddism or mindless adoption.

Practice: Fix or build something every week

- changing your car oil
- installing a new light fixture
- learn a new technique on an instrument
- build custom furniture
- start a garden plot

Practice: Schedule your low-quality leisure

schedule in advance the time you spend on low-quality leisure

initially, don't worry about how much time you put aside for low-quality leisure

vast majority of regular social media users can receive the vast majority of the value in as little as twenty to forty minutes of use *per week*.
fill the newly freed time with high-quality alternatives.

Practice: Join something

Join a group that meets regularly in person.

Practice: Follow leisure plans

Strategize your free time

Seasonal(quarterly) and weekly leisure plan Objectives (make it specific and measurable) and Habits that will get you to the objective

Every week, figure out what you can do to make progress on the seasonal objectives, schedule exactly when you'll do these things. Integrate this with your weekly planning.

You might be concerned that injecting more systematic thinking will rob it of the spontaneity and relaxation you crave.

Once someone becomes more intentional about their leisure, they tend to find more of it in their life.

Chapter 7: Join the Attention Resistance

Extracting eyeball minutes has become significantly more lucrative than extracting oil

Attention Resistance movement: individuals who combine high-tech tools with disciplined operating procedures to conduct surgical strikes on attention economy services–dropping in to extract value, and then slipping away before the attention traps set by these companies can spring shut.

Practice: Delete social media from your phone

Stay far away from the mobile versions of these services, as they pose a significantly bigger risk to your time and attention

Practice: turn your devices into single-purpose computers

[Freedom](#) users gain, on average, 2.5 hours of productive time per day.
What makes general purpose computers powerful is that you don't need separate devices for separate uses, not that it allows you to do multiple things at the same time.

block attention economy services by default, and make them available to you on an intentional schedule

Practice: Use social media like a professional

Maintain rules to limit your social media use. Use tools like [tweetdeck](#) to seek out information
To a social media pro, the idea of endlessly surfing your feed in search of entertainment is a trap.

Practice: embrace slow media

Whereas the Europeans suggest transforming the consumption of media into a high-quality experience (see slow food), Americans tend to embrace the "low information diet"…This American approach is much like our approach to healthy eating, which focuses more on aggressively eliminating what's bad than celebrating what's good.

Many people consume news by cycling through a set sequence of websites. Crucial to this habit is the ritualistic nature of the sequence. You don't make a conscious decision about each of the sites and feeds you end up visiting, it unfolds on autopilot.

To embrace news media from a mind-set of slowness requires first and foremost that you focus only on the highest-quality sources.

Consider limiting your attention to the best of the best when it comes to selecting individual writers you follow.

If you're interested in commentary on political and cultural issues, this experience is almost always **enhanced by also seeking out the best arguments against your preferred position**.

The key to embracing Slow Media is the general commitment to maximizing the quality of what you consume and the conditions under which you consume it.

Practice: Dumb down your smartphone

Paul traded in his smartphone for a Doro PhoneEasy

Daniel put his iPhone in the kitchen cupboard. On most occasions he brings his Nokia 130

"It's time to bring back the dumb phone"

Tablets and laptops have become so lightweight that **there is no longer a need to try to cram productivity functionalities into smartphones**

Conclusion

Digital Minimalism is meant to be a human bulwark against the foreign artificiality of electronic communication, a way to take advantage of the wonders that these innovations do in fact provide, without allowing their mysterious nature to subvert our human urge to build a meaningful and satisfying life.

Digital minimalists see new technologies as tools to be used to support things they deeply value–not as sources of value themselves. They're comfortable missing out on everything else.

Adopting digital minimalism is not a onetime process; it requires ongoing adjustments.

It's not really about technology, it's more about the quality of your life.