



How To Be Indistractable With Nir Eyal



What are the real causes of distraction and how can we accomplish the things we set out to do? Nir Eyal provides answers in his book, *Indistractable*.



Nir Eyal

James: James Schramko here. Welcome back to SuperFastBusiness.com. This is Episode 682. And I have a special guest here called Nir Eyal. Welcome.

Nir: Thank you, James, great to be here.

James: Your name is familiar to my listeners, because you wrote a fabulous book called *Hooked*. And a lot of people listening to this podcast have businesses where it suits them to have someone sticking around. We have a lot of subscription businesses; there's quite a few software as a service businesses, plenty of coaching on retainer-type businesses, and information products, as well. So of course, we got a couple of e-commerce people and then some, you know, if it was a bell curve, there'd be a few people distributed either side of that.

How to get un-hooked

Now, you have a lot of traction in this particular topic, because you're a graduate and instructor in Stanford Graduate School of Business, you've studied and taught behavioral design with industry leading experts and scientists, and you write, consult, and you're sort of in that intersection of psychology, technology, and business. You have a blog, nirandfar.com. And your writing's been featured everywhere, Harvard Business Review, the Atlantic, TechCrunch, Time, The Week, Psychology Today and My Kindle. So I'm pretty excited about it. And you've got this new book called *Indistractable*, which is really interesting, because your first book kind of taught people how to create things that hook people, and this book is coming at it from a different perspective. It's not like a naysayer, doomsdayer book about how evil and destructive things that hook you are; it's more an educational on how to manage those things, sort of the way that I take it. But I'd be really interested in how you came at it and what was the evolution of those two books that I'm familiar with, at least?

Nir: Yeah, absolutely. So that's everyone's first question. How does the guy who wrote *Hooked* now write this book about how to get unhooked? And somebody told me once that wisdom is found in the seeming contradictions. And it seems like a contradiction, but there's really no dichotomy that we can use the good aspects of habit-forming technology. You know, all of your listeners, nobody's using it for sinister purposes – they're using it because they have businesses that could help people, if people just use the product. And so that's really my passion, is to help companies build the kind of products that people want to use, as opposed to feeling like they have to use another crappy piece of software or another crappy product out there that they don't enjoy using. So why not use the same psychology that makes Facebook and YouTube and Instagram and WhatsApp and Slack, all of these products so engaging? What if we could use that same exact psychology to make all sorts of products engaging, to build healthy habits in people's lives?

The other side of what I research and write and teach about, when it comes to this overarching topic of behavioral design, is designing products and services to affect people's behavior, but also to help people design their own behavior. So that's what *Indistractable* is about – it's an insider's view into how to manage distraction. And distraction is defined by the opposite of distraction, which is traction. So traction is anything you do that moves you forward in life, anything you do with intent. Distraction is the opposite of that, anything you do that is not what you plan to do, anything that moves you off track, that pulls you away from what you really want to do in life. So that's two sides of the behavioral design coin, is helping people design products and services to perform healthy habits, while also informing people around the deeper psychology around why sometimes we don't do what we say we're going to do.

James: So in essence, *Indistractable* is a user manual. It's a behavioral design guide for humans, that's the device this time around instead of a software platform.

Nir: Exactly. Right. *Hooked* is all about how to build this stuff, but *Indistractable* is about, you know, now that you know the deeper psychology of why you get distracted, you can design your own behavior. So that's a great way to put it.

James: I really like this because as a business coach, I'm finding lots of people get distracted. And that's the best distinction I've ever heard. I've never thought about distraction, and traction. I've heard the one about disease and ease, and why people might feel badly, because they're not at ease. And that's the best definition I've ever heard of distraction.

The hidden messages in distraction and traction

Nir: Thanks. People think that the opposite of distraction is focus. And I would argue it's not. Because if you actually look at the etymology, not to get too geeky here, but I love this kind of stuff, but if you actually look at traction and distraction, they actually come from the same Latin root, they both come from the word *trahere*, which means to pull. And so traction means to pull towards what you want, things that you do with intent. And distraction is the opposite, things that pull you towards things you don't want, things that you're not doing with intent.



And the reason I think this distinction is so important, is that you'll notice both words end in the word action, reminding us that distraction is not something that happens to us; it is in fact, a behavior that we do. It is something that we ourselves do. It's not just something that you know, people say, oh, my iPhone rang and I got distracted. No, the distraction was that you answered the phone, when it pulled you to do something you didn't plan to do. And the reason this is so important is because I don't make any value judgments on what you do. There's nothing that says that somehow, you know, playing Candy Crush is morally superior to watching a football match. No. If that's how you want to spend your time, great, do it. Reading a book, meditating, even planning time to do nothing. That's great, as long as it's what you plan to do with intent. Because if we don't plan, if we don't decide what we're going to do with our time, somebody else will decide for us.

James: That reminds me of that saying, if you don't have a plan, then you will fall into someone else's plan. It's probably exactly what's happening when we pick up a phone. You know, they read your first book, and then their plan's working.

Nir: Yeah.

James: Just when I thought you explained distraction, traction as best possible, then you add the action one – you can see that word hidden in there. It's great. It also explains why I was a bit confused the other day. I was watching a video from Gary Vee, and he was talking about how he's the most unfocused, focused mofo, or something to that effect. It was really confusing. He was saying he's very focused because he's unfocused. But now, if I think of it more in terms of traction, he's just applying traction in multiple areas. So that's where the fuzziness comes, around the difference between focus and traction. I like the traction way of thinking about it, it makes a lot of sense.

Nir: If you want to focus, that's great, by the way. If what you want to do with your time is focus...

James: We could be focused on being distracted, I imagine.

