

Nir Eyal: People were saying how distracting the world is thousands of years ago. And let's be totally honest. If Facebook tomorrow shut down, let's say Mark Zuckerberg says, "You know what people? I'm sick of this. I'm going to take my money and I'm turning Facebook off." Do we really think people will all of a sudden become no longer distracted? Of course not. We'll go back to what we've always done. We'll gossip. We'll spread news. We'll waste time with soap operas or whatever else we want to give us the same functionality of all distraction, which is an emotional escape.

Robert Glazer: Welcome to Elevate, a podcast about achievement, personal growth, and pushing limits in leadership and life. I'm Robert Glazer, and I chat with world-class performers who have committed to elevating their own life, pushing the limits of their capacity, and helping others to do the same.

Robert Glazer: Welcome to the Elevate podcast. Our quote for today is from Tony La Russa, and it is, "There are always distractions if you allow them." Our guest today, Nir Eyal, is one of the world's leading thinkers on technology and its power to capture our attention and distract us from our lives. He's a founder, investor and author who's been featured in Harvard Business Review, TechCrunch and Psychology Today. He's also the author of two best-selling books, *Hooked: How to Build Habit Forming Products*, and *Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life*, which releases on September 10th, which is in a few days.

Robert Glazer: Nir, welcome, I'm excited to have you join us on the Elevate podcast.

Nir Eyal: Thanks. Great to be here, Robert.

Robert Glazer: So you've done a wide variety of things throughout your career. What were your early days of your professional journey like, and where did you get your start in business and psychology?

Nir Eyal: My first job out of college was at the Boston Consulting Group, and I can say this now, I'm not scared of retribution, but it was hell. It was...

Robert Glazer: I love my 2x2 matrixes though.

Nir Eyal: Yeah. Yes. Okay, so, that's interesting you say that. My love of 2x2 started at BCG, but working at BCG was awful. It was a very high-stress, a very difficult work environment. What's interesting it's kind of come full circle, and we can talk about this more as we get into more depth around distraction. Funny enough, a case study in my book *Indistractable*, in this section on why distraction at work is a symptom of cultural disfunction, the case study... I have two case studies in the book, and one of them is about BCG, and how BCG actually made this amazing cultural transformation to be a company that had very high employee turnover, very high rates of depression and distraction at work, and now they've actually reformed the company culture in some pretty

amazing ways. Now they're consistently listed as one of the best places in America to work, so it's all come full circle.

Robert Glazer: Well, when we talk about the book, I'd be curious to get into some of those changes, because they're typically ranked pretty high on the best places to work list.

Nir Eyal: Now they are. Right? They didn't used to be.

Robert Glazer: Yeah. Got it. So you're in their good graces now? Are you redeemed?

Nir Eyal: I haven't talked to anybody there in so long, but now they're an example actually that I hold up as a company that's really been able to change their ways. They used to have a very dysfunctional culture. I think they've gotten a lot better.

Robert Glazer: Well, fast forward, in the past few years you've really established yourself as one of the smartest people on how technology intersects with our lives. Why did you choose that focus, and how did you develop such an advanced understanding of it?

Nir Eyal: Well, if we really want to go way, way, way back, I mean, before... I helped start two tech companies. Before that I went to Business School at Stanford, I taught at Stanford for many years, and I taught at the Design School at Stanford, but even before that, when I really think of where did I start this fascination with consumer psychology, I think it really started in my childhood when I was clinically obese. This wasn't just overweight. I remember going to the doctor's office with my mom, and the doctor saying, "Okay, son. Here's normal weight. Here's overweight. And here's you. You're in this red zone." You know, fat camp, the whole nine yards.

Nir Eyal: I have some pretty traumatic memories of that time in my life. Now thankfully... I've always struggled with food and exercise in my life, but because of this journey over the past five years, primarily, trying to figure out how to become undistractable, it's changed my life in so many ways, and one of them is that I'm in the best physical shape of my life, but I think it really started from this curiosity around why could I not control what I was putting in my mouth, right? Why did these products, and in my case it was food, have so much power over me? I didn't like what this was doing to me, and yet I had so much trouble controlling these behaviors. And so that's where I think my fascination with products and habits and how products can change our habits, all began.

Robert Glazer: Your first book, *Hooked*, focused on how tech companies are actually making their products habit-forming. You have a great quote in there which was, "If you hold your breath waiting for companies to make their products less engaging, you're going to suffocate." So, can you give us some examples into this, and the difference between a tech product that's habit-forming and not? I know there's

been... I heard Cal Newport talk about this, and there was this whistle blower and how, when you pull the Refresh bar down in Twitter, that's really designed after the Vegas slot machine mentality.

Robert Glazer: I don't... It's interesting. There's been some whistle blowing in this space, but I don't think the noise has made its way down to the general public yet.

Nir Eyal: Mm, interesting, yeah. I guess, you know, I'm so-

Robert Glazer: You're so in it.

Nir Eyal: ... steeped in this. I'm so in it that... I think there's really been two camps of people. There's been a lot of tech critics, but there haven't been too many people, I think, from my point of view, that say, actually, "It's not the tech doing it to you." I don't particularly agree with Cal Newport. I read his book but reasonable people can disagree, and I don't particularly like the model that he proposes. He talks about the Amish and how great life is there, and that's nice, but, look buddy, we got to use social media for our livelihoods. Not all of us have the luxury of being a professor that doesn't need to have social media account. I need a social media account.

Nir Eyal: If it wasn't for social media no one would have ever discovered my work, and so I love tech. So, Indistractable is a pro-tech, pro-human approach, because, one, to say go off of tech, take a 30-day digital detox, and I don't mean to single out Cal. There's lots... Basically, every other book in this category tells you to do the exact same thing which is go on a digital detox, excise the technology from your life, get rid of the tech, the tech is melting your brain, and frankly I'll call bullshit because I tried it. I literally have them. Before the call you saw this video of me in my office, where, video feed here, and you saw all the books behind me, and I literally bought and read every book I could get my hands on on this topic. And they all basically tell you technology is the problem. The distraction is the problem.

