

EPISODE 765

How Social Media Impacts Human Health And Productivity

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SHAWN STEVENSON: There's a recent change in our culture that's making it more complicated for many people to have the physical and mental health they really want to have. A study published by the CDC titled 'Effect of Media Use on Adolescent Body Weight' found that increased use of screen devices like smartphones, tablets, et cetera, is associated with increased risk of obesity through a variety of mechanisms, including insufficient physical activity and increased calorie intake while using our screens. They also noted that this increased media use is significantly associated with shorter and poorer sleep quality, which is also a significant risk factor for obesity. Our use of technology has absolutely exploded in the last couple of decades. And don't get me wrong, it's not all bad. We've got access to so many incredible resources, thanks to our innovations in technology. As a matter of fact, we're experiencing a paradox where we have access to so much information that can help us to get healthier, that can help us to connect with each other, that can support our mental health. But yet, if you look at the data and you see the trends, our physical and mental health is continuing to suffer despite all of these recent innovations.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Now, what about the specific impact of our tech use on our mental health? Is there any data on that? Well, of course, there is. A study published in the American Journal of Epidemiology, assessed over 5,000 test subjects and found that overall, regular use of social media had a negative impact on the individual's sense of wellbeing. And research published in the Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology found that using social media less often than you normally would leads to significant decreases in both depression and loneliness. We feel better when we're not on it as much. And ironically, again, it's called social media. It's supposed to be about connection, and it's a deep human need to feel a sense of significance and connection. We are very, very social creatures, but today you're gonna learn how our use of technology can be robbing our mental health.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Now, you might be thinking, well, this isn't me. I don't have that big of an issue with technology and social media and things like that. Well, a lot of people do. It might not be you, but maybe it is, and you might not realize that it's happening, that it's siphoning and pulling away from your ability to take care of yourself, to have the sleep quality that you want to have, to have the creative outlets that you want to have, to focus on your physical movement and your mental health. We might not know, sometimes these things are hiding in plain sight, but just to look at the average person, depending on which dataset you look at, the average person today is spending about three to five hours on their phone each day, and the average person checks their phone over 100 times a day, alright? It's just this little slot machine that we have in our pockets that we're constantly wanting to pull and see what comes up.

SHAWN STEVENSON: And so again, this is for the average person. Some people are spending far more hours on their device, some people are spending less. But the reality is, it is a deeply ingrained part of our culture today, and we need to address it, not to villainize our tech devices or social media and things like that. They have their benefits, absolutely, but we need to come into this situation with more awareness, so that we can use these innovations and they're not using us. And that's what you're gonna learn about today, because we've got two of the most incredible experts in this field who's sharing information around this, to look at the impact that technology and social media is having on us, plus some strategies to better manage our interaction with technology and our minds overall.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Now, before we get to our first expert, one of the most science-backed ways to help neutralize some of the influence that our tech and social media and things like that are having on our lives is to spend more time with people that you care about in the real world. And a powerful way to do that, that has a tremendous amount of benefits that I actually talked about in my most recent USA Today National Bestselling cookbook, *The Eat Smarter Family Cookbook*, is having more frequent family meals with friends and family. By the way, friends are included as well. And thankfully, there are incredible companies out there that feel the same way, and they're doing a lot to help to bring families closer together. And one of those companies is Organifi. And they actually put their money where their mouth is and bought a huge bundle of Eat Smarter Family Cookbooks to give away as part of their incredible superfood kit that has three components that focus on energy, recovery and radiant appearance, including healthy skin.

SHAWN STEVENSON: For energy, they've got their organic red juice blend, which a study that was published in the Journal of Applied Physiology showed that one of the ingredients in there, which is beet, they've got pomegranate, they've got blueberry, the list goes on and on. But beet juice was found to boost stamina up to 16% during exercise and training. Plus, the blueberry component researchers at the University of Michigan found that compounds in blueberries can actually impact genes that are related to fat-burning. For recovery and better sleep, they've got the Organifi Gold Blend, and the highlight in there is turmeric, which has been found to improve insulin sensitivity, reduce blood fats, and directly act upon fat cells. Plus, research published in the Journal of Ethnopharmacology points to turmeric's potential in reducing the severity of both anxiety and depression.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Now, for radiant healthy skin, you'll get the very best collagen product in the world. The Organifi collagen is derived from the very best and most bioavailable sources. Collagen has been found to support metabolic health, skin health, and help to prevent fine lines and wrinkles. And unlike most collagen products, Organifi's collagen utilizes multiple forms of collagen. You get all of this in the Organifi Eat Smarter Kit, and when you

get the Eat Smarter Kit, you're going to get a free copy of the Eat Smarter Family Cookbook as well. So such an incredible value. Head over to organifi.com/smarterkit right now. That's O-R-G-A-N-I-F-I.com/smarterkit. That's just together as one word, smarterkit, and get hooked up with this incredible superfood bundle. Alright? And by the way, again, when you get the Superfood Bundle, you're going to get a free copy of the Eat Smarter Family Cookbook. So, head over there, check them out, organifi.com/smarterkit. And now let's get to the Apple Podcast review of the week.

ITUNES REVIEW: Another five star review titled 'Saved My Life' and 'Made Me a Better Man' by Humble Beast 9278. I spent 10 years in prison, surrounded by toxic everything. In December of 2022, I found this podcast and have listened to every show, and I've applied so much of what I learned to my life that I dropped 35 pounds in 12 months, rebuilt damaged relationships, and joined a mentorship, helping others. I was released on January 7th, 2024 to my wonderful family who was reaping the benefits of the Shawn Stevenson Show. Thanks for keeping it. Follower for life.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Come on, come on. That's what I'm talking about. Thank you so much. You're an absolutely amazing human being. Thank you so much for sharing your heart and for having the heart to overcome your incredible challenges. And wow, I'm just, I'm speechless right now. Thank you so much. I'm very grateful, because this is the type of impact that we can have. This is the type of impact that we will be selfish not to share. We've got to share our voices, we've got to share our hearts. And thank you again so much for leaving a review over on Apple Podcast. And if you have to do so, please pop over to Apple Podcast and leave a review for The Model Health Show. And on that note, let's get to this incredible topic today, which is looking at the impact that technology is having on our health and wellbeing.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Now, keep in mind again, that incredible review is sharing the positive perspective that technology can have. That's the power of it, the right use of technology. But what happens when it becomes so ingrained that we start to miss out on the application of things in the real world? We start to miss out on the relationships in the real world. We start to have diminishing returns when it comes to our mental health, and our sense of significance and our sense of wellbeing. These two experts are going to share with you, the most recent data and some of these things are incredibly eye-opening. And I wanted to share this because it's one of the things that I've been so conflicted about with social media, because yes, it's a great platform to share information and education and empowerment, but it's also something that is robbing people of their time and energy. And also, as the latest data is affirming, it's dramatically diminishing our ability to pay attention, right?

SHAWN STEVENSON: So, we've got to cultivate a more well-rounded association with these things that are not going anywhere. But so often, we are dealing with things that we don't

really understand. We're just living in it, we're just existing in it, and we're not really looking at what impact is this really having in my life, and what can I do proactively and practically, so that I can utilize things that are, yes, they're gonna be more and more integrated in our lives in a way that's efficacious and helpful, and it doesn't backfire on me and start to rob me of all the juiciness and the incredible opportunity that we have being a human being right now in this experience.

SHAWN STEVENSON: So first up, you're going to hear from Adam Alter, who's a professor of marketing at New York University's Stern School of Business, and he's the author of the New York Times bestselling book, 'Irresistible'. And in this segment, he's gonna talk about how technology like social media is designed to hook us. It's designed to make us addicted. He's gonna share why the like button created a new age of feeling pseudo significant, why social media can have us fishing for negativity, and how to create some changes to your environment to free yourself more often from the hooks of tech addiction. Check out this first segment from the incredible Adam Alter.