Nir: Well, you can gain traction by doing focused work, right? That's totally fine. But if your traction, if what you want to do with your time, is to let yourself daydream, to be completely unfocused, if that's what you plan to do with your time, it's traction, and it's not distraction.

James: Yeah, I've talked about a few things around this, like, for example, in my week, I partition my working blocks to Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. And even in those days, I push the blocks towards the early morning, and in the late afternoon. For example, it's 8:30 AM where I am now. This is my last call for the morning, and I won't be back till four or five hours later. So I'm going to go and do other things. And I take Mondays and Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays away from external things. So I've built those areas to get traction. And sometimes, just by not being at work, I'm actually really able to be storing up energy and getting really good for when I am back on. But I know most people don't have day parting or week parting the same way that I do. A lot of people are doing what everyone else does Monday to Friday, nine to five, Netflix, couch, Candy Crush devices, or whatever. It's a wonder when they do actually get to do work. Would you say the average worker is not putting in eight hours of traction work, that there's a fair degree of distraction happening?

When you need answers, write a book

Nir: No, not even close. I mean, most of us, including myself, right? I don't want to point the finger; I want you to know I wrote this book because I needed solutions. Right?

James: Self-help therapy.

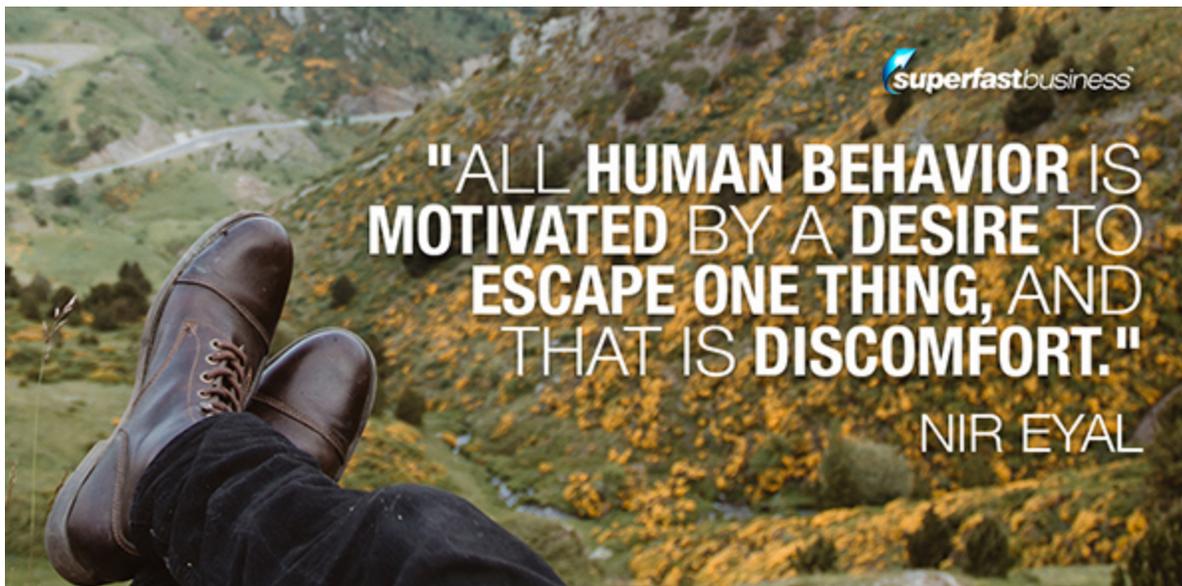
Nir: I found myself getting distracted. Gretchen Rubin said to me once you said research is me search. And that is certainly true in my case. I mean, I was finding myself getting very distracted. And I'm the guy who wrote the book on how to get people hooked. And so I thought, wow, if I understand how these things are designed to capture our attention, and I'm struggling with this, well, then lots of other people out there must be struggling with it as well. And so that's why I really wanted to dig into this topic.

And you're absolutely right. I mean, the average knowledge worker – you know, just some quick stats – we know that, according to Harvard Business Review, that the average knowledge worker, 25 percent of the time they spend on email is spent sending emails that they never needed to send, and 25 percent of the emails they receive are emails they never needed to receive. That's just one example. I mean, think about all the pointless meetings, all the pings and dings throughout our day; open floor plan offices, where people can walk up to your desk and interrupt you in the middle of your work. All of these things are distractions; they take us off track.

And yet, when you ask an average knowledge worker, you know, is focus important for your job? Do you need time to reflect in your day in order to come up with novel solutions to hard problems? They'll all say yes, right? We all need that time. But no one makes that time; no one guards that time for their day. And it's really corrosive. It's taking a real toll. We have all this great technology that connects us, and yet most people don't feel more productive.

James: So really, your first step towards fixing it is being aware of it. You've obviously created this book to solve your own problem and the problem many others are experiencing. I think, well, it's my observation, a lot of people don't actually realize what's going on. You don't have to look hard to see people on their phone in a cafe, on a bus, walking down the street. It seems to become to the point where I think Elon Musk was quoted as saying he wants to embed a chip into his brain. Like, we're getting closer to the point where we're going to find it harder to separate. Like, I like not wearing a watch. And I keep my phone away from my bedroom, and I have a lot of time away from it. Like, some people call me and they say, you didn't answer your phone. I'm like, I don't even know where my phone is right now. I almost feel like I'm lucky enough to have come from a generation where we would ride our BMX bikes around at night; we didn't have devices when I was a kid. So I remember what it was like pre-mobile phone. And then I've got kids now, and they don't. Like, they've grown up from day one with this technology all around them. So you're sort of introducing, I think, a brand new topic for a whole generation where you get to be aware of this.