Nir Eyal: And while I will absolutely acknowledge that these technologies are designed to get you hooked, I mean, that was the title of my first book, which was Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products, and I absolutely understand, as an industry insider, someone who's helped build these technologies, now the good kind, not the kind that addict people but the good kind, I will tell you that these tools are very, very powerful. But they're not that powerful. This is not mind control. This isn't even addiction. This is overuse. For the vast majority of people out there who find themselves getting distracted, they love to call it addiction.

Nir Eyal: The tech critics, like Cal, unfortunately, also calls it an addiction, and not only is that not true scientifically, it's actually harmful because what it does is perpetuate this idea of learned helplessness. That when we tell people, "There's nothing you can do. It's hijacking your brain. It's addictive." There's a pusher, right? A lot of people say you use the word addiction because addictions have a

pusher, a dealer, someone who's doing it to you. But when you call it what it really is... And of course some people do get addicted, of course some people get addicted to technology. People get addicted to all sorts of things, right? Many of us have a glass of wine with dinner, we're not all alcoholics. Lots of people who have sex are not sex addicts. There's lots of things that potentially addict some people who actually have a pathology without addicting everyone.

Nir Eyal: The trouble is that we're not being specific enough. We'd say, "Oh, this stuff is addicting everyone. It's addicting our kids. It's addicting our colleagues. We're all addicted." And it's not true, and it's hurtful and harmful. It's hurtful to people who actually struggle with addiction, who actually have the pathology, who need our help, and it's not helpful because it tells everybody out there, "Well, nothing you can do, so don't even try."

Robert Glazer: Let me ask you a question, there. But when teenagers post something and they're looking for the like and the dopamine, that they... I understand they're not craving it, like they're not shaking, but the inability to put that down, it may not be an addiction but there is something beyond the normal kind of habit where people are really struggling there. I mean, it has some of the principles of addiction, but I guess you're saying it's not the definition of addiction.

Nir Eyal: Right, because the definition of addiction is a persistent, compulsive dependency that harms the user. So, something that we want to stop doing but despite our best efforts have a very, very difficult time stopping. What I realized in my research over the past five years is that we love to complain about this and nobody's done anything to actually try and fix the problem themselves. So we shake our fists at social media and we wait for the politicians to do something, and meanwhile we sit on our hands, or even better, sit on our phones and keep scrolling and scrolling.

Nir Eyal: So, what I want to add to the conversation is, A) let's do something about this right now, and B) let's not just focus on the tech because, listen, you know, Robert, you can get just as addicted to the news. Right? You can get just addicted to your email account. You can get just as addicted to the work that you do every day.

Robert Glazer: Right.

Nir Eyal: Right? So, the real problem is not the tools of distraction, it's this deeper truth that we need to understand around why we get distracted. So, I did these digital detoxes myself. I didn't want to write a book if somebody already had the answer out there. So I tried what all these books told me to do. I got rid of all my technology, or at least the stuff that they say is hijacking your brain. I went and got a flip phone that only receives and sends calls and text messages. I got a word processor from the 1990s that I found on eBay and I stopped using my laptop. And I did this stuff thinking, "Okay, well, that will take care of the problem."

Robert Glazer: And their business tanked.

Nir Eyal: Well, not only was it really difficult to stay in business, but also, it didn't work because I would sit down at my desk and I would say, "Okay, now I'm going to write. I'm not going to be distracted. You see? I turned off all my technology, I got it all out of the room. There's no tech here, I'm just using my flip phone and my word processor." And... then I turn around and see, "Oh, there's that book on my shelf that I've been meaning to read," or, "My desk needs reorganizing," or, "You know what? I should probably take out the trash here for a second."

Nir Eyal: And so the reason it doesn't work is for the same exact reason, that when I was obese, that the fad diets I would go on didn't work.

Robert Glazer: It's treating the symptom and not the disease.

Nir Eyal: Exactly. That's exactly right. Like, okay, 30 days, no fast food. And then what do you think I did on day 31? Right? [inaudible 00:11:27] I eat everything. I'd come back with a vengeance.

Robert Glazer: There's so many things in life where I was... the medicine has looked at this, but I think there are analogies in business and communication problems or otherwise where people are focused on the symptom and I would say the simple example is, you can give three people an aspirin for their headache. One is dehydrated, one is allergic to gluten, and the other has this serious brain tumor, and they're all headaches but the reason they have headaches is very different.

Nir Eyal: Yeah. And this is the big theme and lesson of the book. The big takeaway of the book is that we love proximate causes, and proximate causes are easy scapegoats, whereas what we really need to do is look for the root causes. And so, whether it's distraction for the individual, distraction in the work place, distraction with kids, for each one of these examples, for each one of these use cases, the problem is not the technology. The technology is the tool, but unless we dive into the root cause of why we overuse, why we get distracted and understand the deeper psychology, we'll just keep spinning our wheels. We'll always be distracted by something.

Robert Glazer: So, is it that technology has just become the easiest and most disposable form of distraction?

Nir Eyal: Well, it certainly has become more pervasive and persuasive. If you don't know how to deal with distraction, they're going to get you, okay? Because they're in our pockets, and so of course if you are looking for distraction, it's easier than ever to find. But let's just keep historical perspective here. Aristotle and Socrates, 2,500 years, they talked about akrasia, this tendency that we have to do things against our better interest. People were saying how distracting the world is thousands of years ago, and let's be totally honest. If Facebook

tomorrow shut down, let's say Mark Zuckerberg says, "You know what people? I'm sick of this. I'm going to take my money and I'm turning Facebook off." Do we really think people will all of a sudden become no longer distracted? Of course not. We'll go back to what we've always done. We'll gossip. We'll spread news. We'll waste time with soap operas, or whatever else we want, to give us the same functionality of all distraction, which is an emotional escape.

Nir Eyal: And when it comes to all the productivity books that have been written, one of the things that I think the vast majority of them miss, is this mantra that I came up with that, time management is pain management. That unless we understand fundamentally why we do or do not do tasks that we ourselves say we want to do, we have to fundamentally understand the reason why we do everything is the avoidance of discomfort. This, for me, kind of took me for a loop because I'd been studying psychology for a while and I bought into what we call Freud's pleasure principle, that all motivation is spurred by the desire to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. Everybody knows this, right? It's carrots and sticks. Not true. It is not true.

