Smarter Than Your Phone

-How to use your phone to feel better, become more efficient and strengthen your relationships

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CONTENTS

THE PENDULUM HAS SWUNG

For roughly a decade, our techno-optimism knew no bounds. We sat down to watch Apple's latest product launch, streaming live from Silicon Valley. We proudly flaunted our latest mobile phone purchases in the staff break room, and our most well-used apps, like Facebook and Instagram, soon made it onto our home screens. Suddenly, the entire world fit into our back pocket – and we loved it.

That's when the warnings started to come in.

'Mobile phone addiction, a new public disease" (Svenska Dagbladet, 27 Oct. 2013), 'Instagram and Snapchat make young people unwell' (Aftonbladet, 19 May 2017), 'New warning from researchers: mobile phone surfing can make your brain shrink' (Expressen, 15 Oct. 2016).

For many, these were headlines that confirmed a gnawing suspicion – reporting that reflected situations we recognised, both from our own lives and others'. Lying on the couch a Friday night, scrolling through your feed and, as the party pics become more and more numerous, feeling worse and worse. Catching yourself at the playground, with your eyes on the screen instead of on your child playing. The reluctance against putting down your phone, if only to go to the bathroom.

There was a backlash and those who had been the first to embrace the new technology were now the first to throw it away. Digital detoxing became a health trend, just like eating right or exercising. In newspaper articles you could read about prominent media personalities who had dug out their old Nokia 3310 from their wardrobe and attested that it had made them more harmonious. Screen time became a hot topic at parents'

meetups and books about how to liberate yourself from phone addiction topped the bestseller lists.

The pendulum has swung. And, as always when it swings from one extremity to another, there are many of us watching from the sidelines, wondering if perhaps the truth doesn't lie somewhere in-between.

During the entire history of humankind, we have used tools to extend our abilities. Picks and shovels have allowed us to reach farther and hit harder than we would otherwise have been able to. With the IT revolution, we have been given the opportunity to outsource more and more of our thinking abilities to external tools. We can store information, do calculations, and communicate in ways that weren't possible just a few decades ago.

Suddenly, we find ourselves with this powerful tool in our hands. It has the potential to deepen our relationships, streamline our work, and make our spare time more stimulating than ever. Unfortunately, it didn't come with a manual. This means that we, as the animals we are, often forget our good intentions and are seduced by digital temptations like clickbait, the hunt for likes, and manically scrolling through eBay.

We are living in a digital Wild West, and it's developing fast. The scientific community is busy gathering data on how we are really affected by our mobile phones. Initial results have begun to come in, but for natural reasons this research hasn't gotten far. The journalists and experts who claim to have the answers are skating on thin ice, often drawing general conclusions from specific studies. The tech industry, too, has its hands full since whistle blowers at companies like Facebook and Google showed the world how they intentionally design their products to snare users. It's working frantically to find new technical solutions that will ensure users' health, so that they will stay on their platforms.

We live in an exciting time when a lot is happening within the field. The future is likely to have a lot of technical innovations in store for its users. But what about us? While researchers and the tech industry have gone into overdrive, we are left standing here with our phones in our hands and the obvious question – what do I do now?

What, out of everything that's been written about how our phones affect us, is true? What do I do to resist those digital temptations that pop up as soon as I look at the screen? And how can I maximise all the benefits of my mobile phone use – for relationships, entertainment, productivity – in order to get closer to the life I want to live? After all, it's a technological miracle that I can continue watching my favourite TV show in the bathroom!

These are the questions I ask myself, and I know that I'm not alone. We are a growing movement that wants answers. This book is directed at you, who've grown tired of the alarmism and speculations and want to find a smart way to relate to technology in your everyday life. Who wonders what science has to say so far about these issues and how it's connected to established psychological research about the brain, human relationships, productivity, and what we need in order to feel well.

Our phones being smart isn't a problem. On the contrary. We simply have to use it to our advantage.

CONFESSIONS OF A PSYCHOLOGIST

I'm a psychologist. Apart from doing those things that people usually think of when they imagine a psychologist, I'm also passionate about spreading psychological knowledge. When I'm not sitting down in a therapy room wearing a knitted cardigan, I blog about and teach psychology, make media appearances explaining various psychological phenomena, and lecture on how psychological research can be used in everyday life to make it a little nicer, more productive, and hopefully more meaningful. I've written nonfiction and even a novel that's permeated by lessons from science.

I'm also a human being. Just like everyone else, I sometimes get stuck in my Facebook feed when I should be working, engage in discussions in the chat room that would have been more appropriate face-to-face, and watch another episode on Netflix even though it's really getting too late.

If my phone and I had a relationship status on Facebook, it would say 'it's complicated'. Its ringtone gives me palpitations, but I don't like to leave it, even when I'm just getting something from the next room.

For a time, I had a long-distance relationship with a guy in Malmö. I lived in Stockholm, but that didn't stop us from speaking to each other every day, exchanging selfies, and watching TV shows together over Skype. We even went on long-distance dates. Each kitted out with a phone and handsfree, we went to restaurants with franchises in both cities and ordered the same vegetarian burger with coleslaw. Afterwards we went to the cinema at the same time and saw a film that we then discussed on the way home. Despite being almost 400 miles apart, we could share an experience, and in that way get closer to each other.

When my grandmother and grandfather were young, they also had a long-distance relationship. They were just as in love and just as far away from each other geographically, but while our generation has Snapchat, Skype, and Messenger, making it possible for us to talk and see each other whenever we want, they had to make do with a photograph of the other person and a couple of phone calls a week.

LESSON 1: Modern technology makes it possible for us to be close, even when we are far away. It makes it possible for us to prioritise that which is important.

This guy later moved to Stockholm. And those dates, long breakfasts, and nights watching TV that we had shared from different sides of the screen, we could now experience from the same couch. But there was still a third party to the relationship.