In the book, you sort of break down, what are the internal triggers, in part one. Maybe we should chat about that for a second.



The single biggest psychological trigger causing our actions

Nir: Sure, yeah. So there's four big parts to becoming indistractable, and they need to be taken in order. So the first part is about mastering these internal triggers that in the course of my research, what I learned is that most distraction starts from within. And what I mean by this is that all distraction – actually, let me back up – when it comes to really first principles, not just why do we get distracted, but why do we do anything? All human behavior is motivated by a desire to escape one thing, and that is discomfort. Most people think that, as I used to think, that motivation is about the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. You know, this is called Freud's pleasure principle. But it turns out, it's not true. That in fact, motivation is not about the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. It's not about carrots and sticks. In fact, neurologically speaking, it's pain all the way down. It's about avoiding discomfort. And we know this physiologically, right? If you feel cold, you put on a coat; if you're hungry, you eat, right? You take action when you feel some kind of physiological discomfort. The same rules apply to our psychological discomfort. When we're lonely, we check Facebook; when we're uncertain, we check Google; when we're bored, we look at the news, we check Reddit, you know, the list goes on and on of products that can help us not feel bored anymore.

So the first step to mastering distraction and mastering our behaviors and mastering, you know, making sure that we do what we say we're going to do in life, is to make sure that we can master these internal triggers, these uncomfortable emotional states. Because if all behavior is prompted by a desire to escape discomfort, that means that time management is pain management. And that's not something that I ever heard before in any other productivity book or, you know, the typical advice given, but it's absolutely incredibly important. Because you can use all the strategies, all the tactics, all the productivity hacks out there, but if you don't fundamentally understand the root cause of why we do what we do, why do we do things against our better interest, then you'll always go off track. And so the first step has to be mastering these internal triggers.

James: It's very powerful. I've written that one down. So we do everything to avoid discomfort. And I've often talked about trying to create things that free people up from boredom. We hear about gamification, trying to make things that are mundane fun and exciting. Like, when they put a little thing on a trash can, that when you throw something in, it sort of makes like a, wheeew, crash! type sound so people want to look for more rubbish to throw in it. Because it's normally, I guess, it's not that exciting to pick up trash and put it in the bin. I've heard of time management as being energy management, but definitely never pain management. That makes a lot of sense.

It's funny when I think about when people are putting something off, and I mention to them, you know, it's obviously just not important enough to them. I guess, I was skirting around the edge. But it's not important enough because they're not in enough pain that they need to solve it, by the sound of it.

Nir: Right. So one form or the other, right? So even the pursuit of pleasure. We say well, don't we pursue pleasure? Doesn't something feel good motivate us? Yes, but you're not taking it deep enough. The deeper reason why pleasure motivates us is because of desire. Wanting, craving. These things feel psychologically uncomfortable. There's a reason we say love hurts. The process of wanting and desiring something is itself psychologically destabilizing and uncomfortable. That's what prompts us to act to satisfy that discomfort, that itch, that wanting,

James: Well, I have to ask, then, I do occasionally encounter at the [higher level of coaching](#) people who start reaching a ceiling on where they're comfortable in business, and I'm suspecting that they start self-sabotaging their ability to succeed, because it might be too painful or discomfort might arise if they push to the next level and attract more attention or feel like there could be potentially more pressure on them, or expectation. Is that what's happening?

Nir: Sure. And this is such a great example of how we have to get to the root causes, whether it's distraction in our home life, whether it's distraction in our work life, our kids. What I've noticed recently is that we're very quick to blame the tools, what I call the proximate causes, without understanding the deeper cause.

The only three reasons we're ever distracted

And so you're absolutely right, you know, if an executive is not performing at their best, there probably are some deeper reasons here. There are only three reasons we ever get distracted. Those three reasons are either an external trigger, which is what most people think about – it's the pings, the dings, the rings, that might prompt us to do something we didn't want to do. And so there's recipes in the book for what to do about those, at work, on your computer, on your phone, etc.

Then there's the planning problems, which is when we just didn't allocate the right amount of time for something that we wanted to do, and therefore we got off track because we put the time on our schedule, and we can talk about tactics for that.

But then the most common, the reason we have to start with first, are the internal triggers, or these things that are uncomfortable that we seek to escape, and most people don't want to talk about those. We don't want to deal with the icky sticky truth that, you know, make it very personal. I noticed that I was using my phone instead of being with my daughter. And if I'm honest with myself, it was because I was bored. It was because I'd had enough toddler time. And at first I beat myself up – I'm a bad father; you know, there's something wrong with me; why am I not enjoying my time with my daughter? Everybody seems to be having such a great time on Instagram with their kids. Why am I bored? Right? Why have I had enough?

But it's only when we start dealing with those real problems, you know, if you find yourself very distracted at work, there's a section in the book where I talk about why distraction at work is a symptom of a dysfunctional culture. That there's always these deeper causes. Kids, especially, you know, when it comes to why kids overuse technology, we love to blame the technology. But the research is showing that there are deeper reasons here why our kids are overusing technology.

So the real moral of the book, if there's one thing I want people to take away, it's to look for the root causes – not to just blame the proximate causes, the tools of distraction, but to understand the real cause of distraction. Because look, if you think the world is distracting now, just wait a few years, right? Just wait until virtual reality or whatever else comes down the pipes. Neuralink, as you mentioned, with Elon Musk. The world is going to continue to be even more distracting. So we have to prepare ourselves now. Because look, these companies are going to get you. If you don't prepare, if you don't know these techniques, they're going to get you, they're going to get your colleagues, they're going to get your employees, they're going to get your kids. Because they understand what makes you click and what makes you tick better than you understand yourself. And I'm telling you this as an industry insider, right? I wrote the book Hook.