Nir Eyal: Neurologically speaking, everything we do, everything we do, is not about the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. It is all about pain. It is all about the desire to escape discomfort. Even, the pursuit of pleasure.

Robert Glazer: Well, most people's chosen... I mean, I wrote a Friday Forward on this a few weeks ago called Purpose and Pain, and you even allude to that. I was going to say something before. Most people's chosen vocations in life come from a deep point of pain, often in their childhood.

Nir Eyal: Yeah. Absolutely. I could absolutely see that and that's why it's so important. Before we get into all of the tactics and hacks and stuff that people do to try and squeeze more productivity out of their day, we have to start with principle number one, which is to master our internal triggers, to understand what are these uncomfortable sensations that prompt us to action, and make sure that we can master those so that they lead us to helpful behaviors as opposed to hurtful behaviors.

Robert Glazer: One of the things that I've heard people talk about and I agree kind of with Cal in essence, some other points, is that we just, no one is comfortable in their own head. I mean, the time that we would have for downtime about waiting in line, or going for a walk... I mean, it's always now you can pull out your phone. Are people avoiding being with themselves there, whether they realize it or not?

Nir Eyal: Well, that's certainly part of it, and I think that's why we do need to peel back the onion a bit and stop blaming the tools, because, as I mentioned, even if we got rid of the tools, if we don't deal with what's driving us to distraction, we'll always find something. So that's a big part of it. Now the question is, what do we do about it? Some people fall into the category of what I call the blamers. The blamers say it's all tech's fault. "It's a distraction doing it to me," but I think we've made a pretty good argument why that's not true.

Nir Eyal: Then you've got the shamers. The shamers say, "You see, there's something broken with me. I must have some kind of disfunction. My brain is somehow not working properly." And look, a little asterisk here, some people really do struggle with a pathology, whether it's addiction or obsessive compulsive disorder. That is a portion of the population. It's single digit percentages. This is not a lot of people, but those people are a special group of people that need special resources. But for the vast majority of people out there, there's nothing wrong with them. But we love this script, this narrative of, "You see, I have a short attention span. I have an addictive personality. There must be something wrong with me."

Nir Eyal: And the fact is, the answer is neither the blamers' or the shamers' response. The answer is that this is about behavior, and behavior can change if we know what to do.

Robert Glazer: So, I'm not sure, do we actually answer the million dollar question here before when you were saying the why. Like, what is the... If it's not addiction, really, what is it at its core?

Nir Eyal: Overuse. When you call it what it really is, overuse. All of a sudden, "Wait a minute, there's no pusher? There's no dealer? There's nothing controlling the strings, the puppet strings of my mind? Oh, crap, now I need to take some personal responsibility here and do something about it." That's the uncomfortable truth here. Right? That's what we don't like to face, that, "Wait a minute, actually I need to go a little bit deeper as to what pain I'm trying to escape when I'm..."

Nir Eyal: Well, let me back up for a quick second. Here's why I really wrote this book. The seminal moment, what caused me to say, "I need to figure an answer to this problem," was an incident shortly after *Hooked* was published. I was sitting with my daughter. We have this afternoon together, and we had this afternoon open for daddy-daughter time. Do whatever we want. And we had this activity book that daddies and daughters could use together, could use to spark conversation, different activities, make a paper airplane, all kinds of fun stuff.

Nir Eyal: Well, one of the activities in the book was to ask each other this question, and this question was, "If you could have any superpower, what superpower would you want?" And I wish I could tell you what she said, but I can't, because in that moment something on my phone had captured my attention. She got the hint and she left the room to play outside. And the next thing I knew I looked up and she was gone. And so, that's when I realized, "Wow, this is not good. This... I'm not doing what I intended to do." And if I told you that it only happened one time I'd be lying. Not only that, it was happening in many aspects of my life. It was happening at work. I would sit down to write and I couldn't focus. I'd be with my friends and I'd find myself wanting to check my phone or get distracted with something.

Nir Eyal: And so what I realized is that this problem is much bigger than just one context or just one technology. That fundamentally the question I wanted to answer was, "Why don't I do what I say I'm going to do?" That's really the central question in the book, and what a superpower it would be if I simply did whatever it was I said I would do. If I say I'm going to work out, I work out. If I say I'm going to deliver a project, I'll deliver it. If I say I'm going to work on my book for an hour-and-a-half, that's what I do.

Nir Eyal: So this is really about living with personal integrity. And so the first step, there are four key steps, but the first step is about mastering these internal triggers. So if I was honest with myself, the reason I was checking my phone when I was with my daughter had nothing to do with my phone. I picked my phone because of what was going on inside me. I was in a very stressful time in my business, I was bored, frankly, I had enough toddler time for that day, and I was using this phone as an emotional pacifier. And again, it's not about the phone. Whether it's working too much or too much television, too much football on TV, whatever it might be, it's all about understanding what those internal triggers are, and then we have a choice. We can either do two things. We can either fix the source of the problem, or we can learn tactics to cope with that discomfort in a healthier manner. And I tell you how to do both of those.

Robert Glazer: Interesting. The one thing I'm struggling with is, like to have information and sort of the feedback loop in terms of... Let me tell you the problem and you can tell me where this falls in the framework. So, my kids just got back from summer camp, the older ones have phones at home. They're on them a lot. They tell me I'm the worst the father in the world because I use Apple Screen Time thing, and no one else does it, but we try to have some healthy limits and boundaries around that. But when they go to summer camp they don't have their phones. They would tell you that they're happier than the rest of the year. They have a great time. It's amazing, and then they come home... and they could probably even associate, "Yeah, it's so nice, I'm talking to people, I'm out there, I'm extra..." And they get back on the phone, and yesterday I look and someone asked for more time, and I was like, "Look how much time you already used on this."

Robert Glazer: So, what is going on? Because, they already identified and told you, "I'm actually happier when I don't do this," but then they're right back into the same routine.

Nir Eyal: Yeah. So, we could spend this entire episode just talking about kids. And, by the way, that's my second favorite section in the book, *Indistractable*, is about how to raise indistractable kids. It's a longer discussion which I would love to go into. I know that most of your listeners, I don't know if they're parents or not so I don't want to go too-

Robert Glazer: A lot of them are. Yeah.