The phone wouldn't be broken up with so easily.

'Honey, can't you do that later?'

'I just need to check something real quick…'

'But we were supposed to have cosy time tonight.'

'Shit! I forgot to sign up for that event on Thursday!'

Our email inboxes, social media, and notifications became a dinging accompaniment to our shared life. And it became a distraction.

LESSON 2: Modern technology can pull us away from each other. It can make us forget what's important.

I'm writing this book after spending a long time thinking about how to have a healthy relationship to my phone. This new technology permeates my everyday life. It has a noticeable effect on my life and my choices. It shapes what I think about, how I feel, and – not least – it affects how I behave, in everything from what I do when I'm alone, to how I behave in relationships and at work. In other words, the psychologist in me sees an exceptional potential! By taking charge of our phones, we have the chance to steer our lives in a positive direction, toward improved wellbeing and greater meaningfulness.

I think that the discussion in the media has been much too one-sided, focusing on screen time, digital detoxing, and how to limit one's usage. Sure, it's happened that I've become both stressed and anxious from my phone and social media, but is the solution to delete one's account? Of course we don't know how to handle technology when it's new! The future belongs not to those who log off but to those who learn to manage technology despite its traps and flaws.

Because I'm a psychologist, this book will focus on how our mobile phones interact with our mental health and wellbeing. Naturally, technology also affects a lot of other things, such as sedentary life, the political conversation, personal integrity, and so on. These issues are both important and exciting, but they lie beyond my area of expertise, so I happily leave them to those who know these things better. The same is true of the big question about screen use for children. To many, it's by far the most important issue, and I will therefore raise it briefly in specific chapters. But the fact remains that I work with adults, and therefore it's adult phone usage that I will base my observations on.

As of late, digital wellbeing has become an area of life among others, with its own diets, exercise tips, and retreats for those who want to maximise their performance. This book will delve deep into several areas of life (the brain, leisure, social media, relationships, work, and social values). We will go through common pitfalls in each area and you will get tips on how to optimise your wellbeing. But don't rush off and think that you or anyone else is expected to act perfectly in all these areas. I don't. It happens that I get stuck in a chat conversation even

though I'm having dinner with friends and know that I should put my phone away.

The psychologists' golden rule is this: It's only a problem once it becomes a problem. It doesn't matter whether you have installed Netflix on the insides of your glasses, as long as you feel good, your interactions with the outside world run smoothly, and, by and large, you are enjoying life. No one can say what a life should or shouldn't look like. These are suggestions of things you can do if you feel like there is a problem or think personal development is fun.

To help you, there will be a number of exercises. They are designed so that they can be performed here and now with your phone. The reason is that studies show that we only translate the decision into action in half of the cases when we intend to change our habits. Do you recognise yourself in this? The steady beat of everyday life can drown the best of intentions and we lose sight of all that we had decided to do. Acting right away, when your motivation is at its peak, increases the chance that it will actually happen.

This book is meant as a guidebook to better health. Should you have really big problems with your phone, I must refer you to the healthcare system. If you or someone you know is a gameaholic, suffers from depression, or has a super stressful work situation, there is help to be found beyond what this book can offer. If this sounds like you, contact information for where to seek help is listed at the end of the book.

Last but not least: Technology changes constantly. Human nature does not. Therefore, this book will not give you '7 quick tips' on which apps and steps are currently the best on the market for optimising your tech use. You can easily google that yourself. Instead, here you will get a deepened understanding of the psychological mechanisms behind our use of technology: Why we so easily develop a tricky love–hate relationship to our phones and which needs we are actually trying to satisfy when we check our work emails in the middle of the night. When you close this book, hopefully you have not only improved your relationship to your phone but also to yourself, your family, and your job. With a deeper understanding, we can use technology consciously, even when smartphones have become obsolete and new products are in vogue.

Well then. In a moment, we'll move on to you and your life. But before that, it can be good to gain an understanding of the gadget that the rest of the book will revolve around. (And why it's so #&% difficult to resist!) Let's look closer at how it all started: the alarming reports about how the tech industry's sleek mobile phone design and smooth user functions are a conscious move to snare us.

THE ATTENTION WARS

'Every time I look at my phone, it's like playing the one-armed bandit. What will I get?'

In 2014, the sound of a whistle-blower cut through the tech industry. It was Tristan Harris, design ethicist at Google, who proposed a vision of a more ethical tech industry in his TED talk 'How better tech could protect us from distraction'. Just like many others, Harris had studied user design at the Persuasive Technology Lab at Stanford University. There, he had been taught by, among others, the tech guru B. J. Fogg on how it is possible to use a well-balanced design to drive people's thoughts, emotions, and behaviours in a desired direction.

Pull to refresh. Distracting notifications. In his presentation, Harris pointed to example after example of how platforms are designed to attract users and keep them around for significantly longer than is in their own interest.

He wasn't alone. The following years saw an avalanche of stories, articles, and books on how modern technology steals our time and mental resources. Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked by Adam Alter and The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads by Tim Wu are just a couple of examples.

The villain of the piece is spelled 'the attention economy'. Today, many tech services are free – or so it seems. That's because the users aren't actually the customers; we are the commodities. The companies gain their proceeds from advertisers who pay for our personal data and the time we spend with their ads in front of our eyes. The more time we spend on these platforms, the greater gains for the tech companies.

So what are these design tricks that the tech industry uses to catch and keep our attention? There are plenty of them, and here are a few:

MENUES. At every given moment, there is a limited number of options. Just like a menu in a restaurant limits what you can eat, tech companies choose the options you see on their sites with care. 'Reply', 'like', and 'continue to scroll' are often easily accessible, while 'log out' or 'unsubscribe from the newsletter' are considerably more difficult to find. And which options aren't there at all?

