

**DIGITAL MINIMALISM:
CHOOSING A FOCUSED
LIFE IN A NOISY WORLD**
by Cal Newport

Summary & Worksheet

The Book In Three Or More Sentences:

Our relationship with technology is becoming unbearable. If something doesn't change soon, we'll either mentally break or legalize weddings between a man and a device. Luckily, Cal Newport, probably the only famous person without a social media account, shares practical advice on how to reduce your time spent online and finally stop mindlessly scrolling. How this can be done? By embracing the philosophy of digital minimalism.

The Core Idea:

As minimalism in general talks about less is more, digital minimalism preaches about the same thing but done online. The gadgets and the websites we visit should be used to support what we truly value, not become valuable on their own. By ruthlessly reducing your engagement with addictive apps and trendy sites you will earn awards, have real friendships, focus better, and feel a hell lot better.hell lot better.

Highlights:

- *Silicon Valley programmers are programming people, not apps.*
- *Digital minimalism will help you find clarity in the disorganized online world.*
- *We keep using social media because these platforms offer approval and unpredictable feedback. Both things the brain craves.*

5 Key Lessons from Digital Minimalism:

- *Lesson #1: You Have a Slot Machine In Your Pocket*
- *Lesson #2: You Have no Good Reason To Be On Social Media*
- *Lesson #3: There Are Three Core Principles of Digital Minimalism*
- *Lesson #4: Try Digital Decluttering for 30 Days*
- *Lesson #5: Best Practices For Digital Minimalist*

Lesson #1: You Have a Slot Machine In Your Pocket

The device that's sitting quietly inside your pocket? It's a tiny slot machine.

Yep, every time you open an app or a website, or receive a notification of some sort, you're searching for one thing: "What did I get?"

But unlike slot machines where you have a small (tiny) chance of actually winning something, our pocket computers and the tools we daily use are designed to rob us. To steal the most important thing we have in the most seductive way possible – our attention.

According to Tristan Harris, a famous entrepreneur mentioned in the book, Silicon Valley programmers are not programming apps, they are programming people.

All the shiny applications that are free to use and promise care-free living, are designed to be used in a particular way for long periods of time. By scrolling and liking pictures all day, big corporations are making big bucks while you're sinking deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole.

The solution to escape this vicious cycle of liking and sharing?

Adopting the way of the digital minimalist.

"People don't succumb to screens because they're lazy, but instead because billions of dollars have been invested to make this outcome inevitable." Cal Newport

Lesson #2: You Have no Good Reason To Be On Social Media

There are many who will tell you that social media is good and helpful. And these folks will probably be right. I mean, there are certainly benefits of using these platforms – running a business, managing a team, the ability to connect with folks in different continents.

However, the majority of people actually using these time-wasting apps are not doing it for any of the above reasons. They're simply afraid of missing out on something. And, because these tools are designed to be seductive and to cause behavioral addiction.

Yes, regardless of how noble the mission of Twitter and Instagram might seem on paper, the code behind these platforms was developed to keep you inside – doing nothing productive.

There are two main hooks embedded in the devices that keep us refreshing like lunatics:

1. INTERMITTENT POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT: A scientific study by Michael Zeiler from the 1970s explains that rewards delivered unpredictably are far more exciting for the human brain than when delivered in a known pattern. That's why we so enthusiastically check our notifications. They spark strong emotions in our brains and we constantly want more. App developers were, and still are, able to bring us back to their websites thanks to the "Like" button. This tiny little button changed the way we engage with the online world. Nowadays, we don't simply go online to see what our friends are doing, we visit these virtual places to get a dose of unpredictable feedback.
2. THE DRIVE FOR SOCIAL APPROVAL: We simply can't ignore what other people think of us. In the past, it was vital for our survival to have a healthy relationship with our tribe – or else they can exile us. Now, while in theory, we can survive on our own if we have enough money, the feedback we get from others cannot be ignored from the brain. That's why we post stuff online – to get approval. More likes means more people approving us and we keep doing it because we constantly crave more. The negative side, besides that it becomes addictive, is when no one is liking our stuff. If this happens, we enter a melancholy state of mind and other negative thoughts start to consume our mind.

Understanding the above, makes it clear why so many of us stay inside these virtual online spaces.

And while Cal Newport talks a lot about quitting social media and reducing your time spent online, the concept of digital minimalism is not about completely rejecting the modern tools. It's mainly about asking yourself, "is this the best way to use technology to support what I value?"

"It's a social-validation feedback loop... exactly the kind of thing that a hacker like myself would come up with, because you're exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology." Sean Parker

Lesson #3: There Are Three Core Principles of Digital Minimalism

The app store is coming for our souls!

To deal with these devilish creations that are messing with our impulses and trying to manipulate us, we need a serious long-term strategy.

This is where the principles of digital minimalism come into play.