Nir Eyal: If they are, I'd love to talk about it because it's fascinating.

Robert Glazer: Give us a preview.

Nir Eyal: Yeah. I think the question has to start... A lot of us as parents, and by the way, I'm a dad as well and I definitely see this problem. I know exactly what you're talking about very intimately. I mean, some of my daughter's first words were, "iPad time, iPad time." So I know what you're talking about. But we jump to the conclusion that you see, my kids are acting in a bizarre way, it's what they are turning to that's the problem. Because I think the more informed perspective is, what are they missing that drives them to use tech? If they didn't use tech at camp when they had the option to play, that's what now is missing in their life that they're turning to technology to replace.

Nir Eyal: At camp when they have the option to interact with other people, I saw this at Stanford when I taught there, that among the undergrads, with each other, they wouldn't use their phones because they know that's rude. Right? Like, you don't want to be that jerk that's on their phone constantly. They make fun of each other, sort of, "That kid who's always on his phone and can't have a conversation." They really do. But of course around your parents, that's a different story. When you don't have the option to be with your friends, well, where do you go? Your friends are there on your phone.

Nir Eyal: So, big picture. The problem is that parents don't realize that the reason kids overuse their devices, some kids... By the way, not one study, not one, has demonstrated any negative effects to well-being for moderate use. Two hours or less of screen time, extracurricular screen time, no deleterious effects whatsoever. In fact, too little screen time has shown negative effects on well-being as much as too much. We're talking five, six hours of screen time. That shows some negative effects. Very slight effects, but it's there.

Robert Glazer: Is that because the people who are below that were sort of denied it and then therefore they're socially out of things?

Nir Eyal: There's something going on. There's some kind of U-curve there, so that begin... But most of us, most parents, we should not be concerned as long as that content is age appropriate, two hours or less, nothing is going to happen. But the question is, what about kids who spend too much time? And what about these weird behaviors that when we try and take the phones away, they go nuts. What's going on there?

Nir Eyal: This is called the needs displacement hypothesis, and this comes from the work of Deci and Ryan, the founders of self-determination theory. This is one of the most established, well-studied theories of human motivation out there. It's 40-year old research that's very well known. If you read Daniel Pink's book Drive, his book is basically popularized that and made it more digestible for a mainstream audience, but the same three things. So, Deci and Ryan tell us that every human being on the face of the earth, children included, they're human beings too, require three things for psychological well-being. I call them psychological nutrients because I like the idea that, physical nutrients are

carbohydrates, protein and fat, the three macronutrients, and these are the three psychological nutrients, and they are, competency, autonomy and relatedness.

Nir Eyal: What Deci and Ryan tell us is, when people don't get those psychological needs met offline, they find replacement for them online. So, let's go really quick. I'll be as fast as I can because I think it's super important, because, by the way, adults do this as well. Competency. Think about how many times every year we test our children. What's correlated with the rise of technology, and personal technology, is also the rise of standardized testing in this country. Many kids... I saw this report that in Philadelphia, in the school district in Philadelphia, it's something like the average kindergartner is tested four times a year with a standardized test. In kindergarten!

Nir Eyal: That might not be exact... It's somewhere around three or four times a year, and that continues throughout their education. So what message do kids get around competency? Well, they get the message that they constantly failed. They're not good enough. They're not competent. And we all need that sense of competency for our psychological well-being. So, if you're not getting it in the real world, well, the tech companies are more than happy to make ROBLOX or Minecraft, where you feel competent, right? That's an experience that does make you feel in control.

Robert Glazer: Or if you're not connected in the real world, it's easier to get likes and connection in the digital world.

Nir Eyal: Exactly. So that's relatedness. Right? The third factor, relatedness. This country... We have seen, since the 1950s, a collapse in the number of hours that kids spend with free play. For two reasons. One, we parents are freaked out that our kids are going to get abducted or molested by a stranger, right? Stranger danger, that's what we've taught our kids, when this is in fact the safest time in history to be a child in this country.

Robert Glazer: There may be more reporting, but it's definitely, statistically [crosstalk 00:26:09]

Nir Eyal: Exactly. So, that's one problem, is that we're all freaked out. We don't let our kids outside anymore. I mean, I remember when I was a kid, my neighborhood sang with the sound of kids playing. You don't hear that anymore. The second thing is that we've scheduled the hell out of our kids. Between Kumon and Mandarin and swimming and ballet, there is no time for free play, and free play is where we learn our place in the world. It's one thing if a parent tells you not to do something, but if a peer tell you, "Hey, chill out. You're being rude right now and I don't want to play with you unless you act nice to me, too," that's where we learn our place in the world.

Nir Eyal: And there is a huge crisis. This is why we are creating all these snowflakes that can't deal with adversity, because they haven't heard it from their peers.

They've only heard it from coaches and adults, and so there's no time for free play. So guess what? If there's no relatedness, where do they go? Social media, because on social media, on Snapchat, on Facebook, on Instagram, I can feel connected to my friends, which is exactly what we used to do on the phone as kids.

Robert Glazer: Right. And what they also are really missing, they don't know how to... This is the dumping... They just don't know how to have real social confrontation or discomfort [crosstalk 00:27:16] here to hide behind a difficult message via text, and then when they get into the workplace, this is another disaster that they have to deal with.

Nir Eyal: We blame it on the tech, but the problem is, we schedule time for ballet and swimming lessons and soccer, we don't schedule time for free play, and it is a huge mistake. We are screwing up our kids because we do not give them time for free play. Peter Gray's talked about this. It's incredibly important.

Nir Eyal: And then the final part, autonomy, is also super important. This has to do with how much regulation we put on our kids. We know that human beings need autonomy for psychological flourishing, and yet studies find that children in America have 10 times as many rules as adults, and twice as many rules on the average American child as an incarcerated felon. So there are only two places in society where you can tell people where to go, what to think, what to do, what to wear, who to be friends with, and that's prison and school. And so is it any surprise when they come home that they want to play Fortnite where they can be gods of this online universe? That's where they feel autonomy.

Nir Eyal: So, the reason your kids don't use phones at camp is because that's where they're getting their psychological nutrients met, of competency, autonomy and relatedness. And when they get home, they're not feeling that, and so they're turning to their devices.