The skill of the century you should master

Now, just because these tools are very powerful, and that technology is becoming more pervasive and persuasive, doesn't mean that we can't do something about it. In fact, I'm not one of these, you know, Chicken Little, sky is falling tech critics that that tells you that technology is hijacking your brain and it's super addictive. No, that's actually rubbish. We are way, way more powerful than these tech companies, if we know what to do. That's the important thing. We have to learn this new skill set. This what I call the skill of the century, this master skill of learning how to do what it is we say we're going to do.

James: Yeah, I like that. It's really the message I've been putting forward, I feel like we're going to reflect back and think, Wow, why didn't we see this coming more? I have talked about it being a problem on this show. I've seen it even with myself, was the first thing I noticed. Hang on, these devices, they're taking up too much of my time, I'm more distracted than I used to be.

And it was only this time when I actually sat next to a friend of mine, and I saw him watching YouTube video after YouTube video after YouTube video after YouTube video. And he wasn't doing any work. Like I wasn't one of those people that ever watches YouTube at that time. I was super serious and very, very focused in my work. And I didn't realize that's how the ordinary consumer is behaving. And I was like, No wonder they're not getting anything done.

I did want to spread the message. So like, that's so true, we can take control. And I recently played a VR game with my team (I'm visiting the Philippines at the moment). We went into this place, we put on headsets, and we went and blew up some zombies together. It was very realistic and amazing, like you could be in a shipping container with some tech and be transported into a remote prison with a zombie outbreak. And it's quite a good sort of taste of what's coming, with augmented reality and the way we're going.

So we really have to get the user controls to ourself. It's a common theme, actually, on this show. We've really just come off the back of [a series of episodes talking about taking control of our own health](#). And I'll put this down in the health bucket. Mental health seems to be reported more and more these days. And we have to take control of ourselves and be in charge.

So you've given a few ways that you can deal with internal triggers, and to reimagine them. And I won't spoil all the fun, because I really recommend someone listening to this gets the book, *Indistractable*. I was lucky enough to get an advanced copy and to read through.

Let's talk about how you make time for traction. Because you mentioned before, you've got to block the time off. And I've certainly noticed that's been a huge thing way back when I was running a large team. I had to actually close the door in my office just to get stuff done. Because otherwise, I actually tracked it once - I was getting interrupted every two to three minutes all day with open-door policy. And it was a joke.

Nir: Absolutely. I mean, this is so important. And it's become, you know, it's something that that C-level executives almost across the board have been doing for years and years. And maybe, you know, you look at the typical C-level executive at a big company, they are walking around all day with a clipboard. And typically it's a paper printout of exactly where they're supposed to be that entire day. And that's a practice that I think needs to trickle down to the rest of the organization, at least if you're the kind of person who struggles with focus and distraction and, you know, people are constantly asking for requests on your time.

And, you know, the problem is that it used to be, when you were in the office, you might be interrupted by your colleagues. But of course today with with [Slack](#) and email, we're constantly interrupted all the time by people. And so the idea here is that it's no longer an option to not schedule your time, that if you don't plan your day, someone else will. And what I want people to remember is that we have no right to call something a distraction, unless you know what it is distracting you from. So remember that you know the opposite of traction and distraction, those are opposing actions that we can take. The only way to know if something is a distraction is to know what it is you plan to do with your time.



So many times when I was researching my book, I would talk to people who are struggling with distraction. I'd say, tell me what it is you wanted to do today, what did you get distracted from? And they take out their phones, and they'd show me their calendar app. And nine times out of 10, it's blank. People just go into the office with the to-do list full of stuff they think they're going to get done that day. But that's only half of how to use it to-do list, right? You know, this myth of the to-do list - you put stuff on a to-do list, and magically, it's going to get done. That's ridiculous. The to-do list is the output; your time is the input. And so everything on your to-do list has to have a time in your calendar, or it ain't gonna happen.

James: Yeah, I don't keep a to-do list anymore. I haven't for years.

Nir: You're ahead of the curve.

James: You know, I have a rule of [I won't sit in front of the computer unless I know what I'm supposed to be doing](#). Like, this call is a great example. It was in my scheduler. My scheduler had that block and I turn up for my morning work block and there was three or four appointments there. At the end of this call, I'm going to close my laptop, I'm going to go and do family stuff. But it was in the scheduler and it happened because I know that's how I get the best out of myself, is I just block it. So if I'm inclined to get something done, then I'll actually go and put it into my scheduler so that it turns up and there's time allocated for it and it's ring-fenced, like no one can penetrate the fortress while I'm doing that activity.

Understanding the negative impact of wrong residual beneficiary allocation

Nir: Absolutely. You are very much ahead of the curve. Very, very few people do this. And what I think is essential, and this was a mistake I was making, is that I would say the business stuff is important. Right? Like the the revenue-generating stuff is important. But if you ask me what's most important to me in life, I would tell you my family, my friendships, my health. And yet I didn't have time in my calendar for those things. And so I was making my friends and my family what we call a residual benefactor. Residual benefactor – I learned this term in economics class in college. A residual benefactor is the chump who gets what's left over during the liquidation of a company.

James: Like, most businesses' profit until they read Profit First.

Nir: It's the chump who gets whatever's left over. I met my wife in college, we've been married for almost 20 years. And a few years into our marriage, she told me, "You know, you're making me the residual benefactor. I'm the chump that gets whatever time, whatever scraps of time you have left over after all the other stuff you do. And that's not fair." And you know what? She was right. And I now have time in my counter not only for the important work stuff, but also time, repeating time, regularly on my schedule – for my friends, for my wife, of course, for my daughter. That time is in my schedule as well. Time to exercise, time to make healthy meals, all this stuff is in my calendar. Because if I don't make time for traction, if I don't turn my values into time, I can't live out my values. I can't do what it is I say I'm going to do. I can't become indistractable. So that's the critical second step.