The modern philosophy created by Cal Newport rests on three core principles. By following them, you'll successfully reduce your time online and become a digital monk who controls technology, not the other way around:

- **PRINCIPLE #1: CLUTTER IS COSTLY:** In general, people think that adding more things and working more hours is good for them because they'll gain more – money, fame, social status, even more money. But a digital minimalist understands that cluttering their time with more devices and apps leads to negative consequences. Instead of trying to be everywhere online, reevaluate the gains you get from the sites you visit and choose platforms that only help you get better.
- **PRINCIPLE #2: OPTIMIZATION IS IMPORTANT:** Tech can surely help us improve our day to day existence. However, simply using the default options is not good for you. To become a real virtual minimalist, you must tailor the tools to fit your specific needs. Once you figure out why you're using a certain site and why exactly you visit social media, you can make adjustments to gain the most out of it. For instance, if it's important for you to stay connected with your relatives, you can schedule monthly calls with them instead of constantly checking what new they posted.
- **PRINCIPLE #3: INTENTIONALITY IS SATISFYING:** Becoming

a digital minimalist is not about rejecting the online world or trying to burn Facebook's headquarters. It's OK to have a social media account. Yet, only if you use it intentionally. If you manage a Facebook group, you can unfriend most of the people on this platform to keep your newsfeed nice and cozy. This will allow you to stay connected with your group members while not letting the constant updates destroy your productivity.

OK, these are the 3 commandments of digital minimalism. Once you have them printed, continue with the next step of your journey towards intentional online living.

Lesson #4: Try Digital Decluttering for 30 Days

Digital minimalism, as mentioned earlier, is the new dogma that teaches people how to handle the avalanche of online tools that are trying to corrupt our thinking.

But simply stating that you're a digital minimalist won't mean much unless you're only saying it to get a few more likes on your favorite social media account. You need to do something additional!

Fortunately for us, the lost souls who are relentlessly searching answers in the online space, the author created a short process called Digital Declutter. You can imagine this as fasting from technology for around 30 days.

When he first mentioned this to his email subscribers a few years ago, over 1,600 people sign up for this challenge. Later, the efforts of the volunteers were even mentioned by the national news.

"But what's this mystical challenge and does it work?" you might ask yourself.

It does, but it's tricky. Cal Newport shared that a lot of people abandoned the project only after a few days. He adds that the problem wasn't in their willingness to participate or their desire to make a change, it was something more subtle – the restrictions they placed were either too vague or too strict.

Or to put it differently, in order for this challenge to work for you, make sure to tailor the steps below and fit them to your specific needs.

The Digital Declutter Process:

1. **STEP 1:** Take a thirty-day break from addictive apps and sites that add little value to your life. This also includes video games and television. Write down what you're not allowed to do for the time period of 30 days.
2. **STEP 2:** Stay strong for 30 days. It will be hard to resist the desire to check social media and not do the other things on your banned list. Instead of moaning, however, find new ways, better ways, to do the activities you previously did online. For example, if you are a vivid gamer, start playing board games with folks in person. This way, you'll still play something and at the same time improve your relationship with the people you love.
3. **STEP 3:** After the 30 days, start from a blank slate. Don't get back to the old way of doing things. After the unplugging period, to adopt something (digital) in your life it should first tick the following boxes: Does this serve something I deeply value? Is this the best way I can do this activity or there is a better alternative? Do I have an agenda on how and when to use this tool?

For example, if you previously used social media to read the news, instead of going back, you can subscribe to a newsletter that offers similar info. You will be still well informed but you won't have the opportunity to mindlessly browse.

The last step is crucial. Every time you go somewhere online, you should be intentional about your visit. Otherwise, you're simply wasting your time.

Lesson #5: Best Practices For Digital Minimalist

Instead of using the available tools online to get ahead in life and further fortify our values, we value the actual tools.

Facebook says that they want to help people build communities and to bring the world closer together, but do you use it in a meaningful way? I don't think so. You continuously add content to indulge your own ego and to fool around.

And how is this helping you in the long term?

It doesn't.

So, don't allow the online tools to use you. Your goal should be to use these tools to get better at your craft.

This means first devoting your life to something meaningful. Once you have that, find the best tool online that will help you scale your craft and don't fall into the trap of being sucked into toxic social media games.

The author included a couple of practices that will help you stay on track and have a clutter-free online presence.

Best Practices for Meaningful Digital-Free Life:

- Leave your phone at home: Your smartphone is the main reason you can't focus. When this device is in your pocket, you're always ON. Whenever you can, don't bring your smartphone with you.
- Take long walks: Of course, without your phone. Don't listen to music either. Take some time to observe nature and to think about your life.
- Write letters to yourself: Share the struggles you're going through. These handwritten notes will help you find clarity and solutions to your problems.
- Don't click "Like:" Liking a picture or leaving a short comment is a low-value interaction. Besides, when you do so, your brain will wait for some sort of response.
- Be less available over chat and text: Set some rules. Don't constantly reply to messages or to emails. Schedule your texting and reply only in certain timeframes during the day. This way you'll avoid trivial conversations about meaningless stuff.
- Fix things or build things: When you abandon the online world you'll have a lot more time on your plate. Use this time to create something or to fix things around your house. This will help you stay away from the addictive social media sites.
- Schedule in advance low-quality activities: Digital minimalism is about lowering the negative impact of technology. Still, it doesn't mean to completely abandon it. To make sure you're not spending 12 hours a day on Twitter. Schedule time – one hour a day, for example – to do low-quality leisure activities like liking pictures or watching Netflix.
- Join something: Join a group. A cause. Organize an event. Adding more high-quality activities in your life will help you become intolerant towards meaningless distractions.
- Delete all social media apps from your phone: The hardest but the most useful practice is to remove all social media apps from your phone. Once you don't have easy access to these time-wasting apps, you'll quickly realize that you don't really need them.