[music]

ADAM ALTER: It's a little bit like going fishing, and you're kind of, you're lowering the hook into the water and you're trying to make it as attractive as possible for the fish. And so, if you can put a lure on it so that you've got maybe some flashy little feathers and things going on that light up when the fish swim by, you're more likely to catch the fish. And when you're building a tech product, there are certain hooks or lures that you can build into your product in the same way. It's like picking and choosing from a toolbox, or a tackle box and they're all there, and you just have to build them in. You just have to make them a feature in your program. And as the people who are developing software and apps become more sophisticated, they become better at kind of naturally folding these tools into their programs. And as a result, with each additional tool, the platform becomes more difficult for us to resist, and that's where the title of the book 'Irresistible' comes from. It's this idea that if you weaponize a program, you start to embed these hooks in that program, it becomes irresistible to us. And that's why we went from 18 minutes a day to four, five, six, seven hours a day now.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Right. And those hooks include obviously all of the social media apps and dynamics with those email, texting, the list goes on and on. When I read this in the book, I literally thought about humans. I pictured it. I'm a very visual person, a bunch of us swimming around like fish with our stupid fish faces and like we are swimming in an environment that has far more hooks than water.

ADAM ALTER: Yeah.

SHAWN STEVENSON: And wondering why we're getting caught up. So, yeah.

ADAM ALTER: Yeah, that's true. That's true.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Totally, crazy. Now, one of the things that, and I told you this before the show, I literally put the book down, I had to go for a walk after I read this, but you shared a story demonstrating how just the presence of your phone affects our ability to connect with other people. Can you talk about that?

ADAM ALTER: Yeah. The phone is basically a portal to another world, right? And so when you see a phone, it reminds you of all the things that you do with the phone. So, if you're a social media person, you're gonna start thinking about Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, whatever other apps you have. You might be thinking email, WhatsApp, text messaging, education programs, whatever the things you do on your phone are, when you see your phone, you're reminded of all of that, and it removes you from the here and now. And so, one of the effects is that if I meet someone for the first time, imagine we sit across from each other at a table, and we have a conversation, if we do that and there's a phone sitting on the table, even if it's not turned on, just the fact that the phone is sitting there, we will draw a weaker connection between ourselves. We are less likely to form a bond, and we're more likely to say that was kind of distracting. And I don't feel like I fully formed a sense of this other person. If you replace the phone with a book, so you take the phone away, you put a book there instead, you don't have that effect. So, it's specifically phones themselves that lift us out of the here and now. And basically, they divide our attention. They take a part of us and put it somewhere else.

SHAWN STEVENSON: That's like a soul-sucking statement right there, man. I had literally, yesterday I was discussing this, that my phone, any of us, when we are on our phones, we have no choice but to leave our reality. We go into a different reality that in a sense doesn't really exist. It's kinda like a parallel universe from where we are right now. And even that transition back into the real world, there's like a lag time. Now, I think that a lot of us, we believe, especially when we're in the concept of addiction, we think about a myriad of different things. And we think that it's... Well, we'll get to that in a moment. I wanna talk about one dimension being willpower. Because I think a lot of people believe that this is an issue of willpower, but we don't understand it's far more complex and veiled than that. And there are people working behind the scenes. Can you talk about that to make sure that your willpower doesn't matter?

ADAM ALTER: Yeah. Well, one thing about willpower is it's limited. It's finite. We all have a certain store or reserve that we can draw on from time to time. But if you are busy, if you're

overworked, if you're tired, if you're making a lot of decisions during the day, imagine willpower like a kind of gas tank, and the gas slowly recedes until eventually the tank is empty. And if you rely on willpower constantly to make the right call, the right kinds of decisions with respect to things like how much time you spend on your phone, ultimately, you'll fail, because you just can't keep drawing on that will. So, what you really need to be able to do is to set up structures that mean that you don't have to rely on willpower. So habits, we can talk about this at some point if you're interested, but there are things you can do to circumvent willpower, so you don't need to use it.

ADAM ALTER: But yeah, the biggest issue with it and why willpower is never enough is, as you say that behind every screen, there are two things. One is there are very smart people who know a lot about human motivation and psychology designing those products. So, they're putting those hooks in that we talked about. The other thing that's going on though, is you don't need to be smart. You just need access to a lot of data. And if you have access to data, you can AB test everything. So, if I'm creating an app and I wanna know if I make the background red, will people spend more time than if I make it blue? I release two versions, everyone gets a red version or a blue version, and then maybe I see from user data that the blue version is more engaging. So, suddenly everyone gets the blue version. Then I say, I wonder if I add a like button or a button that allows engagement, what happens? Suddenly people are spending 20 minutes a day more on the platform. If you do that with each feature over and over again, this little arms race between different versions of the product, what you end up getting at the end of it all is this kind of evolved, weaponized version of the product that is perfectly designed to overcome whatever willpower reserves most humans have. And that's why so many of us spend more time than we'd like on our screens.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Yeah. I wanted to really reference that because even hearing this that the average person is spending around four hours of their day on their device, and kind of losing track of reality, we think that we can just willpower our way through it. Like I'll just put this down. It's not gonna bother me. It's far deeper than that. And these hooks can really get into us pretty deep. But now let's talk about that in this concept of feedback and if you could, a little bit of the history, like how social media likes became kind of addictive. It became like a little bit of a drug.

ADAM ALTER: Yeah. People are very interested in the history of social media platforms and understanding how they evolved over time. And for me, the biggest change, the sea change in social media platforms was the introduction of the like button for Facebook which is more than a decade ago now. And the reason that was so important was because Facebook for a long time, I remember using it in 2005 when it was first released to the university where I was studying. And it was engaging, it was interesting to see what people were doing, but they had to tell you what they were doing. They had to update you by saying, I moved towns, I've

got a new job, or whatever. Then with the like button, everything became bi-directional so you could get feedback. So, if I posted something like tell people how I'm feeling, or I post a photo or a link to something eventually that you were able to do that on the platform as well, I could find out what people thought of me. A proxy for my kind of social value in that context was how many people liked what I did, how many people engaged.

ADAM ALTER: And sometimes you'd post something and you'd be hit with a wall of silence and that wouldn't feel very good. But sometimes you'd post something and everyone got engaged, and they shared it and they talked about it. And it's kind of impossible as a social creature, as a social being, which we all are as humans, not to some extent feel some burst of reward that comes from that experience. And so the introduction of the like button, I think was the smartest and most important thing Facebook did. Obviously, copied by a lot of the other social media platforms. And it was because it introduced this engine of feedback. It made social media like a gambling device, like a slot machine where every time you posted, you were pulling that handle and wondering what was gonna come up. And sometimes you hit the jackpot, people engaged, lots of positive feedback, massive dopamine rush. People feel great. And I think that's why it was such an important decision among the developers.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Oh, my goodness gracious. So, already my wheels are turning even more so than from reading the book right now. And how this stuff affects our value, it affects our perception of what we're saying or what we're sharing, or even who we are and how valuable we are based on the response that we get from this world that is largely detached from us, from a lot of people that we don't even know. So, would that be accurate? Can you talk about how these things affect or kind of dictate our value?

ADAM ALTER: Yeah. I think this is a big... The biggest problem here is with young people, with teens, with kids, with adolescents, but it's true for adults as well. I mean, if you think about what it's like to be a kid, you draw a picture of an elephant that doesn't look like an elephant and you give it to your mom or your dad or someone who supports you and cares for you, your teacher maybe, and they say, that is a fantastic elephant. You get this burst of positive feedback and you get it for very little when you're a kid because we know kids are just developing and maturing, and we wanna encourage them. But there's a point, and it happens at different points in different cultures, but there's a point where if I, as an adult, draw a terrible picture of an elephant and show it to someone, I'm not gonna get that same burst of positive feedback.

ADAM ALTER: I've gotta do something truly remarkable to get that same reward that a kid gets very easily. Now, that doesn't mean adults don't need that. That positive regard shapes who we are and who we think of ourselves as in the same way that it does for kids. It's just as important to us, but it's more scarce. That was until the advent of social media, because

suddenly now adults could post pictures of their lunch. You have a burger and fries as you post a picture of that, suddenly people are telling you, that's a wonderful photo. You get 500 likes and you're affirmed in the way that a kid is affirmed for doing essentially not very much. Right? It's that elephant is, it's fine, but it's not the greatest elephant that was ever drawn. Doesn't matter. And that's kind of what social media has done for us. And so, we absolutely derive a kind of measure of our self-worth from the feedback we get online. And that's, I think, problematic.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Yeah. And it's also the negative that comes into play too. When you mentioned showing the picture of an elephant to your teacher, your parents, and now if you do it now and you show me this really sucky elephant picture, I'm gonna be like, "Adam, this isn't an elephant, this is a elecan't, like, this is trash." [laughter] And then when you go home, you maybe you're crying like, "You can't tell me, whatever." So, and we look, we actually look for that. And you talk about that in the book, that we are more likely to remember these bad events. We're more likely to be drawn to the negative comments. Why is that?