HIJACKING YOUR ATTENTION. As human beings, we are programmed to direct our attention at sudden sounds and movements, regardless of what we are focusing on at the moment. It's no coincidence that the Internet is teeming with pop-up windows, sounds, and animated ads. There is barely an app today that doesn't use push notifications. It's a cheap way of regularly reminding the user to open the app.

BOTTOMLESSNESS. In the same way that we are sensitive to signals in our surroundings that tell us when to start doing something, we are to a high degree reliant on signals that tell us when it's time to quit. In the analogue world, it can be the end of a text, the fact that your stomach is rumbling, or that the hands on the clock indicate bedtime. Our social media feeds, on the other hand, are endless, and most streaming services automatically play the next video within a few seconds. Without stop signals, we end up using these services longer.

LOSS AVERSION. The human tendency to make an effort not to miss out on anything, rather than perhaps achieving something, is so widespread that it's been given its own name: loss aversion. FOMO, fear of missing out, is a version of this that means that we can be scrolling through our feeds even when we are spending time with others, only to make sure that we don't miss out on an even better experience somewhere else. You may have noticed that companies are consciously taking advantage of this if you have ever wanted to delete an app. 'Do you really

want to delete all your data?' it might say – despite the fact that it's probably safely stored on the company's servers.

UNPREDICTABLE REWARDS. If something we do has positive consequences, the likelihood that we'll do it again increases. Here, one might think that a reward every time is what gets us hooked on a service, but the fact is that unpredictability is even better. It's like playing the one-armed bandit every time we lift our phones, open our emails, or post an update on social media. We never know what we'll get, and for that very reason we try our luck again and again.

STATISTICS ON SUCCESS. By compiling responses to our efforts in numbers, the results become clearer and we get a yardstick to measure ourselves against. Here, developers are careful in what they measure and which results are shown to users. Often, engagement and reach are rewarded. The success of a post is measured in likes, and the value of a profile is summarised in its number of followers. Depending on what we are being measured on, we tend to adapt our behaviour accordingly. That can lead to phenomena like bought followers and #likeforlike ('if you'll like mine, I'll like yours').

SOCIAL BONDS. Human beings are pack animals, and appreciation and reactions from other people weigh more heavily for us than auto-generated messages. Therefore, tech services aren't slow to update us in real time about everything our friends are doing: when they write to us, when they like something, or when they are listening to a certain song. Even if it's not something we would otherwise consider doing, the chance that we'll like, watch, or click the ad increases if a friend of ours already has.

An important part of the social bond is reciprocity – giving back when we get something. The photo app Snapchat has something called 'snapstreaks', which allows you to see how many days in a row you and your friend have sent each other messages. Who wants to be the person who breaks the streak after 150 days?

Are these design choices a consequence of tech companies in general being evil and wanting to lure us in? No. They are a

consequence of the fact that they compete against other companies over the same limited resource – our attention – and that both sides are using the same weapon to win it.

Let's say that developers at the video-sharing site YouTube have a clever idea: autoplaying the next video. Viewers stay longer on the site, and YouTube increases its revenue. Brilliant!

This puts the developers at Netflix in a tricky spot. Now, they are losing market shares to YouTube. The only way for them to keep their position is to also introduce autoplay, and counter with their own attention hook. (One might think that Netflix would be exempt from this race because it's a subscription service. Surely, no one wants to pay for a service that is intentionally keeping them up at night? But really – people whose Netflix viewing-time decreases tend to end their subscriptions soon. We pay to be absorbed, not to be recommended one film worth watching a week.)

This has given rise to what, in the tech industry, is referred to as 'the arms race for attention'. Based on this logic, people's impulse control and active choices are obstacles that must be bypassed in order to reach the perfect state, in which users are completely hooked.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Just like Tristan Harris says in his TED talk, there are options. We find ourselves in a situation that has arisen as a result of market forces, sudden advances within tech and design, in combination with ignorant (or at least unconcerned) consumers. In the same way that we have increased the supply of organic foodstuffs by no longer simply comparing goods based on price, we can increase the supply of life-affirming technologies by making new demands of tech companies. The bottomless design of social media feeds could easily be redesigned as a button: 'You have now been on this site for 15 minutes. Would you like to continue?' If you get stuck in a lengthy political discussion online, the response field could be supplemented with the option: 'Book a new meeting?'

A design is governed by its purpose. After all, the same tricks that are employed to keep us glued to social media can be used to encourage knowledge acquisition, new meetings, or basically any values whatsoever. Why hide these psychological or technological insights under a rock and pretend that we have

never had them, when they can be used to our advantage? Technology is a tool, and it becomes what we make of it.

The first step is to remove the hooks that the tech companies have placed for us and which are not in your best interest. Even though companies rarely put their full menus on display, you have more options than you might think.

THE QUICK FIX

If you want to take control over your tech use, there is a simple first step. Your mobile phone is, as mentioned, full of hooks to pull you into its apps. Get rid of them! By removing all apps, thumbnails, and notifications that you haven't expressly asked for, the risk that you'll get stuck unnecessarily decreases. You know what I'm talking about: you pull out your phone to check the time and catch yourself 15 minutes later, halfway through level twelve of a game. App developers have adjusted the default settings for their purposes – set them to fit your own instead.

I call this chapter 'The Quick Fix' because it's about simple phone settings that quickly reduce routine use. Perhaps you have already read these tips in some magazine. If you pull out your phone and do these exercises now, you will have taken a big step towards a more conscious tech use. The rest of the book will dive deeply into more complex causes like psychological mechanisms, social rules in our circles, and what we value in life. It will be much easier to work with these when you are no longer interrupted by push notifications every two minutes!

CLEAN UP AMONG YOUR NOTIFICATIONS

Pull out your phone. Go to Settings and disable all notifications from apps that you don't really need. You can always open them of your own accord if you feel like it. If you would like some but not all notifications from an app, you can open the app and change which notifications you receive under Settings.