James: Wait till you're planning a schedule around tide charts like me. I surf every day, and that's why I have a four-to-six-hour gap even on my work day, because you have to allow for the changing tide – it moves by about an hour a day. And then you have to have time to go to the right place, the right break with the correct swell direction. Oh, fun.

Nir: Yeah. Now I mean, this is a perfect example, right? What you do with your time, that's consistent with your values, surfing is consistent with your values. And this actually brings up a really interesting point. Because you say, well, but my schedule changes, right? The tides change every day. What do I do about that? And the analog, I think, for the office worker is, we had some emergency, right? Some blow-up happening that we couldn't have planned for. So the idea is, we want to review our schedules as frequently as they change, meaning for most people, the cadence is about once a week.

So I'm going to give you a link that you can put in the show notes – [I built this tool](#) because I kept getting asked for this. People asked me to have an easy tool, like a very simple tool; Google calendar is way too complex for that. Just a very simple tool to make a weekly template. For most people, you know, commuting to work occurs at the same time; lunch occurs about the same time; you know that they can carve out some time for their emails, or for meetings, or whatever it might be – that occurs with regular cadence from week to week. But some people, it changes every day. So what you might want to do is have what's called a daily stand-up, where you're looking at your day – along with your colleagues, by the way; this is something that should happen if you have employees, if you have colleagues that need your time. That's something that we want to review with a frequent cadence. We also need to do that with our whole life. Right? So every week on my schedule, it says, review schedule with Julie, with my wife. Because we go over our calendar; we do a schedule sync, is what we call it, where we review each other's calendar to make sure that we are in sync in terms of how we're spending our time.

James: Well, my wife and my calendar are synced, so I know we have to go and pick something up at the shops after this. I saw that, and she knows I'm doing a podcast right now. So we actually incorporate them together and I think that works really well for us.

Nir: Absolutely. I think nothing has improved my marriage more than this practice, especially when it comes to household admin. And I hate to admit it, but I was stiffing my wife when it came to household admin tasks – she did way more than I did. And so we sat down together, we listed out everything that we have to do, and we made a time for it. It's like, it's literally in my calendar. Every Saturday is my time to cook for the week. That's now my responsibility. But it's in my calendar, and we have so fewer fights because of this.

James: Well don't tell your wife, I think I cook every day.

Nir: Wow.

James: I quite like it.

Nir: There you go.

James: It was something you jammed into the side. Like, when I had an office job and was running a big team, you know, you'd be eating a meal in the lunchroom while two or three people are queuing up to talk to you, it was just crazy. And now I have all the time in the world. But I'm the same person. But I've just reorganized the way things work and restructured my life around doing a better way.

I'm Indistractable – come back later

Let's talk about your term, "hack back" because part three of your book has a whole string of hack backs. I'd love you to explain what that means.

Nir: Sure. So step one, again, is to make sure that we master internal triggers. Step two is to make time for traction. Step three is about those external triggers, the things that can prompt us to either traction or distraction. So what we want to do here is to ask ourselves this critical question: Is the external trigger – the ping, the ding, the ring, whatever it might be that prompts you to traction or distraction – is it serving me? Or am I serving it? Is the external trigger serving me? Or am I serving it? The ones that are serving you, keep. Right? This is not an anti-tech book – quite the opposite. I love tech, these tools are wonderful. So if an external trigger is helping me do something that I wanted to do, that I planned with intent, hey, go on a surf or, you know, whatever it might be that you want to do with your time...

James: That's like the wave alert. My app sends me a wave alert.

Nir: Yeah, there you go. If that's consistent with your values, keep it if it's serving you.

James: It's like, the right conditions, perfect wave size and direction, it sends an alert, which means that that automatically elevates that as a high priority.

Nir: There you go.

James: We're in the go zone.

Nir: This is why it's so important. Like, for somebody else, that's not important. That's not part of their values. But it's consistent with your values.

James: I imagine, for most people listening.

Nir: Hey, if that's important to you, wonderful. I'm jealous. I got to admit, that sounds awesome. But you know, what most people do is that, two thirds of people with a smartphone, the stats tell us, never change their notification settings. That's crazy. Really? Two thirds of people don't change their notification settings. So not only do we need to change these external triggers on our phone, we have to do it on our computer; we have to do it in our workplace, right?

One of the leading causes of distraction at work is these open floor plan offices. People constantly interrupt each other in these open floor plan offices. So I tell you techniques for what to do about it. In fact, one of my favorite techniques is that inside every copy of Indistractable, there's a red piece of card stock in the middle of the book that you tear out, you fold up into thirds, and you put that piece of card stock on your computer monitor. And it says on this, very bright, you can't miss it, screen sign, it says I'm indistractable, please come back later. So it's this message that we send to our colleagues that for a few minutes, I need some focused work time. And people say oh, I put on headphones, you know? That doesn't work, right? People think you're listening to a podcast or YouTube or whatever. So we want to make it very explicit about when we're trying to focus. So the idea here is to hack back all of those external triggers that don't serve us.

James: I must admit, when we started that call on video, and you had an Indistractable T-shirt, I thought, maybe this isn't going to happen.

Nir: What do you mean?

James: Well, I thought maybe you were in your indistractable mode.