Robert Glazer: Did you see the article that Adam Grant shared this week? I think it was in the New York Times about the people from Finland who came to New York, and New York went to Finland, and sort of looking at each other's school systems? Because it was exactly that Finland has the best school system in the world, and it's all about play and breaks and whatever. Then the family came here and they were asking the three-year-old about the standardized test scores and that he was going to fall behind and the... The guys didn't understand what they were talking about.

Nir Eyal: Yeah. Yeah. That's exactly right. And you see, this is why I get so upset about this, because what most people want to do is to see you see it's this tech. Done deal. Case closed. The jury has decided. And what that prevents us from doing is actually dealing with the real problem. The real problem is all these things I just discussed. It's not so simple. It's not black and white. "Tech is bad. Tech is melting your kids' minds." The tech is the tool, not the root cause.

Robert Glazer: All right. We're going to take a quick break for a word from our sponsors, and we'll be right back with Nir.

Robert Glazer: You can have your favorite restaurants come to you with DoorDash. Ordering is easy. Open the DoorDash app, choose what you want to eat, and your food will be delivered to you wherever you are. DoorDash is a regular go-to in our household. We have a group of hungry teenagers who all want to eat something different? My kids use DoorDash. My wife and I also use it when we want to get a meal but don't have the time to cook. Some of our favorite restaurants now have delivery available for the first time. In fact, there are over 3,400 restaurants in 3,300 cities, now on DoorDash. Right now, our listeners can get \$5 off their first order of \$15 or more, when you download the DoorDash app and enter promo code Elevate. That's \$5 off your first order when you download the DoorDash app from the App Store and enter promo code Elevate. Don't forget, that's promo code Elevate for \$5 off your first order from DoorDash.

Robert Glazer: All right. And we're back with Nir Eyal. So, we were talking a lot about families and kids, and I know you're going into that much deeper in your book. One topic I want to ask you about, I'll flip it back for a second, because I'm sure you have a opinion on this. I've been really fascinated with the whole debunking of the open office concept. All these open offices and toys and this and that, all these studies are coming out that it is so distracting that people are not productive and they're wearing noise-canceling headphones and doing all this stuff because they can't find any space for quiet work.

Robert Glazer: I'm curious your thoughts on this, and did we really underestimate the impact of distraction in the office environment?

Nir Eyal: Yeah. I think this is a great example of how distraction is not new, and in fact doesn't take only the form of digital distractions. I mean, if you look at, from a quantitative basis where more distractions come from when it comes to external distractions, we talked earlier about internal triggers, and that actually is the number one source of distraction, all these uncomfortable emotional states that we seek to escape, boredom, uncertainty, stress, that's why actually we get distracted more often than anything else.

Nir Eyal: But when it comes to the external triggers, the things in our environment that prompt us to distraction, way more than our cellphones and our computers, is other people. And so, the solution is not to get rid of open floor plan offices. That's a fool's errand. That's not going to happen. The solution is to figure how to manipulate the environment so that we can tune out these distractions. So how do we do that? There's a case study that helped me answer this question. I think it's really revealing. If I were to ask you, "What is the third leading cause of death in the United States?" I'll give you the first two. Number one is heart disease, number two is cancer. What's number three?

Nir Eyal: Most people would say, "Oh, it's car accidents, or stroke, or Alzheimer's." Not even close. The third leading cause of death, if it were a disease, would be prescription mistakes. People receiving the wrong medication or the wrong dosage of medication in hospitals from healthcare providers. 200,000 Americans are hurt every year because of this completely preventable human error. Most hospitals in America say, "Oh, what are we going to do? Nothing we can do about it. Just a fact of life." Until a group of nurses at UCSF said, "We want to get to the bottom of this." And they realized, they did a study and they found that the reason that healthcare practitioners, primarily nurses, were making so many mistakes is that they were distracted. They were dosing out medication and they were constantly being interrupted during their dosage rounds, during their medication rounds, by a colleague, by a patient interrupting them, and then their work was degrading.

Nir Eyal: What's interesting about this is that they didn't realize it was happening. So, while they were dosing out the medication, they didn't realize they were making mistakes until much later. They, you know, somebody took the wrong medication and was hurt or died, because of this mistake. And this is a great metaphor for what we do as knowledge workers, because we don't realize how much better our work would be, we don't understand our mistakes and how our work product suffers when we can't focus on one task at a time. And so, what was the solution? What did these nurses do to fix the problem? It wasn't a multimillion dollar program, it wasn't some fancy new technology. What they found was that they found a very simple solution to reduce the number of prescription mistakes by 88%. 88%. The solution was plastic vests. Plastic vests that the nurses wore when they were doing their medication rounds, that told their colleagues, "Medication rounds in progress. Leave me alone. Don't bother me."

Robert Glazer: Yeah.

Nir Eyal: So I took this lesson to heart and I inserted inside every copy of Indistractable a piece of card stock that you pull out of the book-

Robert Glazer: A door hanger?

Nir Eyal: Close. You fold it into thirds and it's a screen sign. You put it on your computer monitors, if you're working... and not everybody has the luxury of a door they can close. In this case, you fold the sign, it's bright red, and it says, "I'm indistractable at the moment. Please come back later." And you can't miss it because it's a big red sign that has a red stop plate on it, and it tells your colleagues, "I'm doing focus work." You say, "Okay, well, I'll put on noise-canceling headphones." You know that doesn't work. People think you're listening to YouTube or a podcast or something.

Robert Glazer: And now I'll Slack you.

Nir Eyal: Yeah. Exactly. They'll send you a Slack notification. Exactly. So, there is eight chapters in the book about how to hack back external triggers. And by the way, this is step three of four. But hacking back external triggers is about removing these external triggers that don't serve us in all sorts of environment. Meetings, huge source of distraction. Email, for the love of God, how much of a waste of time are these goddam emails we get every day? Those are external triggers that oftentimes don't serve us. How do you deal with that? How do you deal with open floor plan offices? And, of course, our devices like phones and computers as well.