You can turn off notifications for incoming calls and messages temporarily by using the Do Not Disturb mode. It's a practical solution if you need to focus on work, want to have a quiet night in, or bring your phone with you on a walk without being chased by notifications. On most phones, it's possible to adjust the Do Not Disturb mode so that, for example, calls and messages from your favourite contacts get through or, alternatively, any number that tries to call you again within 15 minutes. In this way, you can disconnect while confident that you can always be reached in case of an emergency.

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<u>REDESIGN YOUR HOME SCREEN</u>

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Are there certain apps that you easily slip into and get stuck in? Often, these time-guzzling apps are the ones that we choose to have on our home screens, when the smartest thing is actually to do the opposite and make them less accessible. By giving ourselves a second to think, we decrease the risk that it turns into a routine.

REMOVE TIME-GUZZLING APPS. Are there apps that you would like to reduce your use of (social media, games, news sites)? Remove these from your phone. Visit them in your browser instead or, alternatively, download them and delete them again once you're done. Your account is saved on the company's servers, so you won't lose any data.

A LIGHT VERSION IS TO MOVE THE THUMBNAIL FROM THE HOME SCREEN and put it in a folder that requires a few more taps to get to instead. It's not as efficient, but better than having them on your home screen, where you are constantly reminded of their existence.

CLEAN UP YOUR HOME SCREEN. Here, only keep what's most necessary – that is, thumbnails that don't risk hijacking your attention at the wrong moment. The same is true for the thumbnails at the bottom menu as well: don't let your email

remain there out of habit. Put the rest in folders on other screens.

You can move an app by pressing your finger on it until it starts to jiggle. Then you can pull it wherever you want it, even across the edge of the screen onto another screen. A folder is created when you move and drop an app on top of another.

One tip that Catherine Price offers in her book *How to Break Up With Your Phone* is to change your background picture to one that says 'What do you want to pay attention to?' If you'd like, you can write it on a piece of paper and ask someone dear to you to hold it up while you take a picture. It becomes a reminder to yourself to use your phone consciously when you pick it up. We get used to this type of reminder quickly, so change the background picture again after a few days.

When you are done it might look something like this:
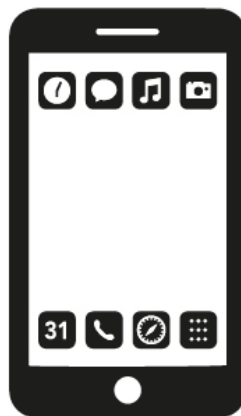
CAUGHT IN THE TRAP?

There are many good apps if you want help controlling your phone use. You can start by downloading a tracker app that charts your usage: how often you unlock the screen, which apps you use, and for how long at a time. Perhaps you discover a pattern right away that you're not comfortable with, which is

fairly easy to do something about. I, for example, realised that I shouldn't look at memes during my lunchbreak – if I do, it never ends.

A few of the most popular ones on the market right now are:

SETTINGS. On later versions of the iPhone and Android devices, you can now go to Settings and see a breakdown of your screen time. There, you can also enter time limits for different programmes. Look for Screen Time (IOS) or Digital Wellbeing (Android).

MOMENT. This app is available on IOS and will be released for Android. It measures your screen time and can help you limit it. It also exists as a family version to limit the entire family's usage during dinner time, for example.

RESCUETIME. An Android app that logs and reports your screen time. It can measure specific usage such as emailing, meetings, etc.

WORK

When I'm being interviewed by career magazines, I sometimes get the question: 'How can I limit my phone use to perform better at work?' As you probably understand by now, the question itself is misconceived.

The point of all technologies is to extend our human abilities. We use spades and hammers to reach farther and hit harder than our bodies can do on their own. Today's technology can strengthen, relieve, and compensate for flaws in our mental faculties. It makes it possible to keep more things in mind, ask questions to people who are out of earshot, and speed up demanding thought processes. Today, the average person can handle tasks of a degree of complexity and at a level of coordination we couldn't dream of a couple of decades ago. We can google solutions to difficult work problems and make professional connections online.

Technology also erodes the boundary between work and leisure. We work remotely like never before. While it used to be the privilege of the highest bosses to make private phone calls from the office and sometimes sneak off for a round of golf, nowadays more and more people have been given the opportunity to decide their own working hours.

But not all tech use is good. It's easy to get stuck procrastinating – opening your computer to deal with a task but getting sucked into the seductive world of cat videos and clickbait headlines. Or 'just checking your emails quickly' after work and then walking around with a creeping sense of anxiety over something you will have to deal with the next day. The fact is that every other Swede checks their email even while on vacation.

In other words, we hold in our hands a powerful tool with the potential to multiply our capacity. In that situation, a better

question is: 'How do I optimise my use of technology to perform better at work?' The problem isn't the tool. It's that we are still missing the manual. Consider this chapter a start.

A few of the biggest problems I see people struggling with are difficulties focusing at work because of distracting technology, resisting the temptation to procrastinate, and how to separate work from leisure in a time when it's possible to check your emails anywhere. We will now go through these one by one, so that you can avoid the most common pitfalls and get the very best out of your technology.

THE BRAIN AND MULTITASKING

One of the most common mistakes we make when we are trying to be productive at work is to do several things at once. We're writing a report at the same time as we shovel lunch into our mouths and answer emails. In fact, multitasking reduces our efficiency.

Don't believe me? Let's do a little experiment.

Get yourself a piece of paper and a pen, and pull up the stopwatch on your phone. Time how long it takes you to write the following two lines:

<div align="center">

I CAN MULTITASK

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13

</div>

Done? Now I would like you to do the exercise again, but this time I want you to alternate between the two lines. First a number, then a letter, switching back and forth until both lines are complete. Ok? Go ahead!

How did it go? My guess is that the second time you did the exercise, it took you three or four times as long.