ADAM ALTER: Yeah. It's sort of an evolutionary property in humans that the thing that matters the most for your survival as a species is being able to detect threats and concerns and alarm bells. So, if something's good, if it's sailing along nicely, humans don't pay that much attention to it. They don't tend to remember it that well. Positive emotions, obviously, we seek them out, but they don't have a really super deep, profound effect on us. In contrast, negative emotions that signal some sort of threat or signal that something's not okay in the world. It could be sadness, it could be anger, it could be whatever, it could be loneliness. There are lots of different kinds of it, boredom as well. All of those signal that there's a problem in the environment around us, something's not quite right. And so we've evolved to be preferentially sensitive to those negative emotions.

ADAM ALTER: And so when it comes to social media, if someone gives you negative feedback, if you're bullied as a teen online, or even if someone just ignores your post and you feel like they should have given you a response, it has a colossal effect on you. Way more, you could get 500 likes. But then there's that one person who says something negative and it's like releasing a book. You release a book, you'll know this, you look at those reviews like a hawk and you remember the positive ones. But if you ever get negative reviews, those things stay with you. And it's the same on social media. We are preferentially sensitive to it.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Holy moly. Is there anything we could do about that though, Adam? Like I know a lot of people experience that more so than ever. And the difference as well is part of the, and we'll talk about this more, I'm sure, but it's part of the separation of humanity in a sense. Like I was just with Laila Ali and she's undefeated champion. Her father, greatest of all times. And she would tell me that some people would say little crazy things out of the way

to her online. And the reality is she knows when I said, I was like, they would never say it to your face. And she looked at me like, of course not [laughter] but there's no sense of empathy the things that we would be willing to say to another person who oftentimes we don't know, we can't even see their response. There's an entire level of disconnection in what's even appropriate. And then people unfortunately get caught up into those comments from people who don't know them and/or they don't even have an emotional association to the thing that they're saying.

ADAM ALTER: Yeah. Well, a big problem is anonymity and being able to conduct yourself at a distance from other people. So, the perfect example of this is YouTube comments that most people hide behind usernames that mean they're anonymous. And there's a good reason for that as well. But the negative side of that is that it liberates us to be our worst selves. We're separated from the people we're commenting about in space, like they're not actually in the room with us. And also we're separated by the veil of anonymity, which basically means that we are liberated to be the worst version of ourselves online, which is a problem. You asked whether there's anything we can do about this. The first thing you can do, I think, is to surround yourself both online and offline with people who support you and who genuinely care about your wellbeing.

ADAM ALTER: And that's easier said than done, especially for younger people. For teens thrust into the high school environment, for example. Or, you know, you can't always pick all the people you are around. You can't choose them. But where you can, where you can intervene on your environment, where you can release yourself from friendships or relationships that are really unhelpful, that are unproductive, that are negative, that are critical. I think that's really, really important. And I think it's become more important in the last two decades than ever, because not only do we need support in the offline world as we always have, but we need that support to counteract the anonymity, the facelessness of what it means to be online. And also that focus on negativity as well, which I think is problematic too.

SHAWN STEVENSON: So, one of the things that of course I wanna talk to you about is this association between behavioral addiction, addiction and kind of identifying, is this just a flaw that some people carry or is it something deeper? As soon as you bring up the word addiction, we have this negative connotation. We think about illegal drugs, things of that nature, alcoholism, gambling. But there's this concept also of behavioral addiction. So number one, can you talk about that? And also can you talk about whether or not addiction, because I think a lot of us, when we know somebody who is an addict or we hear about an addict, or we see a story or movie, we think it's a character defect. But your data actually revealed that essentially all humans are susceptible to addiction. And you talked about an incredible story

from Vietnam and the heroin use that took place. So, that's a lot there. So, can you please dive into that for us.

ADAM ALTER: Yeah, absolutely. The first question, what is addiction and what is behavioral addiction was such an important one for me in writing this book. You're right that traditionally we've thought of addiction as being about substance ingestion. So, whether it's a drug or nicotine or alcohol, you ingest a substance into your body and that has an effect on your physiology. And then you have this response that means that you chase more and more of that product and you get this addictive response, this kind of chain of addiction. That's a traditional addiction. Behavioral addiction is a newer phenomenon. And certainly it's true of things like gambling, which have been around for a long time. But apart from gambling, it's really the last 20 years or so where we've become behavioral addicts in all sorts of new contexts. This is kind of mushroomed. And so the majority of us now have at least one, what people call behavioral addiction, where behavioral addiction is basically defined as something that you do over and over again, compulsively, despite the fact that you recognize it's probably not good for you. In some respect, it's harming your wellbeing.

ADAM ALTER: And so it's incredibly common. And so, then that leads to the second question, which is, is this about certain personality types? Like are some of us just susceptible to this? Or is this just a property of what it means to be human? And it turns out it's about being human in the wrong place at the wrong time. And so, this story of Vietnam it's totally fascinating. A whole lot of the soldiers that went to Vietnam, the GIs that went to Vietnam, they had a lot of downtime when they were there. There was obviously battle, but they were also spending a huge amount of time being bored and not having much to do. And a lot of them, because of the area of the world they were in, they happened to be in a very heroin-laden area of the world.

ADAM ALTER: There were a lot of chemists around at that time that were producing increasingly higher grades of heroin. And so the production of heroin was improving, it became cheaper. And so, a lot of the GIs took heroin, and the US government got very concerned about this. They were convinced there was gonna be this epidemic where a hundred thousand GIs would come back to the country and suddenly you'd have a hundred thousand heroin addicts who needed to be weaned off the drug. And they were worried about the public health implications. They were terrified that this would actually cost many, many, many millions of dollars, and that it would flood hospitals and so on. And so, this was a public health concern. So, at the end of the war, these GIs did come back. Normally, the rate of relapse when you are a heroin addict is about 90%.

ADAM ALTER: Of these GIs, only 5% used heroin again when they got back into the country. And the doctors were totally puzzled by this, and so was the government. They were like,

"Was there something wrong with the research? Like, we don't understand what's going on. We must be missing something." And the answer was that, you took them out of that context, moved them into a completely new context. Now, if you're a drug addict and you go back into that context where you took the drug, it inspires you to take it again, it kind of primes you for it. It makes you want the drug, your body starts remembering all those cues. But if you go from the lush jungles of Vietnam and you settle back into your hometown in the United States with your family, completely different context, most of them went back to jobs. They had full lives and some degree of social support.

ADAM ALTER: Most of their psychological needs were met here. And so they didn't need the drug, and they didn't feel like they needed to go back to it. And one thing we learned from that incredible study, that low rate of relapse is context matters an incredible amount. That it's not so much about these addictive personalities, it's about putting people in the right place or the wrong place at the right or wrong time. We happen in the year 2020 to be living in an era where we're in the wrong place at the wrong time. If we're trying to avoid screens and these hooks that we've been talking about, it's really difficult for us to do in a way that it wasn't for these Vietnam GIs who were coming back into the United States.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Yeah. Oh man, that's powerful. And you reiterated that with different animal studies that they were doing as well. And the number of GIs, this wasn't like a small percentage, we're talking like, I think it was 35% to 40% of the GIs there admittedly used heroin, but those are just the guys who admitted it.

ADAM ALTER: Right.

SHAWN STEVENSON: And so, they were really expecting this huge wave of a problem to take place that didn't take place. And we'll come back to some more tips in a moment. So, I just want to reiterate that. But with our kids and us too, I wanna talk about how our smartphones might be making us dumber, actually like we're... I think you called it digital amnesia.

ADAM ALTER: Yeah. There are a number of these really interesting effects that we've observed over time. I think one of the really interesting things that's happened is our threshold for boredom, for being bored and tolerating it has gone down pretty dramatically. So, if you watch someone get into an elevator today, within one second, the phone will come out. That's almost a universal response, right? You get into the elevator, all the phones come out. And on the one hand, it's nice to have a device that means you won't be bored. But on the other, it's really important for us as humans to be able to tolerate boredom, because that's when lateral thinking, creativity inspiration, innovation, all of that comes from these moments of roadblocks where you have, you're kind of butting up against a moment where you're like, "Oh, I don't know what to think about now."