Nir: You know, that's funny. That actually leads to the fourth and final step, why I wear this T-shirt. The fourth and final step – and this is something we do last, by the way, because this technique can be dangerous, it can backfire. But the fourth and final technique, after we've mastered internal triggers, after we've made time for traction, after we've hacked back external triggers, the last technique is to prevent distraction with pacts. And there are three types of pact, but the most important pact is called an identity pact. Because it turns out that long-term behavior change is identity change. And so the reason that you saw me in my Indistractable t shirt is because I wear this to constantly remind myself what I am. I am indistractable. It's in the same way that a religious Jew might wear a yarmulke. It's the same way that you know, monks were traditional garbs. We identify ourselves with a particular persona, with a moniker, because it helps us do what we want to do without expending willpower or requiring a lot of self-control. That in fact, our identity can shape our behavior in a pretty profound way, by binding us, by letting us enter a pact.

James: You know, we talked about [how to use your alter ego with Todd Herman](#), and he would call that an artifact. So when he puts on his glasses, it sort of transforms him, like a superhero. That was Episode 635. If someone's listening, they want to slip across, have a listen to that afterwards.

I like that, putting on your T-shirt puts you in indistractable mode, putting the little red card on your computer says hey, I'm not available right now.

I saw you did an interesting post on [Slack](#). Because some of the people who are anti-Slack say it's too distracting. And then you did an article about the people who work at Slack and how they deal with that.



The missing ingredient from most workplaces (without this your team will be very distracted)

Nir: Yeah, that's right. That's right. I mean, you would think if technology causes technology distraction, then this company that people blame, this product I should say, that people blame for causing distraction, the employees who make the product, use it more than anybody, they should be the most distracted people on earth. And that's not the case at all. That in fact, at Slack, Slack is this great example of a company that doesn't have the distraction problem that a lot of other companies have. Because the source of the distraction at most companies is not the technology; it's a dysfunctional work culture. It's companies where people don't feel what's called psychological safety, where they don't feel that they can raise their concerns without getting fired. Because look, distraction at work is a problem like any other. And so if you struggle with distraction at work, if you're constantly being pinged and dinged by your boss and your colleagues, you're always expected to be on, that's a dysfunction. Because you're not talking about a problem that bothers you. It's like a family where people hate each other, but no one can talk about the problems. And so that's the same thing that occurs in these organizations.

So number one, the organizations that have a work environment with psychological safety, that's the first criteria, and Slack has that in spades. And I talk about in the article and in the book about how Slack creates this environment of psychological safety. It's interesting, they actually use Slack to generate that environment of psychological safety.

The second thing you have to do is you have to create a place for people to talk about their problems, right? And it turns out that distraction is just one of many problems that I talk also in the book about Boston Consulting Group, and I used to work at Boston Consulting Group. It was actually my first job out of college. Let me tell you, really sick culture, at least at the time. They've really converted that; they've changed it a tremendous amount now, because they have these, what's called predictable time-off meetings, where people can talk about this problem of how can we give everybody on the team predictable time-off. And now with that forum, what's amazing, when they gave people a forum to talk about their concerns, they had all kinds of other skeletons in the closet, all kinds of other things that people weren't talking about. And once they could talk about those problems, they could serve their clients better, employee retention increased, because they could finally start talking about their problems for once.

How Slack can be used for productivity

And then the third thing that these companies do that manage distraction, that create an indistractable work environment, is that the leadership exemplifies being indistractable. Right? These are companies where at Slack, I interviewed a few folks in the book, where people, when they have a meeting, put their phones away. They give each other the full attention. They allow their employees to turn off on nights and weekends. In fact, surprisingly enough, if you walk into Slack headquarters, there's a big neon sign on the company walls that says, work hard and go home. And everybody from the CEO on down lives out that motto, right? They will chastise you if you're on Slack channels on nights and weekends. That is not something they do there. They exemplify how to be indistractable through the leadership.

James: Yeah, we use Slack and love it. And I love what you said about psychological safety. That's exactly what I believe. I've lived the dream; I've worked for those multinationals who grind you out to a pulp. And you know, I'm sure all the blood, sweat and tears I've shed in those places have been long forgotten. In my own team, we use Slack and we can see the calendar. I want to make sure people have lots of time off. It's great when they have a notification saying they're away. And we can all work around that and pick up. I want them to have a good life. That's like our core value. Because it's hard doing transcriptions for my podcasts and my videos. I'm always talking about lifestyle design and surfing and having a great life. And I want my team to have that too. It's not like they're doing all this hard, difficult work so that I can have a great life. It's like, let's all share in this together.

Nir: Right.

James: And it's very important in this online culture.

Nir: Yeah. And it benefits you, of course, as the business owner.

James: I want them to take their kids to school; I want them to take their partner to the movie on a weekday. Like, if we're going to have the benefit of working from home, and we don't have time-critical deadlines in our business, we're more or less a publishing business now. We don't have end-customers that we have to serve like when we had a service business. We had 65 people in our business at one point, and we ran an SEO business for seven years. But even then, we had enough depth in the team that we could rotate and replenish, and that was our strength. We stay strong and agile.

Nir: Absolutely. Absolutely. And that increases employee happiness, it decreases employee churn, and that's the most expensive part, right? Hiring and firing sucks. It's horrible.

James: In a sales business, 50 percent of the sales force leaves every year.

Nir: Ridiculous.

James: In our business, my team are coming up to 10 years in January. And they're a remote team. This is important. So they're in a different country to me most of the time. And the second newest person's coming up to five and a half years. And the newest person, we only hired a few months ago, and she's having a great time. But stability is great because you develop that intellectual property and they start to be like an organism. They know the tone and the way we do things, and the culture of the business is very strong. But I think you really put your finger on the pulse there. I would say the one thing that I'm constantly saying to people who hire a team, especially in the Philippines, is that the fear-level is very high. If you can lower the fear, you'll get the performance. And so doing things like visiting them in person, knowing a little bit about them, understanding the culture, encouraging time-off and not trying to suck every ounce of bandwidth. Like, a lot of people resort to time tracking tools. But something about that I just find terrible. It seems very Orwellian. And I'm concerned that I wouldn't want to work in an environment like that. So why would you enforce that, or have people you trust so little that you need to micro screenshot them every five seconds?