The reason is that the human brain can only focus on one thing at a time. It cannot solve two problems at once. On the other hand, what it can do, and is really good at, is to quickly switch between tasks. So quickly that it might feel like you are doing two things at once.

The downside is that it comes at a hidden cost. Not just that it takes time to make this switch, as in the exercise above. What's more, the brain gets tired more quickly and you feel more stressed than if you had taken on one task at a time.

But, you might object, us humans do several things at once all the time. We listen to the radio while we cook and reply to emails during meetings. That's true; we have a certain measure of simultaneous capacity. However, it only works when you perform an activity that is automated, that you are used to performing, or that is very simple. If you are cooking a dish that you have made twenty times before, it doesn't require much thought. The same thing applies if you are a seasoned driver, driving in familiar neighbourhoods. If, however, you were to try a new and complicated recipe, or suddenly find yourself in a tricky traffic situation, dealing with the task at hand requires your full attention. The brain filters out the rest of the world and zooms in on the problem in question.

Here, we risk tripping ourselves up. For, if we think about the modern workplace, it's rarely designed with the above in mind. How many of us don't sit with our phones, switched on, on our desks, or are forced to interrupt whatever we're doing because of incoming emails? The brain automatically directs our attention at sudden sounds and movements. It's an effective protection against imminent threats, that unfortunately also makes us very curious to investigate what it really says in that pop-up window.

This constant alternation is a real productivity-stealer. Not only does it take time for the brain to shift its focus to the new task, it takes just as long to find your way back to the flow you were in before you were interrupted. If you check your phone every other minute, it means that you never achieve full concentration, and perform accordingly. The switching increases your stress level, so that it feels like you have more to do than if you had taken on one thing at a time.

What does this mean for the person who wants to maximise their performance, while also keeping their stress levels in check? Simply that you must do things one at a time.

PROCRASTINATION

Another pitfall you probably recognise is dilatory behaviour. Procrastination means putting off an annoying or difficult task until later, and doing something easier or more fun in the here and now. You know what I'm talking about. Really, you should be dealing with that important task that's been brewing on your to-do list for days. After going to the bathroom, getting more coffee, and avoiding your computer for fifteen minutes, you finally sit down… and open Facebook. An hour later, you've read two blog posts, checked your emails, and watched a few cooking videos on YouTube, but still not started your task.

What's so frustrating is that we do this despite knowing that it will have negative consequences. Deep down, we know that we should put away our phone and get going, otherwise it'll just get more stressful further ahead. And yet it's impossible to resist! Why do we behave in this way?

As human beings, we are prone to go for the quick reward. Getting started on a big task often causes discomfort, especially if it's difficult, boring, not particularly urgent, or if we don't know where to begin. Watching YouTube or checking your emails is not only more entertaining, it also functions as a distraction from the anxiety-inducing thought that you should really be working on something else.

Everyone procrastinates on difficult tasks and decisions sometimes. Giving in to the temptation to check our phones instead of working every now and then is simply human. It's if it becomes a habit that it might cause trouble.

Unfortunately, procrastination risks becoming a downward spiral. The longer we postpone a task, the more stressed we become. When the feelings of discomfort at the thought of a task increases, so does the inclination to escape into distractions. There's also a risk that we exaggerate the task in our mind and become less excited the more we think about it. After all, a tough task is rarely as boring as when we are just getting started. Once you have become engrossed in it, you have other things to think about than how cumbersome it is (unless you remain in escape mode by checking your phone every other minute).

Perhaps you have thought that 'all it takes is that I pull myself together'? Procrastination is often mistaken for laziness. The difference is that lazy people often enjoy their way of working, while the person who procrastinates often experiences feelings of guilt over their behaviour and feels rather miserable. People who procrastinate may also be accused of being irresponsible, when it may in fact be an exaggerated sense of responsibility that's causing the postponement. You are reluctant to do something that won't be perfect.

That's why it rarely works when others tell you (and you tell yourself) to get organised. If quitting had been that simple, you would have done it already, right? The good news is that procrastination, just like other learnt behaviours, can be changed with practice. If you have such a significant problem with procrastination that you have a hard time managing school or work, I would recommend that you turn to the healthcare system for professional help. For us everyday procrastinators, it's often enough to change the way we work: designing away the most tempting distractions, setting smart goals, and planning our work sessions – things we are about to practice now.

DESIGNING AWAY DISTRACTIONS

Step number one if you often find yourself getting stuck in digital distractions is to simply hide them away.

EMAILS

Honestly, how often do you really need to check your emails? I know several people who disconnect entirely for a few months when they are working on a particular project that they want to finish, which, unfortunately, is a luxury solution that few can afford. However, what most of us can do is to actively choose how often and at what times during the day we check our inboxes, and, instead of constantly having our notifications switched on, plan specific periods during the day when we

answer emails and messages. In this way, you can work without disruption when you need to and at the same time minimise the mental strain of constantly having to switch between tasks.

How often you need to check your emails depends on the nature of your job. Of course, there are jobs in which it might be worth reducing your performance in favour of always being reachable, such as if you're a freelancer and cannot afford missing a single job. What I'm fairly certain of, however, is that you don't need to check as often as you think. This is because of the negativity bias that I mentioned earlier, that is, our tendency to put an exaggerated focus on the negative aspects of something and undervalue its advantages. When someone (myself, for example) proposes a change (such as turning off your notifications), our thoughts automatically rush to everything that could go wrong: I could miss a time-sensitive offer, my boss could get furious, or my children's school won't be able to reach me if they end up in hospital. Our first impulse is to keep our notifications switched on, despite the fact that the risk of a disaster is negligible compared to the obvious gains of being able to stay focused for a greater part of the day.

Unfortunately, our brain rarely listens to rational reasoning when it's up against powerful feelings such as fear. Therefore, you should challenge yourself to try it for a few days. Try out a new routine in which you check your emails a couple of times a day. Gradually, the worry that you might miss something will settle. The same is true for the near-automatic motion to open your inbox all the time.