ADAM ALTER: And your mind wanders a little bit and interesting things can happen. So, you need that. This digital amnesia idea. I remember being a kid, and I knew probably a hundred phone numbers. I just memorized them like every other kid. As a kid of the 80s, we all ran around like phone books. It was amazing. And it was an incredible facility that we could all do that. And it wasn't that hard, right? It was kind of automatic. You just knew certain phone numbers and no one can do that today. I don't know anyone who knows phone numbers today. And I think that's not a huge deal in and of itself, but it's like a muscle, right? If you don't use that part of your brain that stores phone numbers in long-term memory, there are gonna be other related skills that just aren't as developed. They're gonna atrophy to some extent.

ADAM ALTER: And so this huge reliance on outsourcing to Google and to devices, I think is good because it leaves us free to do other things with our minds. And that's beneficial. But at the same time, like if you only ever did math with a calculator, you won't understand the process behind the math, and you'll probably become less adept at very basic sums. So, it's good to kind of engage your brain in that way sometimes. And we are not doing that anymore in the same way, because no matter where you go, you have access to the most incredibly sophisticated tools that used to take... The things that are on your phone used to take up warehouses of space. If you wanted a calculator or a computer that's sophisticated, you'd have to book time at a university to get access.

ADAM ALTER: And now we all have them, and they're right next to us constantly. So, the last thing you wanna do is rely on willpower. So, all these solutions are designed to get around that so that you don't have to rely on self-control, because that's never gonna work in the long run. So, you mentioned behavioral architecture, this idea that you're essentially crafting an environment where you are minimizing your exposure to your phone. So, one of the really important insights people had was that if you ask adults in the United States and again, this is true across the world, how much of the waking day or how much of the day, 24 hours a day can you reach your phone without moving your feet? So, it's effectively a part of your body. It's like an implant. 75% of adults tell us that they can access their phones without moving their feet 24 hours a day.

ADAM ALTER: So, that means the phone is in their pockets, they're sleeping with it on the nightstand, no matter where they are, no matter, it's on the desk next to them. It's always available. And that's incredibly problematic because it basically means that... We know the rule is that the things that are closest to you in space and time are the things that are gonna have the biggest effect on your wellbeing and on your experience of the world. And so, if you allow your phone to occupy that much space and time, it's gonna encroach. And that's what it does. So, what we have to do is circumvent that. There are a number of ways to do that. The

first strategy when I work with people on this, is to tell them to pick something that's constant every day. For most people, that's dinner.

ADAM ALTER: Everyone has dinner at some point in the day. Start there, during dinner time, find a different room. Or if you're out to dinner again, non pandemic times, it's easier to do that. Make sure that the phone is as far away as humanly possible from you. So, lock it in a drawer in a different room when you're having dinner, make it nowhere near your dining room. Some people have a little box. I know a lot of families have a little box. They'll put their phones in their box. There's a great company called Intentionally Unplugged. They sell these boxes that are like really cute, beautifully made, kids love them, they throw their phones in them. So, you can do that. And what you find is it's hard at first. And it should. That's again, the kind of addiction idea that you get withdrawal, you wonder what you're missing out on.

ADAM ALTER: You have massive doses of FOMO and you're like, I feel uncomfortable not having my phone. But if you're alone, you get to think freely. If you're eating dinner with family, you actually get to engage with the other people. Your kids might push back initially, but eventually it becomes this time of day that's cherished, that is like, it's precious. It's a time of day where you connect with people in a way that you can't otherwise. And what I've noticed, which suggests this works, is that once people do this for a little while, it expands. So, they start doing it with the bedroom. They say, I'm not gonna have the phone in my room for 90 minutes before bed. And for the first hour when I've woken up, I don't wanna have the phone anywhere near me. So, that's one thing they do.

ADAM ALTER: Another thing they might do is on weekends, they might put their phone on airplane mode. So, they have access to the camera, they can use the phone as a camera, and in an emergency they can use the phone if they need it, but it's not gonna continually intrude on their, whatever they're doing with themselves, their families, their friends. And so, more and more of the week becomes reclaimed from screens. And it's just, it's the best way to do this is just to build these habits in where anytime of day you should basically be asking yourself any time of day, "Right now, do I need to be able to reach my phone?" If the answer is not, absolutely yes, put it far away. If it keeps pinging you and there are notifications, turn all of the notifications off. If every time you turn the phone on, you see all your app icons for social media platforms and your email and so on, bury them in the fifth page on your phone so that when you turn it on, all you see are the utilities, there's Google Maps, there's my clock.

ADAM ALTER: The basic things that you need every time you turn on your phone. Make sure you make it as hard as possible for yourself to use your phone for as many hours of the day as possible. And you'll find that you enjoy that, it's good for you. You feel better as a human being, happier, healthier, because you've distanced yourself from that device. And you haven't had to rely on willpower because it becomes a habit. It becomes a matter of architecture.

[music]

SHAWN STEVENSON: All right. I hope that you enjoy that first segment. We got so much more goodness to come. Now, keep in mind, another way for us to move from the online world to the offline world and have more real world connection is to simply sit down and have a cup of coffee or cup of tea with somebody that we care about. And just to be able to engage, to see another person in the real world is so valuable and enriching for our minds and our wellbeing. Now, we know that our relationships have a huge impact on our longevity, but also that cup of coffee itself can have a huge impact on our longevity. A meta-analysis of 40 studies published in the European Journal of Epidemiology, revealed that regularly drinking coffee was associated with a lower risk of death from cardiovascular disease, certain types of cancer, and all cause mortality, basically reducing the risk of death from everything.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Although, this is a notable association, just to be clear, not causation, but association. The researchers adjusted for a variety of confounding factors like age, obesity, alcohol consumption, smoking status, and so much more. And still found that drinking coffee stood out as a strong element of longevity. Now, one of the potential elements in coffee's connection with longevity was uncovered by scientists at Stanford University, who recently deduced that the caffeine in coffee is able to defend the body against age-related inflammation. The research revealed that light to moderate coffee drinkers live longer and more healthfully thanks, in part to the protection that caffeine from coffee provides by suppressing genes related to inflammation. Now, just to be clear, there's so much science regarding the benefits of coffee, but there are also some potential downsides, and a lot of that, the vast majority of the negative findings have to do with the things that are put into the coffee, not the coffee itself.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Alright? The artificial creamers and artificial flavors and all this nonsense, the pesticides, the herbicides, the rodenticides, all of these chemicals. Coffee is one of the most pesticide laden crops in the world. This is why it's important if you wanna get these benefits and just have the coffee vibe, make sure that it is organic and ideally coffee that is infused with the benefits of the most renowned science backed medicinal mushrooms like Lion's Mane, like Chaga. Lion's Mane has been affirmed by researchers at the University of Malaya to stimulate neurogenesis. Has been found to be neuroprotective and actually to support the stimulation of the creation of new brain cells. That's incredibly remarkable, to say the least. And also, several studies have found that Lion's Mane has a big impact on reducing the signs and symptoms of anxiety as well. And so, where are you gonna find something like this with dual extracted medicinal mushrooms and organic coffee?

SHAWN STEVENSON: This is what you're getting from Four Sigmatic. Go to foursigmatic.com/model, and you're going to get 10% off all of their incredible coffee blends. They also have tea elixirs if you're not into coffee. And they also have an incredible hot cocoa as well that has the renowned medicinal mushroom Reishi in there as well. So this is what I drink exclusively. I've been drinking Four Sigmatic for years. Highly recommend checking them out. Go to foursigmatic.com/model. That's F-O-U-R-S-I-G-M-A-T-I-C.com/model for 10% off storewide. And now let's get to our second expert in this powerful compilation to help us to better associate with our technology. And our next expert is the incredible New York Times bestselling author Cal Newport. Cal is an MIT trained computer science professor at Georgetown University, and he also writes about the intersection of technology work and the quest to find depth in an increasingly distracted world.

SHAWN STEVENSON: As mentioned before, arriving at Georgetown, Cal earned his PhD from MIT and he's published over 65 peer reviewed articles and authored multiple bestselling books. And in this segment, Cal is gonna be sharing why extracting the time and energy out of human lives has made tech companies more valuable than nearly every other industry. Why frequently checking our phones throughout the day is like a reverse nootropic that actually makes us dumber. Also, he's gonna be talking about why our use of social media and other technology is robbing our creativity and reducing our ability to be productive and to create the value that we want in our lives. Plus what we can do to actually take back control of our minds and to better associate with our innovations and technology. Check out this segment from the incredible Cal Newport.