“Digital minimalism definitively does not reject the innovations of the internet age, but instead rejects the way so many people cur-

rently engage with these tools.” Cal Newport

Actionable Notes:

- AMISH HACKING: I thought that the Amish reject all new technology but the book says otherwise. It turns out that these plain-dressing traditionalists take full advantage of the tools available. But they do it with grace. Before adopting a tool in their community, they first ask themselves: “Is this going to be helpful or is it going to be detrimental? Is it going to bolster our life together, as a community, or is it going to somehow tear it down?” If the gadget can help them in the things they value, they embrace it. You can follow the same logic when deciding what tools to use in your life.
- PREPARE FOR THE IDLE TIME: Our brains never think about nothing. When given downtime, according to the finds by the author of Digital Minimalism, our brain defaults to thinking about our social life. That’s why social media sites are so addictive. After all, your relationships with fellow humans are important for your survival. To cope with that default state of mind, make sure to be prepared with an activity that you can practice when there’s nothing to do. The best way you can handle waiting in line is to have a book or two on your phone. That’s what I personally do.
- FIND VIRTUOUS HOBBIES: The best way to stay away from the computer is to find a hobby that can help you get better at something. If you still don’t have a side-occupation, stop what you’re doing and find one now. A leisure activity comes with a lot of benefits. You’ll learn new skills, you’ll get better at problem-solving, and you’ll feel way better when you complete a project.
- JOIN THE ATTENTION RESISTANCE: Do you know what happens when you check social media ten times a day? You make sure Mark Zuckerberg stays rich. And while you’re adding dollars to his bank account you’re not adding benjies in your own. Join the attention resistance, as the author calls it. Remove social media from your phone and spend your time wisely. If you do need to use social media, make sure you’re doing it to gain from it, not to make already rich people even more wealthy.
- WHY DO WE NEED EVERYONE CONNECTED? A system that allows you to message everyone in the world and to get an immediate response sounds absolutely staggering. But do we, you, need to be connected with everyone? We hardly pause to reflect on why we use social media. On why we spend so many hours playing video games and watching shows. A life full of liking pictures and meme-sharing feels good. But this is an only superficial pleasure. On the inside, there’s emptiness. True pleasure comes from doing something that

can benefit others and will help you improve. Use the tools at our disposal to build something worthwhile, but don't allow these same tools to use you.

Commentary and My Personal Takeaway

Digital Minimalism by Cal Newport, is the bible for people who are sick of the annoying apps that try to rule the world. The book offers a crash course that aims to help us have a healthy relationship with modern tech. In simple terms, Cal Newport tells us to divorce our phones but still see each other every once in a while.

I was expecting a bit more though.

There are interesting examples of real people who welcomed this mantra suggested by Cal Newport but overall, the book feels like a long “declutter your phone” article.

If you're compulsively checking your email and visiting social media for no good reason whatsoever, you should definitely try the principles and probably read the book. But the overall ideas in Digital Minimalism are covered by the major publications in articles circling around the web – just search for the term digital detox. This doesn't mean that the book is bad, not at all. Probably I was expecting a bit more depth in the research and a bit more examples.

My key takeaway: Digital minimalism is not about rejecting tech, organizing a riot in front of Facebook HQ, or borrowing a rocket from Elon Musk to go to Mars and get some work done. It's a way of living that will show you how to use tech to support the things you deeply value.

Notable Quotes:

“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.” Cal Newport

“Digital Minimalism... 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.” Cal Newport

“Some of my work clients have noticed a change in me and they

will ask what I am doing differently,” he told me. “When I tell them I quit social media, their response is ‘I wish I could do that, but I just can’t.’ The reality, however, is that they literally have no good reason to be on social media!” Cal Newport

What to read next:

- Actionable [Book Summary: Deep Work](#) by Cal Newport
- Actionable [Book Summary: Waking Up](#) by Sam Harris
- Actionable [Book Summary: Flow](#) by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

INTERACTIVE SHEET FOR NOTE-TAKING

Reading alone won't help you understand the actionable notes. You need to engage with the content. Answer the question below (just type inside the boxes) to outline your future steps:

1. Before using a new tool, ask: “How is this tool going to help me with what I value?”
2. List high-quality activities to do in your idle time:
3. What's your hobby? Find at least one that helps you improve:
4. Why do you use social media? What can you do instead to connect with others?
5. Delete social media apps from your phone and try digital decluttering:

Don't forget to save your changes.