I, myself, check my emails twice a day. It's happened that I have missed time-sensitive queries: when a stressed-out HR director needs a speaker for a conference or a journalist is seeking a psychologist for tonight's newscast, there is no time to spare. However, it's a cheap price to pay for the increase in productivity that I've been able to reap by being focused on work the rest of the time.

WHEN SHOULD YOU CHECK YOUR MESSAGES?

Open your email client and do the unthinkable – turn off your notifications!

Now decide on what times during the working day that you want to check your inbox. Put it in your calendar for the coming week. Preferably, it shouldn't be the first thing you do in the morning, even though it may be tempting, because that's when the brain is at its most rested. Make sure to get your most important and demanding job assignment out of the way then, before you clutter your mental worktop with other things.

In his book The 4-Hour Workweek, the productivity guru Tim Ferris boasts of only checking his emails once a week. You don't have to be quite that ascetic, but challenge yourself. When the week is over, you can add, remove, or change times if necessary. If you want to, you can add it to your email signature: 'I check my emails twice a day, at 10.30am and 2.30pm. Emails that arrive after this time will be answered the following workday.' That way, there can be no confusion.

YOUR PHONE

The limiting of distractions also includes your phone, of course. If you have a phone that's not needed for work, the best thing is to put it away and only check messages when you're taking a break.

This is true even if you keep your phone on silent. Studies show that the very presence of a phone in the room reduces our ability to concentrate, probably because we have learnt to associate it with breaks and distractions. Many people have a learned reflex to reach for their phone as soon as they get bored. Just like other behaviours, the habit is reinforced with every repetition, until we do it without the slightest thought and perhaps against our own will. Then it becomes difficult to stay focused! Do your future self a favour and put your phone out of reach when you sit down to work.

If you need to use your phone for work, you can prepare it in advance so that it doesn't become more distracting than it needs to be, at least. Block or delete tempting apps during the sessions when you want to stay focused. It's possible to set your phone to Do Not Disturb mode and choose a few prioritised numbers that still go through, which is practical if you always want to be available to your children, your boss, or important clients.

Do not check your phone during meetings. If you know that your phone won't be needed during the course of a meeting, you can leave it outside the meeting room. If half of the participants in the meeting are emailing on the sly as soon as someone else has the floor, it'll lower the quality of the discussion.

The ideal is to keep meetings as concise as possible, so that only those who are actually concerned by the issues are present. If many people have their phones up, it may be an indication that you need to look over the way you run your meetings: perhaps you need to shorten meeting times, invite fewer people, or let certain participants leave once their points on the agenda have been covered.

FLOW AT WORK

When you ask people about when they feel the most content at work, many mention a feeling of flow, the state that arises when we are completely absorbed in a task, when time and space disappear and all that matters is that which we're currently working on. It can happen when we are writing with great concentration or struggling with a challenging work problem. In order to reach a state of flow, the goal we are striving towards must be clear and it must show when we are making progress. The degree of difficulty of the task must match our level of competence perfectly: it's not so easy that we become bored but neither so difficult that it leads to frustration.

Computer games are often designed to induce a state of flow in its players. They have clear missions and the degree of

difficulty increases, so that the game remains challenging without ever becoming too difficult. Many would probably wish that it was possible to make one's working life as riveting. Unfortunately, we are still far from a complete 'gamification' of our working lives. After all, it's difficult to make report writing as thrilling as playing Fortnite. But using technology correctly, we can start moving in the right direction.

It goes without saying that digital distractions throw a spanner in the works for attaining a state of flow. Now, hopefully you have turned off your notifications (or at least set aside time for sessions of focused work), so the question is: what can you do during the sessions themselves to maximise your performance?

As mentioned, in order attain a state of flow, the difficulty of the task must match our level of competence. In this case, it gives us two variables to play around with in order to increase the chance of being engrossed in our work.

IMPROVE YOUR ABILITY TO SOLVE THE TASK AT HAND. In the modern working life, in which it's impossible to be an expert at everything, being able to seek out and make use of other people's specialist knowledge is a core competence. Here, the Internet offers a thousand opportunities. You can look up templates, step-by-step guides, and online courses in everything from how to give a presentation to how to look for a job. As a self-employed psychologist, I have googled my way to everything I know about economics, accounting, and marketing.

You're also just an email away from contacting experts in the field and asking for advice. It's not for nothing that really successful people always start their thank-you speeches with: 'I would never have been able to do this without help.' Who can help you get going? Is it a knowledgeable colleague in the industry, the IT support team, or your sister-in-law who happens to know everything about designing websites?

SET THE BAR HIGHER OR LOWER. The other variable to play around with is the degree of difficulty of your task. The task itself is probably set from the beginning. But by adjusting the bar for every work session, you feel challenged instead of overwhelmed and can increase your performance.

You can do this by formulating a clear goal for every session. It can be to answer all your emails, finish a presentation, or whatever happens to be on your to-do list. The main thing is that you set a goal that challenges you. It shouldn't be so difficult that you couldn't possibly finish on time. It also shouldn't be so easy that you are tempted to check your phone every five minutes. You should need to focus in order to finish on time – it's under such conditions of moderate pressure that us human beings perform at our best.

When it's clear what we need to do and by what time it is expected to be done, the motivation to actually do it often increases. This is a particularly good strategy if you often get stuck procrastinating. When a task is postponed, the feeling that it's insurmountably difficult, that we don't know where to begin, or that the deadline is so far off that we don't feel any pressure are common obstacles. By setting a goal for every work session, the task is made both more manageable and more urgent.

For many, this is obvious, while for others it's black magic. Fortunately, we can all practice and get better at structuring our work. To assist you in this, you have the calendar, notes function, and stopwatch on your phone. And a technique called Pomodoro.