[music]

CAL NEWPORT: This is one of the primary reasons why I think deep work should be a tier one skill for anyone in the knowledge economy. It's because the better you are at concentrating intensely, the easier it is for you to learn complicated things fast. So, if you are very comfortable with intense concentration, when it comes time to learn a new system, a new idea, new types of mathematics or information system, or a new business strategy, whatever it is, the type of thing that changes incredibly rapidly right now in our current economy, if you're adept at deep work, no problem. Intense concentration equals very fast learning of complicated information. And of course, the flip side is what we should be worried about. If you're completely uncomfortable with intense concentration, if you're of that unfortunate generation that has never known anything but life with ubiquitous access to the internet on a phone in your pocket, and so your brain has never actually established any comfort with long unbroken concentration, it becomes incredibly difficult for you to pick up complicated things quickly. And this is a huge disadvantage in the knowledge economy. I mean, this is really gonna put you behind and make it much harder for you to get ahead, for you to actually

move ahead in your career. So, the ability to learn quickly is one of the key superpowers that deep work provides you.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Wow, man, this is really troubling. I mean, like when you said it, it kind of hit me like, our kids are literally growing up with this technology and just instant access to distraction 24/7. Like my son who's in high school, I'm still just kind of fascinated that they can use their phones in class. Like I remember I was one of the first kids to have, and this is really messed up, but I had a beeper, right? And my beeper got taken, you know, just for having it at school. And now it's just like, oh yeah, you've got class time, you can, you know, jump around on. I'm like, why is my son sending me memes at school? You know? But it's just the nature of the situation.

CAL NEWPORT: It's a problem. I mean, we're accommodating this, and I really don't think we should. We're so quick to adjust and say, well, look, kids these days need to be on these phones looking at these information, connecting with each other. That's just sort of what it means to live in the high tech world. But we forget that most of these tools, the tools that are capturing their attention, that are hurting their ability to concentrate, to function in our economy, these are products of the digital attention economy, right? I mean, these are tools that are invented primarily just to extract time and attention from people that can be repackaged and sold to advertisers. It's taking the value that you could be producing as an individual by learning something new or building something new, or connecting with your family or friends or being a part of your community.

CAL NEWPORT: It's taking this value that you're capable of producing as a human being. And instead it's extracting it away and locking it up in the stock price of a small number of these large companies. It's basically, it's allowing Mark Zuckerberg to have a massive house, or three or four massive houses instead of you being able to learn something hard so you can feed your family better. In other words, what I'm trying to argue is the thing that's, especially with young people that's capturing their time and attention is not some fundamental technology that's at the core of what it means to function in the modern age. It's basically just a tool for advertisement delivery. And so, it's not just that we're giving up this tier one skill of deep work, but we're doing it so that a small number of advertising selling firms can do better.

CAL NEWPORT: And I don't mean to go on a sort of conspiratorial rant here, but you have to understand right now Facebook is valued by market cap \$150 billion more than ExxonMobil. They're finding it to be remarkably more lucrative to extract time and attention out of our heads than ExxonMobil is finding to extract oil out of the ground, oil that we actually need to fuel all of our cars and our machineries. They're making more money. It's more valuable extracting time and attention out of our head. These are BMF companies. The attention economy has never had companies as large as companies like Facebook is right now. We've

never had companies that were so large and so powerful built just on trying to distract us and just take our time and attention. And so, deep work, in some sense is a rallying call to say, I am more interested in using my capacity as a human being with a brain capable of doing magnificent things.

CAL NEWPORT: I'm more interested in using this capacity towards learning hard things and producing things of value for connecting with my family, for being a part of my community. I'm less interested in giving 340 minutes a week... The average amount of time the average American uses Facebook products to these large, massive advertising conglomerates. Focus is deeply, human focus is deeply productive. The ability to do this is something that we should be demanding to be in our life. Something that we should be cherishing and seeking. So, I'm ranting, I'm a nerd. I'm a focus nerd. I'm a nerd about focusing. But as you can see, it's something I get energized about because I think this is a huge issue on a lot of fronts in our current age.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Wow. I'm just imagining Mark Zuckerberg trolling you, like, "Oh, I'm a different kind of nerd." You know, but the reality is, as you said, you know, when we're truly focused, when we truly give something our attention, that's where beauty really takes place. That's where the great depth of our human potential can come out. You know? Just like all of this surface level stuff that we're engaged in, that we're doing, we're not really tapping into our potential. And this even goes to, like you talked about learning. You know there's a lot of folks who listen to this show who are in the health and fitness field, or very passionate about it. This is how you actually can engage and create more neural connections in your brain and become very good at things, be it, a physical skill or some knowledge based thing.

SHAWN STEVENSON: There's a couple of ways that we learn, you know, one is through kind of rote memorization and continued exposure. And then another way is just really through something that's really emotional, right? An emotional impact. That's why I do these shows is because I think it hits a real visceral spot for people to get that emotional engagement, but you learn it better, you know, when you're able to truly, deeply engage with the information. And so, now let's talk a little bit about that, about just kind of what's going on in our brain. So, what is all of this distraction actually doing to our brain? I definitely wanna talk about the concept of attention residue.

CAL NEWPORT: Yeah. Well, attention residue I think is something we should all be very worried about. I mean, basically in the late 1990s, people were really into multitasking in the old fashioned way, where they would actually have three windows open at the same time on their computer while they were talking on the phone. And people said, "Hey, I could do multiple things at once." Okay, pretty quickly we figured out that doesn't work, right? I can't hear what's going on on the phone, or I'm missing what's going on on the computer. So,

people learned, I guess this would be somewhere in the early 2000s. Okay. I'm not gonna multitask, I'm gonna do one thing at a time, but what we started doing instead was almost single-tasking. So, we just have one window on the computer, we're just doing one thing, except we do these just checks every five or 10 minutes.

CAL NEWPORT: So, I think I'm trying to write a chapter, but every five or 10 minutes maybe I have to do a just check on my phone. And then a just check of my Twitter feed and a just check of Google News to see what's going on. And what we've learned is that there is a phenomenon called attention residue that's making those just checks almost as damaging as pure multitasking. 'Cause what happens is that the damage to your ability to concentrate, your damage of the ability to do high level cognitive work, it doesn't depend on how long you spend on a distraction. It's the context switch that kills you. So, if I switch my attention over to an email inbox, see a couple of emails that I can't answer now I know I need to get back to later and then switch back to my main task.

CAL NEWPORT: Even if I only glanced at that inbox for 30 seconds, that's gonna leave what's called attention residue in my mind, which can reduce my cognitive performance for 10, 15, 20 minutes going forward. The fact that I only looked at my inbox for 30 seconds doesn't matter. It's the fact that I switched my context to the inbox and brought it back. That leaves a residue. I mean, this is easy to test in the lab. It's very replicable, a quick switch of attention from your primary target, and then you come back to your primary target performance plummets. So, what's happening, I think, to most students and knowledge workers today is that they're doing these just checks enough that they are persistently in a state of attention residue. So essentially, we are working today in a state of self-induced, persistent reduced cognitive capacity. It's like a reverse nootropic.

CAL NEWPORT: Like if I walked in and said, here's a drug that's gonna make you 20% dumber, like it's just gonna slow you down, and I wanna make sure that you're taking this all day long, right? You would kick me right out of your office. Like, are you kidding me? Get out of here. But if I do that same thing, but I call it social media or I call it, you know, Gmail, we don't realize it's having the same effect. So, I think we're underselling our potential in the economy right now because of the attention residue effect. We don't even realize it.

SHAWN STEVENSON: This is blowing my mind right now because you just said reverse nootropic. And that right there is a perfect selling point. It's just like, why would we wanna take something or do something that makes us less efficient, that makes us dumber? Like it's a... You know, I think about the Limitless pill, and then we've got like the Lloyd Christmas pill over here, you know, and like so many of us are taking the Lloyd Christmas pill. And so you mentioned that this, you know, this attention residue, and I also have referred to it as a switching cost, right? There's a cost associated with you jumping back and forth. And I love

how you said these just checks and really everybody listening, how often do you do that? You know, you might be working on a particular task, something that you need to take care of, but you just check your phone real quick, you know, reach over and what you're doing every single time is you're laying down more myelin, right? To create this kind of neuro-association to every time I'm trying to get focused, I distract myself every five to 10 minutes. In your brain, it becomes incredibly hard to not do it right. And we talked about this several times on the show Cal, of this whole idea and really fascinating way that our brains become hard. Like we're creating physical structure in our brain when we do this to ourselves. So, it's just bananas, man.