Nir: Yeah, yeah. On the other hand, I don't think it's about this Orwellian monitoring, but a lot of employees actually do want synchronizing and coordination. Because a lot of us, we don't want to track your time. We don't want to be an overload on your time. So just do all these things and get them all done. So there is actually a case to be made for the employee asking a supervisor, say, look, you asked me to do these 35 things. There's no more input, my input is my time. Where in my schedule, what are my priorities here, where in my day should I do all these things you want me to do? So we also don't want to fall into the trap of not synchronizing at all.

James: That's why we do an 80/20 analysis. We review what things are on their plate.

Nir: There you go.

James: And then we order them. Of those things, which ones are the most important? Which ones are the least important? And often, when I'm issuing some new project, I'll tender it out to the team, I'll ask who would like it. So I'm aligning someone's interest to it rather than just allocating it on a, you know, some roster basis, like, here's a new thing we want to do, would someone like this? And so the person that steps up to that has a good chance of being interested in it. And then we explain where it fits into their regular stuff. Like, this is something we do on the side, on a slow bake, or this is something that really needs to be done by the end of business today. So we give it a scale for them to be able to judge. And then of course, if they do have to do it now I would excuse them from every other task. So there's no pressure. That psychological safety is built in.

Nir: Right. Right. Awesome. And this is just a great example of how, when you build in psychological safety, when people feel comfortable enough to raise their hands and say, Hey, boss, this isn't really working out for me, can I talk about this with you?

James: Oh, they will.

Nir: That's the master skill, right? It's not about specific tactics. You know, tactics is what you do. Strategy is why you do it. And so the why you do this is because, if you can establish psychological safety, you have an environment to solve all kinds of problems. And if employees can't tell you they're feeling burned out, they're also not telling you about the shitty customer service or about your crappy product. They're keeping all kinds of other secrets to themselves.

James: That's why we put a traffic light. So in Slack every day, they just put green, orange or red. And it's a simple way for me to know if they're maxed out or if they've got plenty of capacity.

Nir: There you go. Love it. I love it.

James: You know, as soon as they hit orange, I'm like, Well, do we need to hire another person? Would you like to spread your task out to a few others who can help out? Or should we slow the project down? Basically, I never want to blow someone up. And then occasionally, we've got things we need to do that are, I guess you'd call them a sprint in some environments. But we have lots of replenishment and rest time as well.

So I think we've kind of covered the workplace indistractable elements.

Why computer games are not as evil as parents often think

There is the part about kids, which we have touched on. Certainly been interesting for me, having raised kids of different ages, with different levels of technology. Like, a new kid coming into the world now is starting on a different base than I was or that someone halfway in between was. So where do you see that going in the future?

Nir: Yeah, so this is where we really have to understand why our kids are getting distracted. It's about, again, the root causes versus the proximate causes. And so, you know, one of the problems I see out there is that when we blame technology, by the way, and parents have been blaming something outside of themselves and outside their kids forever, right? You know, today it's technology, you know, personal devices and social media. In my generation, it was video games. Before that, it was television. Before that, it was rock and roll music and comic books, the pinball machine, you know, there were moral panics about pinball machines.

James: Oh, that's right, rock and roll was the devil.

Nir: Yes! So every few years, we get this moral panic that something is melting our kids' brains. And they all stem from the same reason. It's not the thing that's doing it to our kids. It's that we, as parents – I hate to tell this to you, and it's uncomfortable for me as well, I'm a parent of a 10-year-old as well – it's not about all these things. There's always a deeper reason for why they are behaving in these ways. But we, as parents, love to blame our kids' crazy behavior on something else. But the danger of this is that we don't look at the root causes. We don't figure out why our kids are overusing. So first of all, let me calm some nerves for any parents out there. There is zero evidence, zero evidence that two hours or less of extracurricular screen time, if it is age-appropriate, has any deleterious effects. Okay, not one study has shown any problem with two hours or less of extracurricular screen time. Again, if it's age-appropriate. What does age-appropriate mean?

James: And after the age of two. Right?

Nir: Right. So that's what I mean by age-appropriate. So I'm not going, you know, are pools dangerous? Of course, swimming pools can be very dangerous. But once a kid knows how to swim, they can be a lot of fun. So you know, there's a lot of content I wouldn't let my child consume at 10 years old. I live next to the New York Public Library. I'm not going to let her walk in there and just read any book she wants. Reading is very healthy, it's wonderful. But there's some content that she's not ready for, so that she should not be exposed to at 10 years old, even though it's just reading. Same with television. Same with anything on the internet, right? iPads are not inannies, first of all. We need to make sure that we give them age-appropriate content, starting with the fact that the social media networks tell you, don't let your kid use this until they're 13 years old. Why the hell are parents giving their kids products that the manufacturers say, don't let them use under a certain age?

James: Yeah.

Nir: “Oh, but my kid’s friends say they’re all using it...”

James: Like, in China, they’re having permanent vision problems from kids having screen time in their infancy.