TRY POMODORO

One way of becoming more productive during the workday is to use the Pomodoro technique. The point of this is to set a goal for what you need to achieve during each work session and then set a timer. When the timer goes off, you take a break, and then start all over again. The name comes from the Italian for tomato because Francesco Cirillo, who invented the technique in the 1980s, used an egg timer shaped like the red fruit. Now there's an abundance of Pomodoro apps to download for free.

How long your sessions should be depends on the task. The traditional set-up is:

- 25 minutes of work. The goal can be to answer all your emails or read a chapter, for example.

- 5 minutes' break. During this break you should do something that's different from work. Stretching or getting a cup of coffee is more revitalising than staying put and cyberloafing.
- Repeat four such pomodoros.
- A longer break of 15–30 minutes.

There are two reasons for why the Pomodoro technique is so effective: it forces us to prioritise and set goals and it reminds us to take a break. This both helps us to achieve a state of flow and lets the brain rest in order to then be able to work more efficiently again.

Personally, I don't work in pomodoros every day. However, I think it's a good method to use on those days when I have a particularly heavy workload.

LIMIT THE LIMITLESS WORKING LIFE

Stress isn't necessarily something bad. On the contrary, it's often very good.

Stress is your body's reaction to exhaustion and increases your readiness to act. When we get stressed, our body's resources are mobilised, we feel wound up and focused on the challenge at hand. It's not just a natural reaction, it's also very useful. Under stress, we perform better than when we are completely relaxed or blasé.

The danger arises if we are not allowed to recover properly. When your body and your brain have gone into overdrive for a while, they need to do something else in order to recuperate. Just like a battery, which works really well as long as you let it charge between uses. This is where the modern working life becomes problematic. The human physiognomy is adapted to an environment where threats and dangers are short-lived – once you have escaped the lion, you can relax. But what if the threat is an inbox that's constantly being refilled? In that case, when are you supposed to get a break from it? If, moreover, it doesn't stay in the office but follows you home, to the dinner table and into bed, there is suddenly no time at all for

the brain to disengage and recover. Studies show that every other Swede reads their work emails even while on holiday. No wonder that our batteries are run dry, with stress and exhaustion as a result.

In a limitless working life, we must learn to set boundaries, because without regular recovery we cannot perform over time. How we handle the collision of work and free time may vary. It's common to distinguish between two different strategies: segmentation and integration. Segmentation means creating a clear dividing line between work and our free time, that is, focusing on work while on the clock, and then leaving emails and have-tos behind when we are done for the day. For the person who prefers segmentation, it can feel very stressful to be expected to be reachable for work-related matters in the evening. The integrator, on the other hand, appreciates the freedom of being able to do whatever they want, whenever they feel like it – having the flexibility to run personal errands during the day but also being able to get absorbed in a work task outside of business hours. The integration strategy is more difficult to handle while also protecting your health, as it requires you to decide in every situation whether or not to work.

Regardless of whether you prefer to segment, integrate, or something in-between, you need to learn to set boundaries. Perhaps particularly if you are an integrator, as the need for recovery is the same regardless of which strategy you prefer.

DISCONNECT IN ORDER TO RELAX

Some people object that keeping track of their emails while on holiday actually makes them more relaxed. That way, they can rest assured that nothing panic-inducing has happened and they know what awaits them when they get back to the office.

Checking your inbox can offer temporary relief. Especially if you are worried about what might lie in wait there. But as we have touched upon previously, this control is a temporary solution that actually feeds your anxiety in the long term. If you want to relax completely in your free time, you need

to practice disconnecting. Only then is it possible to discover that that which you fear doesn't actually happen. And even in the unlikely case that it does, you'll be able to deal with that too.

COME TO AN AGREEMENT ABOUT
WHEN YOU NEED TO BE REACHABLE

Talk to your boss and/or your colleagues and agree on what expectations you may have on each other's availability outside of business hours. You can start with these two questions:

THE NEEDS OF THE BUSINESS. How wired do you have to be in order for the business to function?

THE NEEDS OF THE INDIVIDUAL. What does your need for undisturbed free time look like?

Then, it's a question of finding solutions that work for both parties. Don't be afraid to experiment and evaluate as you go. For example, you can try to go a week without anyone checking their emails after business hours to see what happens.

If your boss is making unreasonable demands, you can discuss the issue with the safety officer at your workplace. According to law, your employer is responsible for your workload being reasonable and you getting time off.

LIMIT WHAT YOU HAVE ACCESS TO
IN YOUR TIME OFF

If you have a work phone, you can leave it at work when you leave for the day. If that's not an option, or if you use your private phone at work, it's important that the phone doesn't remind you of work unnecessarily in your time off.

Turn off all notifications for work-related apps. (This should already be done, if you have started applying the

principle of checking your emails at certain designated times instead of letting your notifications govern.)

Create a folder into which you put all work-related apps. Move the folder away from the home screen so that you don't see it until you are actively looking for it.

If necessary: create separate inboxes for private emails and work emails, so that you don't have to see your work emails in your time off and vice versa.

Now, the challenge is to not open the work folder in your time off. It can be incredibly hard! You get itchy fingers and all kinds of disaster scenarios pop into your head, especially in the beginning. 'Shit, I forgot to reply to them! If I just log on for a quick moment…' That's when you have to take a deep breath and resist the temptation. Let things be not-perfect and do your best to correct it the next day instead. It's a bit like to quit smoking – awful in the beginning, but easier with time, until one day you ask yourself why you ever thought you needed cigarettes.