CAL NEWPORT: Yeah. And it is permanent. That's the other scary thing about it. So, attention residue is scary because it means you didn't even realize that you're reducing your performance. The hard wiring is the other scary part that we have this increasing evidence that once your brain becomes used to getting these distractions all the time, it permanently reduces it. So, then if you say, okay, you know what, I'm gonna go to a cave, you know, somewhere where there's no internet and no electricity, and now I'm gonna work really hard on this hard thing, you're gonna fail if your brain has been hardwired to expect this. The Late Cliff Nass at Stanford had this great research on it where essentially he could compare, you know, he put people who were sort of chronic distracted multitaskers in a lab. And next to them he put people who really didn't do a lot of that in the lab.

CAL NEWPORT: And they were both cut off from any source of distraction. They said, just work on these hard problems. And the chronic multitaskers really had a hard time, even when their sources of distractions were removed from them because the brain had rewired and you can get it back. And a lot of what I talk about in some of the chapters of my book is essentially what's the cognitive equivalent of sort of getting into shape physically? You can do it, it's a pain, but you have to think about it with that same sort of rigor. It's just like, if I was gonna go run a marathon, I'm gonna expect that's gonna take a lot of long mornings running around the track. It's the same thing that if you've been a chronic distracted person, if you wanna regain a deep work skill, you can do it. But it's not something that you can change tomorrow with a few productivity hacks. It's actually gonna take some pretty serious training.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Yeah, yeah. It's gonna be uncomfortable. Well, you know, I tell people there's this basic especially when you take on a new habit. There's initially the first phase is like this new phase, it's exciting. I'm gonna get started. I'm gonna do this new thing. But then you hit the discomfort phase relatively soon where it's just like, I don't like this. And your brain is even fighting you because it's so used to doing the same thing. And eventually, if you can kind of push through that and some tools to do that, you know, just immersion, getting yourself in the right environment, the right kind of information, the right messages creating some situations that eliminate some of these things like distractions or the negative foods or

whatever. You eventually get to the state of comfort, right? But you still have to consciously think about it.

SHAWN STEVENSON: It's like a conscious competence. And eventually you push through that and it becomes a necessity, right? I have to work this way. Like the phenomenon, people feel like I have to work out. You don't hear people say that very often, but when it happens, it happens. And that person knows what they mean. So, that's where eventually we can all get to. And I wanna share this study in your book real quick. So, this was a professor at the University of California Irvine who observed knowledge workers in real offices and found that interruption, even if short, delays the total time required to complete a task by a significant amount, all right? We're mistaking this busy work for actually being effective, right?

CAL NEWPORT: Yeah. We're mistaking that for being effective. And I think we're building our work cultures right now, primarily around convenience, right? I mean, it's really convenient for everyone involved if everyone can reach everyone else at any point. 'Cause that means you don't have to do much pre-planning of your day. You don't need complicated systems to help decide like, how does this type of work get done? You don't have to think ahead, you don't have to have pretty complex productivity type processes in place. If we can all just talk to everyone at any time, it makes your life easier in the moment as a worker. The point is though, in a business, the goal is not to make life as easy as possible for the worker, it's actually to produce as much value as possible. And those things are usually directly at odds with each other.

CAL NEWPORT: So, that's what's so crazy, I think right now about the way we run knowledge workplaces. I mean, imagine if I was running a factory and I spent all this money on these robots for building the cars, but I kept, you know, stopping them and turning them off every 20 minutes because whatever I needed to take a phone call and they were allowed. And it took a while for them to come back online and we're producing cars at half the rate we could be doing. The factory owners would be like, "Are you crazy?" Like, this is terrible, and if I say, but no, it's convenient, it's just convenient for me just to kind of turn these, they would say, it's crazy. I don't care if it's convenient. Run the factory in an efficient way. We have to have that same type of thinking for the knowledge workplace. I get it that it's easy that everyone can email everyone at every point. And I get it that it's not obvious how you actually have to run an office if you can't do that. But it wasn't obvious to figure out the assembly line either. But you know what? Henry Ford produced 10X times more cars than all of his competitors once he figured it out. So, I think we need more sort of Henry Ford type thinking when it comes to thinking about how do we actually approach work in the knowledge age.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Wow. Have we actually, everybody listening, have you actually thought about how 24/7 people have access to you and you have access to everybody? It's kind of

freaky. I was just listening to Chris Rock's new special, and he was talking about how when he was a kid, like his father left the house at 6:00 AM and his mother didn't hear from him until 8:00 PM at night, you know? And today it's just like constant, you know, this constant connection. And I'm not saying that this is the reason that my relationship is really beautiful, but my wife, like, we've already established that, you know, especially when I'm working and especially engaged in deep work my notifications are off. Like, she's just not gonna be able to get in touch with me, and that's okay. 'Cause a lot of times I'm actually just downstairs, you know? But the reality is like having that time away to actually focus on... And I feel so much better because I'm creating something that's truly valuable. I'm creating something great and I feel fulfilled in my work. And so that carries over into our relationship, I feel. And so just be mindful of that. So, what I'm encouraging everybody to do is just think about it. If you've got notifications for everything on your phone, Instagram notifications, Facebook, text, email notifications, I'm just gonna throw this out there. You're probably crazy right now, but that's okay.

SHAWN STEVENSON: I still love you. But you got to back off. Turn some of those notifications off and allow yourself some mental space to actually get clear and to actually do some deep work. Let's see. I wanna talk to you about this concept in the book of the principle of least resistance. All right. Can you share what that is?

CAL NEWPORT: Yeah. That's my idea that if you're in, let's say, a work environment, if you don't have metrics, hard data pushing back about what type of activities or behaviors produce more value than others, you can't just measure the number of cars that come off the assembly line per hour, people will default because of human nature to basically doing whatever is easiest in the moment. Right? So, this is sort of human nature is that if you can't push back and say, I know this is easier, but if you do it this hard way, we produce more cars, or we make this much more money, we're gonna default back to what's easiest in the moment. And my conjecture is, especially in knowledge work, we don't have those clear metrics. We don't have a car coming off the assembly line that we can measure how fast that's happening. So, in the absence of those metrics, our behaviors have defaulted back to what's easiest in the moment. So, the way that we work today with this sort of constant unstructured communication, this is just the principle of live through resistance in play. This is, okay, if my goal is to make sure that my life is as easy as possible in the moment, this is what you would do. And so that's what a lot of our current work cultures are built around.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Right. Exactly. So true. So true. And how often do we do that to ourselves as well? Especially if we're not, like, if we haven't created the habitual nature of like doing deep work, we'll just do the easy stuff. You'll just jump on, maybe do a couple of emails, maybe do this little thing that is only getting a small percentage of the benefit versus the thing that like the Brian Tracy Eat That Frog doing that big task that can move the greatest

amount of leverage in your life. Let's talk about this neurological argument for depth that you cover in the book. You stated that our brains construct our worldview based on what we pay attention to. I thought that was really fascinating. So, can you talk a little bit more about that?

CAL NEWPORT: Yeah. I was trying to understand this phenomenon that if you spend time with people who are serious deep workers, so they spend large amounts of their time concentrating intensely on a small number of very valuable things, they tend to be happier and more satisfied. And this was this interesting phenomenon that kept coming up again and again. In fact, it wasn't even in the original proposal for my book, I added a chapter on this phenomenon because I kept running into it while researching the book. I kept running into this fact that why do these people seem so much more satisfied? And why is it that when you hear about them, you feel this sense of, "I wish that was me". What is it that's so good about the deep lifestyle? Well, this is one of the reasons, one of several reasons why a deep life, a life focused on focusing tends to be more satisfying is that our sense of the world, we have a lot of evidence, has a lot to do with what we pay attention to.