Robert Glazer: I have a mentor coached me who's been... A gentleman named Warren Rustand, I think he's been the CEO or on the board of 50 companies. He's an incredible leader and he believes in time blocking. Your schedule is planned out for when you're going to do what, so there's time to meet, there's time for quiet thinking, and what he always says which I think a lot of leaders could adopt is... He has an open office mentality. That doesn't mean his office is open for you to walk into and bother him any minute. He really puts a premium on his thinking strategic time and just because it's on your brain, like, very few things are an emergency. So, just because it's on your brain at the time, you can't walk into his office and distract him. So, he has time scheduled for people who need to meet and talk about things, but it is an open office, but his office is not open.

Nir Eyal: Yeah. Absolutely. So, we talked about step one is mastering internal triggers. Step three is hacking back external triggers. Step two, the one we skipped, is making time for traction. We didn't define what distraction actually is, did we?

Robert Glazer: I'm not sure. We got distracted a little bit.

Nir Eyal: I don't think we did. Yeah, we got distracted. That's a great point. So, let's define what distraction is. The best way to understand what distraction is is to understand what it is not. The opposite of distraction is not focus. The opposite of distraction is traction. Okay? Both words come from the same Latin root, trahere, which means to pull, and both end in the same five letters, A-C-T-I-O-N, which spells action. So traction and distraction are not things that happen to us. They are actions that we take. Traction is any action that pulls you towards what you want in life, right? Things that you do with intent. The opposite of traction is dis-traction.

Nir Eyal: This is super important to understand because of two reasons. One, it stops us from falling down this rabbit hole of moral aggrandizement. That you checking social media or playing Candy Crush is somehow inferior to me watching football on TV, and I can judge you for how you spend your pastime because my pastime is better. That's rubbish. Anything you do with intent, anything you do with intent, slacking off, right, the time you plan to waste is not wasted time. So anything can be traction if you plan for it.

Nir Eyal: Second, the other reason this is super important, is because it helps us call bullshit on pseudo-work. Most distraction tricks us. You sit down at your desk

and you say, "Oh, I'm definitely going to work on that big project right now. I'm going to finish that slide presentation. I'm going to finish that report. I'm going to do my taxes. I'm going to do that hard thing I've been putting off, right after I check email. Right after I check that Slack channel. Right after I check the news, because that's an important thing for me to do." And it tricks us. Distraction tricks us by saying, "Oh, this is kind of a worky thing to do. That's beneficial. I was going to do it anyway." And here's the thing. If you didn't plan to do it, if you're not doing it with intent, it is just as much of a distraction.

Nir Eyal: So, the mantra I want folks to remember is that you have no right to call something a distraction unless you know what it distracted you from. When I was researching this book, I talked to a friend of mine who said she was really distracted, she can't get anything done because of technology is making her do this and what Trump said is making her... throwing her off-base, and her boss wants this and her kids want that, and she can't get anything done. And I said, "Wow, that's really tough. Can-"

Robert Glazer: What do you want to do? Was that your question?

Nir Eyal: Exactly. Show me your phone. Show me your calendar, and what did you want to do today? So she takes out her calendar, and it's just blank. Like nothing on her schedule. And so, the reality of the world we live in is that if you don't plan your day, somebody else will. And you can't complain about distraction unless you know what you got distracted from. That's why step two is to turn your values into time. To make time for traction in all domains of your life, not only the worky stuff. Some people if they're... most people, two-thirds of Americans, don't keep any calendar. A small percentage put a few things on their calendar, like the worky stuff. I want you to put everything that matters to you on that calendar. Time for your relationships, time for yourself.

Robert Glazer: This is where people really need to understand this time-blocking concept, because time-blocking is you block your calendar off for what's most important to you. So, I always tell them, if you don't schedule your gym time, like not going to happen.

Nir Eyal: Not going to happen, that's right.

Robert Glazer: I want two hours of quiet time. I want this time at night with my kids. I want meeting with my... So, you preallocate all of the time... It may vary how you spend it, but how you want to spend it, and then it becomes intentional. And so, I have people, I'm sure, you too, reach out to me all the time. "Hey, I'd love to talk to you about X. Can you talk tomorrow at like 2:00 p.m.?" And, [inaudible 00:40:09] you didn't know, like, I have time for that blocked out, for kind of like new conversations and stuff, but not tomorrow at 2:00 p.m., and then, again, am I going to let that person run my schedule, or is it going to run me or am I going to run the day?

Nir Eyal: That's right. That's exactly right. And when people hear this technique of time-blocking, of putting everything on your day that matters so that you can live out your values, many people go, "Oh, that seems hard." Well, good morning, sunshine. Like, do you have to kill your food any more? No. Do we have amazing technologies that help us connect with people all over the world for free, like we're doing right now? Yup. And the price of all that progress is you've got to do a little planning, because there are all these distractions in your pocket that if you don't plan your day, someone else is going to plan it for you.

Nir Eyal: So, yeah, you've got to do a little planning ahead. You've got to sit down for 15 minutes a week and make a template. In fact, I built a tool because I've got so many people asking me what are the best softwares to use, and frankly, Google Calendar or Outlook, it's overbuilt, so I'll give you a link for the show notes where you can actually just build a template for your week. And the reason this template is so important, it's not to punish yourself if you fall off-track. Look, I still get distracted from time to time. Being indistractable does not mean you never get distracted. It means that you strive to do what you say you're going to do. But that means you need to be explicit about what it is you are going to do with your time, because if you don't, you can't tell the difference between traction and distraction. You have to plan ahead. You have to turn your values into time.

Robert Glazer: Yeah, that's a really, really fascinating, philosophical argument, and that we probably just have a lot of people out there kind of rudderless without a purpose, and when they think they're being distracted they just don't know what they should be doing, or if that was meaningful enough or compelling enough to them, then they wouldn't be doing the other stuff that they were doing, because they would have a known cost to that.

Nir Eyal: Right. Right. And that's why we have to do this stuff in advance. I mean, if there's... One of the mantras I like to repeat is that, "The antidote to impulsiveness is forethought." So, if you are complaining that you're overweight as the fork of chocolate cake is on its way to your mouth, it's too late. You've already lost. If you complain that you're constantly distracted with your devices but you're sleeping next to your cellphone at night, you've already lost. It's too late. You have to plan in advance. Why? Because the antidote to impulsiveness is forethought.