WORKING FROM HOME

Working from home can be a convenient solution for many reasons. But it also has its pitfalls: catching sight of the mountain of dirty dishes, and starting to deal with that when you should really be working. Or never quite feeling like you are off work, because it's always possible to do a bit more. Here are a few tips for how to distinguish between work and free time at home:

TIME. Decide in advance what your working hours are going to be. That way, you know how much time you have to work, and when you can take time off without feeling guilty. Schedule both short and long breaks during which you get to scroll through your phone to your heart's content, take a walk, or grab a coffee, depending on what you like to do. By scheduling breaks in advance, you keep your concentration at peak level and reduce the risk of cheating with your working hours.

Do you often work from home in the evening? If it happens occasionally, such as in the run-up to an important

deadline, there is nothing to worry about. Set aside one to two hours to work on a specific task. Then work on that task only, don't get into the routine of telling yourself 'I'll work until I'm done' or seizing the opportunity to check your emails. That way, the chance increases that you'll finish what you need to and can spend the rest of the time relaxing, without having to feel guilty about work. Also decide when to take compensatory leave – working for free is called slave labour.

Working overtime is a short-term solution and if you do it continually, something isn't right. You may get more work done today, but you get less time to recharge your batteries, which can cause you to work less efficiently the following day. If this is repeated day after day, you risk finding yourself in a downward spiral with sinking battery levels. Your performance worsens – which you might compensate for by doing even more overtime. Such a working situation is not sustainable and will not be solved by more overtime hours. In that case, it's better to raise the issue with your boss, and perhaps even with the safety officer at your workplace.

PLACE. The human brain is amazing at association, an ability that may unfortunately come with undesired consequences. Just like a madeleine may take us back to the thoughts and emotions of our youth, an office chair may lead our thoughts to deadlines and unanswered emails. A practical reminder if it's in your office – not so positive if it's in your bedroom.

Choose a place that is your 'home office'. I can be a particular room or a specific place at the kitchen table. Avoid the couch and bed, that is, places where you want to be able to relax. I have a library close to where I live that is open late; I usually go there if I have to work from home.

This is particularly important for students and other people who regularly work from home. If possible, try to find a café or library close by, so that your home can become a haven for relaxation. This also lowers the risk for the inverse problem, in which work is forgotten in favour of the mountain of dirty dishes.

FAMILY. If you live with others, talking through the working-from-home situation can make things easier. Partly, it can be annoying

to have your work interrupted by children who come home and start playing Musical Chairs, or a partner who pops their head in all the time when you are working on an important task. For one, not talking about it can cause friction in your relationship. We might think that we are good at reading emails at the same time as we hum in agreement when our family tells us about their day, but really – they can tell that your thoughts are somewhere else. And the feeling of rejection is often manifested in irritation, which leads to quarrelling in the long term.

Avoid this by coming to an agreement. It can be to tell the others about your intended working hours so that they can adjust their expectations and not disturb you unnecessarily. It can be to ask for permission before going off to check your work emails.

'Is it ok if I work for half an hour, and then we can watch a tv show?' is often a better compromise than working on the sly through two episodes of Game of Thrones.

♀

TIRED AFTER WORK? SKIP NETFLIX

After a long day at work, the most tempting thing can be to sink into the couch and binge-watch TV shows on Netflix until bedtime (and then just one more episode). It's a bad idea and I'll explain why.

It is, as mentioned, important to recuperate after exerting oneself in order to recharge one's batteries. When we think of 'recovering', our thoughts easily go to passive activities, such as scrolling through our phones or mindlessly watching TV. It doesn't require any energy, but the thing is that it also doesn't give us any new energy. Today, most jobs aren't particularly physically demanding, and resting our bodies thus becomes a misguided break.

It's a question of finding leisure activities that give new energy, that help recharge your batteries. For one person, it might be to compete in eSports; for another, it might be to take the dog for an evening walk. The main thing is that it's a clear break from that which makes you stressed, something that feels pleasurable rather than demanding. Many people experience

working out and spending time with their close ones as de-stressing, if we are doing it because we enjoy it rather than because we feel like we have to.

And we should watch Netflix too, of course – if we want to. As long as it's not all that we do; then we risk draining ourselves of energy, and eventually not having the strength to break our couch routine. It's in stressful times that we need gym sessions and a glass of wine with friends more than ever.

THE BOSS' ROLE

I want to end this chapter by turning specifically to those of you who are in leading positions within your organisations. You have an important role in creating healthy digital habits in your workplace, because you're the ones who set the bar. If you are constantly available and send work emails late at night, others will feel like they are expected to do the same, even if you tell them that it isn't necessary. If you need to work late in the evening, choose to delay the delivery of your emails so that they don't appear in your co-workers' inboxes until 8am the next day. Talk about expectations on reachability. Many co-workers might think that they are expected to answer emails around the clock, even though it isn't your intention at all.

Giving co-workers the trust to choose for themselves when and where to work is experienced as positive by most people. Some may find it more difficult than others to make it work, however, and in those situations your support is central. Ask your co-workers how setting boundaries between work and free time is going. Show that you are happy to help with ideas and solving problems if necessary.

There are plenty of prominent businesses with the policy that employees should answer incoming emails within ten minutes. By now, you probably know what I think about such guidelines. Though, what do I know – such a policy might be necessary due to industry requirements. These companies recruit high-capacity people who are expected to be able to juggle several things at once. What I'm wondering is what it would be like if they dared to let their employees disconnect and

concentrate every now and then. How exceptional would the capacity of these employees be if instead of constant distractions and working in fits and starts, they were able to work sequentially and maximise every task?

The industry norms according to which we should always be available are probably already changing. It's a waste of resources to have employees who lack the energy to perform to the fullest because of distractions and stress. And not only is the availability norm about to change: soon we'll see technical solutions that prioritise the messages in your inbox according to how time-sensitive they are, rather than keeping 'everything, all the time' as the standard.

All this about recovery applies to you, too. I've met many managers who feel like it's difficult to take a holiday because their employees don't have anywhere to turn with their questions. Remember that, in the long run, a rested boss is a better boss. And that, actually, there are plenty of other things that are important in life aside from work.