CAL NEWPORT: If you're paying attention to a lot of stressful things, your understanding of the world is, well, the world is stressful. If you're paying attention to a lot of bad things, you think, well, the world is bad. This is the classic, if you watch the local news, you're convinced that your city is rife with fires, car crashes and crimes 'cause that's all you hear about on the local news. So, deep workers avoid a lot of that stress and bad news and anxiety because instead of jumping around through tons of stimuli all day, they focus on one thing that's important, that's valuable, and they do it well. And so their mind constructs an understanding of the world where there's valuable things in there, you're useful in the world, you're producing something valuable. So, it's literally, their brain sees the world differently than someone else who spends most of their time jumping around through different stimuli. And I would argue the human brain is much more well suited for that former approach to the world, and is not very well suited to what we do now, which is let's flood it with stimuli all day long. I mean, that causes a lot of problems at all different ages. And so, deep workers are happier people, and I think that's a big reason why.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Let's talk a little bit more in depth about why it's not so easy. Like if somebody's hearing this and they're like why I want to really commit to having more time spent in deep work in my life. Let's talk about a little bit more in depth and why it's not easy to replace distraction with focus. All right. Let's talk a little bit more about why that is.

CAL NEWPORT: Well, you have to deal, first of all, with both cultural and neurological obstacles. So, that alone makes the transition to a life focused on depth much more difficult. So first, you have all of these cultural pressures that what's important is connection. What's

important is speed. What's important is networks, being online, being connected, being visible, moving information around, being on networks, having other people see you, seeing other people being a human network router, moving messages back and forth, being a human news producer by following all these breaking news leads, knowing what's going on. There's a lot of pressures that say you have to do that. The fact that, for example, 2 billion people use Facebook, I think is sort of an absurd statistic. I mean, it's an interesting service. I could see some people might like, but the idea that that's universal, that essentially everyone uses it, that essentially I'm like the only 35-year-old who has never had a Facebook account in the country, that's crazy.

CAL NEWPORT: So, you have all these cultural pressures that say you got to be living the busy lifestyle. You got to be living the connected lifestyle. Now, that's actually getting a little bit better in recent years. I've noticed that because I'm out there a lot saying controversial things like don't be on social media or these types of things I used to just only get yelled at. And now I have a lot more people who are actually yelling on my side. It's interesting to see that change.

[chuckle]

CAL NEWPORT: Okay. So, there's cultural pressures, but those we can get past, but then you have all the neurological obstacles to get around, which is if your brain has been wired to expect novel stimuli at the slightest hint of boredom, you have to do a pretty serious act of rewiring to just get it ready to do deep concentration. And I think the fitness metaphor is absolutely right. When you want to think about trying to introduce deep work, you just have to think about deep work as being able to run a triathlon, right? I mean, it's something that you can do, but you have to expect it's gonna take some hard training, right? It's gonna take some training. You can't expect to be able to do it tomorrow. It's gonna be great when you can do it. You're gonna be in great shape, you're gonna feel great about it. It's gonna be a huge positive thing in your life. But it's also gonna take a lot of Sunday mornings in the local pool working your laps, right? So, you got to overcome the cultural pressures to say, no, no, you got to be connected. You have to be on social media, you have to be doing all these things. You got to get past that, and you got to get past the neurological obstacles, which is a brain that's not used to deep work. There's a lot of work to get it ready.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Yes, yes, man. Thank you for sharing that. What I wanna talk about now is choosing a philosophy. You say it's important for us to choose a philosophy, and there are four different deep work philosophies that you got to administer in your book. Can we talk about what those are?

CAL NEWPORT: Right. Because if you want deep work to be a regular part of your life, you have to recognize that it's very demanding. And therefore, if you don't have some sort of clear and fixed philosophy about how you schedule deep work in your life, it's just not gonna happen, right? I mean, it's the exact same thing with fitness. It's hard to work out. And so, if you don't have a really clear philosophy for this is when I go to the gym, or this is when I train, you're probably not just gonna do it naturally on a whim. So, the same thing holds for deep work. So, in the book, I started listing different scheduling philosophies that I've seen people successfully deploy with deep work. And the idea was to show, not that this was the exclusive list, but to show that there's many different options and that you can tailor a scheduling philosophy to fit your particular personality and circumstances.

CAL NEWPORT: So, for example, one that I observed a lot of people use was called the bimodal philosophy. Which is a philosophy where either I am only doing deep work and this is for an extended period of time, like two days, three days, or I'm completely available and connected. And you switch back and forth between these modes. You don't try to mix it together. So, I profiled a professor, for example, who does this, when he's working on a paper, he'll drop off the radar for three days. You can't reach him, completely monastic, can't reach him. In between, his door is open, right? Students are coming in, everyone can reach him. So, no one is that frustrated. It's not like he's gone for months at a time, but he disappears for a few days at a time. So, he can clear out all the attention residue.

CAL NEWPORT: For some people, you can't do that. So, another philosophy, for example, is the rhythmic philosophy, which says, okay, same days, same time every week. I don't even want to think about it. I just, it's Wednesday, Thursday, Friday mornings from 7:00 to 10:00, that's when I do my deep work. I don't wanna think about that. A lot of people I've seen that be successful, I've seen a lot of CEOs of small startups more recently start to adopt the variation of the rhythmic philosophy called the Monk Mode Morning, which is where they say, and they tell everyone in their organization starting at 11:00 or 12:00 or whatever it is, I'm reachable until that point, I'm never reachable. That's when I do my deep work and everyone just learns. So, they know, okay, we don't schedule things there. We make sure we get him to sign off on something the night before, if we need something early.

CAL NEWPORT: It's a very easy heuristic for everyone to learn, and it frees up for them a consistent large block of deep work. Another philosophy that's common, I call it the journalistic philosophy, which is where you take week by week. What's my reality this week? When am I gonna fit in the deep work? So, you adjust with the reality of your week. I call it journalistic because journalists are pretty good at switching to writing mode when they have to because news breaks and they have deadlines. So, it's much more of, I'm deep work for three hours, now I'm doing this, no deep work the next day, the next day it's five hours in a row. So, it's more of a sort of scattered shot. It's more of an advanced strategy. More

importantly is the fact that there are different philosophies. So, just because one doesn't work for you, don't have that bring you to a point where you say deep work in general doesn't work for me. You can adjust these scheduling philosophies to work with the reality of whatever it is you do.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Yeah, absolutely. And I wanna share that the rhythmic version, that that's something that I employed. This was when I wrote the first version of my book 'Sleep Smarter', and I was still working in a clinical practice. And so, but those mornings we'll just say from 8:30 to 12:00, something like that, every morning, Monday through Friday, I'd be working on my book, and then I'd see patients after that or doing interviews on shows or whatever the case might be. And so, by me, employing that strategy, this was something that enabled me to write my book very, very quickly. And having a deadline looming. And so, we don't have to stop everything we're doing to engage in deep work. We can build this into our life in a way that works for us. Cal, I would love to talk to you now about what are some tips for us to kind of help to create the conditions? So, we talked about the conditions for problems and distractions. What are some things we can do to create the conditions for us to easily, if possible, fall into deep work?

CAL NEWPORT: Right. So, the scheduling philosophy is step one. Step two, people who are adept deep workers tend to have rituals that surround their deep work sessions. I mean, as far as I can tell from a sort of psychological and neurological perspective, what's going on here, is if you have some sort of set ritual you do, it helps your brain shift into the deep work mindset without you having to expend a lot of mental energy or willpower to try to rinse your attention away from something else. So, Charles Darwin for example, it's sort of a favorite example of mine. When he was working on the origin of species at his estate in Kent, England, he had built a path, he call it the sand walk, because it was paved with sand that went past the most scenic parts of the grounds that he owned. And he built this ritual that, okay, when I start my deep thinking on origin of species every day, I first do a set number of laps on this path.

CAL NEWPORT: And that would get his mind into this set of like, okay, now it's thinking time. By lap one, the concerns of the day would start to wear away. By lap two, he could start booting up in his brain, okay, what are the actual issues I need to think about today? Maybe by lap three, he's starting to actually make some progress. Then he could go from those laps into a study and be prepared to do some real deep work. And that was much more effective than if he just said at some point, okay, deep work time and just swiveled his chair towards the desk and tried the work. Modern deep workers do the same thing. Sometimes it's location, a certain location they go to just for deep work. Sometimes like Darwin it is a particular movement pattern. You walk a particular path, you do certain blocks around your neighborhood or on your corporate campus.