Nir Eyal: The human species can do something that no other species on earth can do, which is to see the future in high fidelity. We can predict what's going to happen, so that means, by taking these simple steps as opposed to whining and complaining about how distracting things are today and how we can't get anything done, we simply need to follow these four steps to become indistractable by planning ahead, by taking some simple measures now to make sure we don't do something we don't want to do later.

Robert Glazer: I have a theory that I've had for years I'd love to test with you, which is, I kind of think at some point, because these things come in waves and we're probably at

the peak of the cellphone kind of always on, do you think at some point, soon, it would be a status symbol and cool to be unreachable? Kind of like Blackberry was cool and that suddenly you want to show off that you could be gotten in touch with all the time? Do you think it's going to flip at all?

Nir Eyal: Yeah. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I think that what will be sexy, what will be sought after, is intentionality. I think you can see that already. If someone's in good shape, it says something about them. It says that they make time to take care of their physical health. We don't know if it actually increases life span. I mean there's all kinds of contradictory data, every day it's a different thing about, "Eat this or don't eat that or..." But whatever. Even if you put that aside, I would argue that most people want to have an in-shape body because I think evolutionarily and I think in terms of a status symbol, it demonstrates something to other people, rightly or wrongly. But you can argue, a few hundred years ago if you were plump, that showed that you have access to food.

Nir Eyal: Well, today, if you're fit, if you're lean, it shows that you have access to a gym and you have the time to spend working out, and that you have the psychological wherewithal to do what it is you said you're going to do.

Robert Glazer: Yeah. It's interesting. A couple things related to this. One example I meant to say before is, people are always asking my wife and I about TV series. "Have you watch this one or that one? It's so new, whatever, whatever." And we don't watch any of them. I know that I get sucked into these things, and I know I would enjoy it, but I also know that I value my sleep. I only have so many hours in the day and I'm running a company and I've one... tried two books in the last couple of years, and I have some other stuff I want to do, so just made a conscious decision not to engage with that and it's interesting. Sometimes people look at me like I have two heads, but I understand the cost of watching a 30-hour series versus having that 30 hours back in my life.

Nir Eyal: Totally. Totally. So, you remember 24 with Kiefer Sutherland?

Robert Glazer: Yeah, I... So my... That's the reason I don't watch these shows.

Nir Eyal: Me too!

Robert Glazer: My wife and I watched that when she was pregnant with our first daughter, and we were up at 11:00 o'clock at night, and so wired after that that we couldn't go to sleep. And it really... it was like addictive, you know.

Nir Eyal: Yeah. And of course, as much as we complain about tech hooking us, look, these... Television has been made, this [inaudible 00:45:43] for ever. Nobody complains about television hijacking our brains, but the cliffhanger is there for a very specific reason, at the end of the episode, to keep you watching to the next. So, it's funny that 24 got you, too. I went to Tahoe with some friends and

we had this great plan of doing all this outdoor stuff and we didn't do anything. We were indoors watching this goddam television series and wasted all this time, so after that I said to myself, "Never again."

Robert Glazer: Yeah. That's so weird. I had the same experience. I will tell people the 24 story. [crosstalk 00:46:15] I couldn't sleep-

Nir Eyal: Wait. Were you there with us?

Robert Glazer: That was like the show that got me to stop taping television dramas as a-

Nir Eyal: Yeah. So, Breaking Bad, no idea. Game of Thrones, no clue. I'm totally out of it.

Robert Glazer: Great.

Nir Eyal: But, but, I love movies. I'll watch at least, maybe once every week, 10 days, I'll watch a movie with my wife because I know exactly how long that movie's going to take-

Robert Glazer: And it ends.

Nir Eyal: ... and it ends. Exactly. As opposed to these series are made to keep you watching and watching. But even that, even that, look, if you put two hours in your schedule, every day, for watching Netflix and that's what you plan to do with intent, go for it. Do it. It's when we use these tools without intent, when we use them because we are using them as a psychological pacifier to get out of our own heads so that we don't have to feel something we don't want to feel, whether it's boredom or anxiety or whatever it is we don't want to feel. That's when we start using these products on the app makers or the tech makers' schedule as opposed to our schedule.

Nir Eyal: And there's nothing morally bad about it. If you want to do it, do it. But I want you to do it in accordance with your values and on your schedule.

Robert Glazer: Or, don't complain about the opportunity cost. I mean, I talk a lot about this in my new book about... You've written a book, and I say in all those books, if you're not a professional writer to go off in a cabin or written a page a day. So people say, "Ah, I want to write a book. I want to do that but I don't have the time." Have you ever heard a coach say, "Okay, well, give me your calendar and let's see what you... Well, okay, so today you looked at people's food for an hour on Facebook, so is that more important to you than writing a book?" Every day you're making the decision to watch what people ate on Facebook and did last night than doing the thing that you said you wanted to do. So, you touched on this, but I'm curious. Do you get into the book a little bit about how does someone discover their values or what it is that they want most?

Nir Eyal: Yeah. So let's start with how we define values. So, values are defined as the attributes of the person you want to become. You never achieve your values. It's something you strive to exemplify, the kind of person you want to become. And so, a lot of people do these like visioning exercises and it's a big ordeal and you've got to sit down for a week-long retreat to figure out what your values are. I think that's just way too much work for the average person.

Nir Eyal: It's much easier to take out that calendar template that we talked about earlier, this schedule maker tool, and start with the simple stuff. Right? So, I break it down in three domains. You have the you domain, you have the relationships domain, and then around that you have the work domain. And you have to start at the center because of course if you don't take care of yourself, you can't take care of other people, you can't be your best at work.

Nir Eyal: So start with these simple questions of, if values are qualities of the person I wish to become, how much time, what's consistent with my values in terms of time I want to spend in the gym? Now, if going to the gym is not one of your values, don't do it. Don't do it because I said so, do it because it's one of your values, and if you say to yourself, "Look, an attribute of the person I want to become is I want to be the kind of person who takes care of their physical health, eh, you know what, 30 minutes a day is great." Terrific. Block that time in your calendar. Okay?