Nir: Yeah. So it’s clear, you know, age appropriate is rule number one. But even when it comes to age appropriate content, there’s still a lot we want to be careful of. So basically, what we’re doing is using the Indistractable model, these four steps: master internal triggers, make time for traction, hack back external triggers and prevent distraction with pacts. We’re teaching our kids how to become indistractable themselves using these four techniques, starting with Why do they really need this? What are they looking for escape from? Remember, we talked about how the motivator for all human behavior is the desire to escape discomfort. There’s a lot in here. We don’t have time to go into all the deeper psychology here, but kids today have a lot of discomfort in their lives. They are looking for what’s called psychological nutrients. They’re looking for escape from stuff. Even kids with healthy home lives. And we need to understand the deeper reason why they’re looking for that psychological escape, so that we can arm them with this skill of the century.

Because the goal of parents, I think, is not to police our children and tell them what to do all the time. It’s about raising future adults. Right? So what happens when your kids leave the household? Do they have the skills to be indistractable even after they, you know, go to university or wherever they go next? That’s the real goal. And so that’s exactly what this section of the book is all about, is about implementing these four techniques with our kids, starting with understanding, what are they looking to escape in the real world? What are they not getting in real life that caused them to overuse tech?

Science buff explains how to get more sex

James: Right, and you extend that, of course, in Part Seven to relationships, which I think is relatively self-explanatory. You’ve touched on that before, that time with your partner without a phone, making sure they’re not the residual benefactor, etc.

Nir: Right. And again, using these four techniques. I mean, my sex life really suffered when every night my wife and I were checking our devices at 10, 11 to midnight. We couldn't have a good relationship. So we utilize the same exact techniques, and let me tell you, our relationship, thank God, has never been better.

James: This has been just an amazing episode. It's definitely one of my favorites. You're so generous with your knowledge. And I think, as you said, it's the skill of the century. It really is the topic of topics to cover right now. We're at a point where we can make changes, where we could recognize why we're doing things to avoid discomfort. We can look for the root cause; we can manage the external, the internal, the planning, if given some frameworks.

The book, of course, is incredible. I recommend it. It's available from all your usual book outlets. And you've also got your website, nirandfar.com, where you publish really good blog posts. I enjoyed reading a few of those, especially one recently about how the big companies are now trying to help us measure and monitor how much we're using it. Because they don't want it to turn into something nasty, I suppose, and they want us to manage ourselves better, which seems counterintuitive. But you know, people like you and I are talking about it a lot, and it's just going to get more and more of a discussion if they don't rein it in, like you made the point about safety sells.

Nir: That's right. That's right, just like the seat belt is the analog here, right? Nineteen years before any law said cars had to come with seatbelts, car manufacturers were putting seatbelts in cars, because guess what? Safer cars sell better. And that's exactly what we see today, that tech companies are helping us use their products less, believe it or not, because they want us for a lifetime; they want us to engage with these products forever. And if they hurt us with their products, you know, people aren't dummies – we stop using a product if it doesn't benefit us. And so the idea behind this methodology is to get the best out of technology without letting it get the best of us.

James: I bet it was probably Australia who regulated seat belts before any other country. We like laws, food labels, seat belts – if it can be regulated, we'll do it.

Want to talk to Nir?

Thank you so much for sharing. I really appreciate this. And I know I saw you had a feature, actually, where you even were letting people book a conversation with you. That kind of blew out for quite some time. That looked like an interesting experiment.

Nir: Yeah, yeah. There's actually a few ways to get in touch with me. Of course, you know, you can always read my content – I publish all that for free on my blog at nirandfar.com. I also have office hours, regular. This is actually a technique I talked about, about how you can reduce your email load dramatically by scheduling these office hours. So I would get a lot of emails from people saying, Hey, I just want to pick your brain; I want to ask you about Hooked. Can we talk for a little bit? And just the back-and-forth thing to coordinate was so much work. So I said, Look, I'm going to have an office hour every week on Thursdays, you can book the time right here for yourself, it's free. But you have to wait for a little while. You know, thankfully a lot of people wanted to talk to me, but I only have so much of time every week. So you have to wait a little bit. But it's absolutely free, and you can talk to me; book the time and we can talk about whatever you want to talk about.

Typically people read the book, and you know, they ask me questions related to one of my books. It got so popular that some people were saying, Well, I need to talk to you right away. In which case, I have this new program where you pay, I think it's 15 bucks a month. And there's a separate calendar for the VIPs. And believe me, I'm not trying to get rich off 15 bucks a month. It's meant to inflict a little bit of friction to see who's serious, right? If you say it's an emergency, my business depends on talking to you, okay, fine, but you've got to put down a little bit of money to show me you're serious. And again, I don't care about the godd*mn \$15, I'm not going to get rich on \$15. But if you would be amazed how many people you filter out who are not serious, or it's not really that urgent, when you put a little money on the line, even if it's just \$15.

And then there's a third category of people who actually say, Okay, no, no, I need you for an hour, we really need to get down to brass tacks, you know, help me here. And I have a consulting practice for that as well. But most of what I do is write and speak. So there's a lot more there on nirandfar.com.

James: Yeah, you're sort of staring more into my sweet spot, Nir. I found it quite lucrative to put up a recurring subscription and to let people chat with you, in a private environment. Been doing it for 10 years.

Nir: Yeah.

James: And it's my prime model. I do have a book, [Work Less Make More](#). And it's a great conversion device. But I'm sure there's a few opportunities for you to help people. And like you said, I'm not surprised at all when you put a filter. We used to do free SEO reports. And then we charged, I think it was \$20. And it cut down the number of applicants to one fifth, but we got the exact same number of people convert through to paying customer. So it's a great idea.

Thank you so much. Unbelievable discussion. I'm really excited about it. I've got some tools as well, and I'm going to especially look into this escape aspect of what the children are doing. I know it's not the tools. It's something deeper than that. And I feel like this story of mastering this skill needs to be out there. And that's why I'm happy to publish this and it's been terrific.

Nir: I appreciate it James. Thanks so much.



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