CAL NEWPORT: For other people, it's taking the space in which you normally work in transforming it. So, if you have an office, for example, it might be clearing everything off your desk, dimming the light, so you just have the bright desk lamp on your lamp itself. Shutting the door, maybe putting a do not disturb sign on it. That transformation itself can be ritualistic and help your brain understand. The other part of these rituals that I see often with successful deep workers is they have very clear rules for how the deep work session unfolds. So, they don't have to think about it, they don't have to have these battles with themselves during it. Often it's very simple things like no internet, no phone, maybe the phone gets turned off. Here's the type of breaks you can take. Like they set these rules so there's no negotiating. And all of this is about preserving mental energy so that you can really focus it on the work itself and not on trying to actually negotiate with other parts of your brain about like, "Well, can't we just glance at this and do we really have to do this now"

SHAWN STEVENSON: You just said something important. Let's talk about our mental energy and how that, that it's not something that's infinite. All right? So let's talk a little bit about that, that we've got a certain amount for us to use.

CAL NEWPORT: Yeah. Well, mental energy is... It's incredibly important because feats of cognition use an incredible amount of energy. And we underestimate how much just actual metabolic energy is required to do intense thinking. And we can think about it relevant or relative to other types of physical acts that are actually very demanding. It uses a lot of energy to do a lot of cognition, which means a couple things. I mean, one, you don't wanna waste energy, like we're just saying. You don't wanna waste energy trying to convince yourself to do deep work because that's energy you can't devote to it. Two, you have to understand that we're wired through evolution to not waste energy. And our brain is happy to expend energy if it sees a tiger running at us, right? Our brain knows, okay, let's expend energy, let's get out of there or we're gonna get eaten.

CAL NEWPORT: But our brain is not wired through evolution to recognize the long-term value of doing deep work, right? So, the deeper parts of our brain, the planning parts of our brain, maybe sees an upcoming deep work session as something like, "Ugh, why are we gonna waste all this energy?" You're gonna experience that as a feeling of procrastination or lack of motivation. And so recognizing that is why it requires a lot of ritualistic support and scheduling to actually convince yourself to get started with it. And the third implication of this is that other types of shallow activities are not neutral. They use energy, especially the social energy that's involved in having to track lots of back and forth social interactions with people that's incredibly draining tribal energy. We're tribal people.

CAL NEWPORT: So, if you're engaged in looking at lots of maybe like say political or cultural news where you're sort of on one tribe and someone else on another tribe, our brain is really attuned to that, and it's gonna burn a lot of energy. It's gonna think about the emotions you feel. Every time you check the news these days, that's burning fuel that could be going towards producing new things of value. And so that's the third implication is that, it's not harmless to spend the time surrounding your deep work, doing lots of these other sort of shallow, unnecessarily busy things. All of that is emptying out the gas tank of the fuel you need to actually produce new things that are valuable using your brain.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Ooh. Everybody, you've got to be more judicious in how you use your mental energy. Again, it's a finite resource each day. And that's okay. And I don't know if anybody has ever experienced this, but after a kind of an arduous day of work and thinking, you just don't want to even make a decision. Just like your spouse might be asking, so what do you want for dinner? I don't care. I really don't care. But if you were to ask that earlier in the day it's just like, I definitely want to have whatever, stroganoff, whatever. I don't know why I said stroganoff. It's so random and so...

[laughter]

SHAWN STEVENSON: Listen, I wanna talk to you about why you advise people to embrace boredom. It's like, I've never heard such things before. Why do you say that?

CAL NEWPORT: Well, the simple reason is if every time you feel bored, you dispel it by giving yourself some novel stimuli from your phone or computer screen... If every time you're bored, you do that, your brain starts to develop a Pavlovian connection. Boredom means stimuli. Boredom means stimuli. If you have that Pavlovian connection built up, when it comes time to do serious cognitive work, to do real deep work, that type of work is by definition boring. 'Cause there's not a lot of novel stimuli. You're focused on one thing. If your brain has been taught, I always get stimuli when I'm bored. It's not gonna tolerate deep work when the time comes. And so, what I advise people, it's not that you have to spend your entire life bored or that there's something good intrinsically in being bored. What I say is, you have to have regular practice with being bored and just being okay being bored.

CAL NEWPORT: If you do that a few times each day, what you're doing is you're breaking your brain's understanding that boredom always means stimuli. So, that's why I advise people, you don't have to be bored all the time, but you better be bored a little bit every day, or your brain is not gonna be able to do deep work. And so, I say go do some errands without your phone. I mean, do some stuff. Stand in line at the bank and be in line at the bank, stand in line at the supermarket, just be in line and be a little bit bored. It's not gonna kill you. But what you're getting is this bigger advantage of teaching your brain, sometimes we get stimuli,

sometimes we don't. And it keeps it comfortable with both. And you have to have comfort with both if you're gonna succeed with deep work.

SHAWN STEVENSON: Perfect, perfect. So yet another, just like a tangible thing for us to do and to consider, say you're having dinner with your significant other and they go to the bathroom, tendency is to grab the phone, start browsing around, just sit, just sit. And it doesn't mean you have to actually sit and do nothing. You could people-watch, you could think about the meal, you can think about an idea that you've been pondering, whatever the case might be. Actually use your mental muscles instead of just constantly jumping to distraction. And again, this is, awareness trumps everything. So, just starting to think about the awareness of these things, I think is gonna help us all a lot. Well, this has been fantastic, and I've got so many nuggets of wisdom myself personally, I absolutely love your book and I encourage people to pick it up because I think it's a vital resource moving forward in our world today. And if you could, I would love it if you would share what is the model that you are setting with the way that you live your life personally, for other people. What is the example that you are setting for others in how you live your life?

CAL NEWPORT: The way I like to think about it is what I'm trying to do in my life is I focus on a small number of things very intensely. So in my case, it's writing and it's the computer science research I do. I focus on a small couple of things very intensely to the exclusion of lots of other things, lots of other things that have little nuggets of value. Things that because I don't do can cause inconveniences, can sometimes upset people, it can mean that I miss out on certain things. I mean, I'm ignoring a lot of things, so I can focus intensely on a small number of things. And it has been a very successful formula. It's been a very successful formula by focusing on a small number of things I do best. And trying to do them as well as possible, I find my life is more meaningful, my life is more satisfying. I think I've been more impactful.

CAL NEWPORT: I think I now have more autonomy over what I do and when I do it, because value is value in the market. The market doesn't value busyness. It values what you do best. And so that's what I'm trying to model. I know a lot of these things that drive our busyness have some value, have some attraction. And I know that if you step away from some of these things, you will lose some value and you will lose some attractive things. But it's okay. Net, net, you are gonna end up better off, more fulfilled as a human, more happy, more satisfied, more successful if you focus deeply on the things that really matter in your life and are just comfortable missing out on the other noise that surrounds it. That is the formula for thriving. It's worked for me and I want other people as much as possible to at least consider following my lead on that.

[music]

SHAWN STEVENSON: Thank you so much for tuning in to this episode. I hope that you got a lot of value out of this. This is so important because technology is not going anywhere anytime soon. Anything short of a walking dead scenario, technology is gonna be a big part of our lives. But we wanna make sure again, that we are utilizing these as resources and they're not using us. And for us to be aware of that sometimes, again, awareness is the first domino, but we need practicality. We need to put some things in place so that we can live our lives on our terms. We can use these devices, but also be able to express ourselves physically to be able to have a healthy state of mental wellbeing and emotional wellbeing, and understanding the sticky terrain of social media and things like that, and the negative impacts it can have on us, on our children and future generations.

SHAWN STEVENSON: But it takes for us to get educated and to put some things into practice and also pay attention to the results, to see how we feel when we put some things into place and we have more time offline. Does that actually make us feel better? Just paying attention to those things and giving ourselves permission to do things that feel good to us more often. We've got some epic masterclasses and world-class guests coming your way very, very soon. So, make sure to stay tuned. Take care, have an amazing day and I'll talk with you soon.

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SHAWN STEVENSON: And for more after the show, make sure to head over to the modelhealthshow.com. That's where you can find all of the show notes. You can find transcriptions, videos for each episode and if you've got a comment, you can leave me a comment there as well. And please make sure to head over to iTunes and leave us a rating to let everybody know that this show is awesome. And I appreciate that so much. And take care, I promise to keep giving you more powerful, empowering, great content to help you transform your life. Thanks for tuning in.