Nir Eyal: Next. Do you want time to spend reading? Is that one of your values? Time to spend with audio books? Time... whatever it is. Time to spend watching Game of Thrones. If that's consistent with your values, do it. Great. Put it on your calendar. Then relationships. Look, we are in a connection crisis in this country. We know that loneliness is as detrimental to our health as smoking and obesity. And part of this has happened because of the secularization of society, that fewer people go to church so they don't have that time in their schedule, not that I'm advocating for it. I'm part of that group that doesn't attend church regularly. But, the fact is, we don't have that time held in our calendars to meet with members of our community, and we are suffering for it.

Nir Eyal: We are so much more lonely these days because we don't have that Tijuana's club or the bowling league, or whatever it is, the church group, to get together with. So that means, put time on your calendar with your best friends. I know this sounds weird but it's called planned spontaneity, where you know every other week or every week, you are going to get together with your buddies at the bar, at the bowling club, whatever it is, put it on your calendar. That's the relationship circle. Also with your spouse, with your kids. I have time in my calendar not only for date days but also for household chores.

Nir Eyal: My marriage, I've been married almost 20 years. My wife and I were at each other's throats over all these household responsibilities, that like... We know that in heterosexual marriages in the United States, women, statistically, even in two-income households, take on way more responsibilities. And yet I denied this for the longest time because I thought, "Well, if I'm not doing my share,

she'll just tell me. Just tell me what to do and I'll do it." But of course I didn't realize that her telling me what to do was in fact work itself. And that's not fair. And so we sat down and we listed out everything that needs to get done, and not only do we say, here's the task, but here's when I plan to do it.

Nir Eyal: So, it is on my calendar as well. And then, finally, there's this domain of the workplace where we talk with our bosses, with our colleagues, about, "Look, I know here's all the stuff that you want me to do," so this is what I call the myth of the to-do list, that we have been told in the productivity space that, "Just put everything on the to-do list and it's going to get done." Well, that doesn't make any sense. Those are outputs. That's not inputs. The output is what you put on the to-do list. The input, the one thing you can control, is your time.

Nir Eyal: So it's not good enough. Step one is putting it on the to-do list. The rest of the process is actually putting it in your calendar so you know when you will do those things that you want to get done. That's the input you have to worry about, not so much the outputs.

Robert Glazer: Yes. Some of the best people I know, the best relationships I've seen with other people, like couples, it's all scheduled. They have their weekly date night, they have their... They're like, as you said, sounds unspontaneous, but this way you make sure that the stuff that's important happens. They have the quarterly thing they do with each kid, and yeah, I think, someone said once, your schedule is your priorities, and I think that's basically what you're saying here.

Nir Eyal: Absolutely. Yeah. That's absolutely right. And it's such a simple thing to do, and it is life-changing. As I said, I don't have a ton of self-control, I don't consider myself... This doesn't come easy to me, that's why I needed this methodology, and it has been life-changing. I mean, I sound like I know what I'm talking about now, but let me tell you, I was a mess. I've lost more than 25 pounds, I've gained muscle, I have a better relationship with my wife than ever before, better relationship with my daughter than ever before, and I'm more productive at work than ever before, with these relatively simple tactics that we just haven't gotten into the routine of doing.

Robert Glazer: Well, I know you can go on for ever, but I want to try to wrap up with a question that I'd like to ask, and this could be a singular one or a repeated one. But what's a mistake that you've made that you learned the most from in your career?

Nir Eyal: I'll go back to an incident that happened when I was the CEO of a tech company that I started back in 2007, I co-founded, and I remember we were raising a bunch of money, millions of dollars from top VCs in Silicon Valley, and I'd never raised money from venture capitalists before, and I was... Here I was, I was still in business school when I was asking them to give me millions of dollars and to trust me with this money. And I was freaking out. It was a lot of pressure. We had employees, business was running, it was profitable, and it was all... It felt like it was all on my shoulders.

Nir Eyal: And here I was pitching to these legends of Silicon Valley like Bing Gordon, who helped start Atari, like all these legends. I was really nervous. And I remember a friend of mine told me this saying that stuck with me. He said, "It's all prom." Remember when you were a teenager and you were getting ready for prom and it was such a big deal? Did you... you went to high school in the United States?

Robert Glazer: Yeah, yeah.

Nir Eyal: Okay. So, prom is like this big deal, and, you know, who you're going to take? And how're you going to get there? And where's the after-party? It was like such a big deal and you get so nervous, and are you going to be invited to the party, and all... It's such a big deal. And then of course now, it's ridiculous, right? It's so stupid that, "Why did I care?" And you know what? It's all prom. It's all prom. And so I say that to myself whenever I find myself getting nervous or taking stuff too seriously. I try and remind myself that in the big scheme of things, we're a little blue dot in a huge black vacuum floating in space, and it's all prom. It's all prom.

Robert Glazer: That's a healthy perspective. Well, Nir, how can people get ahold of you?

Nir Eyal: My blog is nirandfar.com, Nir is spelled like my first name, N-I-R, so, nirandfar.com, and for more information about the book, the book is called *Indistractable: How To Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life*. You can go to indistractable.com. There are all kinds of free resources and tools there. There's an 80-page workbook that I couldn't fit into the print edition of the book that you can get there for free as well, and that's all at indistractable.com, that's I-N, the word Distract, A-B-L-E. So, indistractable.com.

Robert Glazer: Not indestructible.

Nir Eyal: Right. It was close there, right? So that's a superpower.

Robert Glazer: Well, Nir, thanks for sharing that story with us and a bunch of the material from the upcoming book. I know I'm excited to share with readers and I think everyone will really enjoy it. You've done some really I think important and interesting work helping us understand where technology fits into our lives, and where we can control and not control. So, thanks very much for joining us today.

Nir Eyal: My pleasure. Thanks for having me, Robert.

Robert Glazer: And to our listeners, thanks for tuning in to the Elevate podcast. We'll include links to Nir and his books on a dedicated episode page at robertglazer.com. If you enjoyed this episode, I'd really appreciate if you could leave us a review as it helps new users discover the show. If you're listening in Apple podcasts, you can just select the library icon, click on the Elevate button and scroll down and leave your review. And if you're listening in a browser on a different app, you can find

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