

Digital Minimalism

Choosing a Focused Life
in a Noisy World



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Introduction

In September 2016, the journalist Andrew Sullivan wrote a 7,000-word essay for *New York* magazine with the title “I Used to Be a Human Being.” In his essay, Sullivan explained how the endless **stream** of news and images on the internet had turned people into information **addicts**. He warned his readers, “It broke me. It might break you, too.”

I am one of the few people of my age who has never had a **social-media** account, and I do not spend a lot of time on the internet. As a result, my phone is not a big part of my life. This means that I am not one of the group of people who Sullivan was writing about in his essay. In other words, I knew that the internet was changing many people’s lives in a bad way, but I did not have personal experience of this negative effect. That is, until everything changed for me.

Earlier in 2016, I had published a book called *Deep Work*. This book was about how important it is for people to **focus** when they are working. It also explained how the many tools which are available for us to use online were stopping people from doing their best work. As people started to read my book, more and more of my readers sent me messages or spoke to me after I had given a talk. Many of them asked me the same question: “What about our lives at home?” These people agreed with me that there was a problem in the office or workplace. But then they explained that they were even more worried about how the

internet was affecting their lives outside of work. What they said interested me, so I decided to find out more about modern **digital** life.

Almost everyone I spoke to believed that the internet can and should be a way to improve people's lives. They did not want to give up Google Maps or Instagram, but they felt that they could not continue using the internet in the same way. They worried that if they did not change things, they would break, too.

In my conversations with people, they often told me that modern digital life was making them feel extremely tired. This was not because one **app** or website was especially bad. Instead, the real problem was that there were so many different apps and websites which were grabbing their attention and changing their mood. This is a big problem for many people because they cannot control it. Few people want to spend so much time online, but these tools can make you **addicted**.

I found out from my research that some of the ways in which online tools can make you addicted are accidental, but others are not. In other words, the designers of the apps and websites want you to become an addict. Of course, nobody chose to lose control. They **downloaded** apps and **set up** online accounts for good reasons. Then, people discovered that these services created the opposite of what they wanted to happen. They joined social media to speak to friends in different parts of the country or world. But after they did that, they were unable to continue a normal conversation with a friend who was sitting across the table.

I also learned a lot about the psychological effects of modern

digital life. Many people described how social media changed their mood. People look at their friends' carefully designed online images of their "perfect" lives and this **depresses** them, especially if they are already feeling sad for other reasons. And, for teenagers, it can be even worse if they are not in social-media groups and their friends know they are not. There are other psychological effects. Online discussion (especially about politics) often makes people angrier, and it makes their opinions more extreme. Negative **comments** online usually get more attention than positive ones, and people get angry very quickly.

All of these problems really helped me to understand what Andrew Sullivan meant when he said, "I used to be a human being."

One of the first things I realized when I started to research this subject was that online tools can both help and harm people. **Smartphones, Wi-Fi** everywhere, digital **platforms** that connect billions of people—these are all amazing inventions! No serious person thinks that our lives would be better if we went back to the time before these things were invented. But, at the same time, people are tired of feeling like they are the prisoners of their phones. People often try simple ways of solving these problems. They have a phone-free day; they keep their phones away from their beds at night; they turn off their **notifications**. When they do these things, they believe that they can keep all the good things about their digital lives and reduce the bad effects. I understand why people choose these simple **solutions** because it means they do not have to make

difficult decisions about their digital lives. They do not have to completely stop doing anything, **miss out on** good or useful things, or annoy their friends. But people who have tried these small changes have discovered that they do not really work. The ability of new technology to grab your attention and make you addicted is too strong. Instead, I really believe that what you need is a **philosophy** of how to use technology.

There are many possible philosophies of technology use. One philosophy is to stop using technology completely. Another (opposite) philosophy is to try to use technology in every part of your life. However, from my research, I decided that the best philosophy is something that I call “digital **minimalism**.” Digital minimalism comes from the belief that “less can be more” and that we can use this belief to help us to use digital tools in a healthier way.

In this book, you will read about many digital **minimalists** who have made their lives better by reducing the amount of time they spend online. They use less technology than before, and they focus on only a few important online activities. They have learned that this is the best way to succeed in a high-tech world.