

How to gain control of ourselves in the midst of digital era

# **Digital Minimalism for Teens**

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The information and advice contained in this book are based upon the research and the personal and professional experience of the author. They are not intended as a substitute for consulting with a healthcare professional. The author is not responsible for any adverse effects or consequences resulting from the use of any of the suggestions in this book.

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*Editor:* Michael Lierler

To my Beloved Children  
Nina, Michael, Mona, Victor, Alex  
and my Beloved Niece and Nephew  
Nicole and Daniel



# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Short Story of the Book</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>What Digital Minimalism is</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Why Digital Minimalism is of Value</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>How to Achieve Digital Minimalism</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>About the Author</b>	<b>25</b>



## Short Story of the Book

This book was inspired by (guess!) another book titled *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* and written by Cal Newport in 2019. After reading introductory sections of that book my first instinct was to share it with my two teenagers — Nina and Michael. My second thought was that this will be yet another failed attempt of sharing something meaningful from my adult point of view. Why did it occur to me that they would not read it? Not necessarily because they do not value my opinion but, because it is too challenging of a task to engage with a 284 page-long self-help book, let alone follow provided advices. In a way, that would even be a daunting task for most adults I know. Newport's book has solid arguments and compelling stories. However, it is simply too long to follow for the majority of teenagers minds. Perseverance is a very important skill in life, and as any skill it develops gradually with age. Plus there is one more obstacle, the book by Cal Newport assumes that there was a time when its readers lived in an era that had no smart phones and no social media. This is simply not the case for modern teenagers. The teens of today only know the world as it is now: a world where digital connection is available to all kinds of places and people at their fingertips. My third thought was that maybe there is another book on the subject that I could share with my teens. We know that Amazon has it all! In fact, there is a 2024

book by Tanya Goodin titled *The Teenage Guide to Digital Wellbeing: Find the balance to live your best life*. This book addresses the obstacle mentioned last. It assumes a teenage audience facing the challenges of ever present screens and digital connections. Yet, that book is once again *long* totaling 182 pages.

The described chain of thoughts was what brought me to writing a 20 page-long book on digital minimalism for teens. After all, writing is what I – at times – do for a living. True, it is typically another kind of writing that targets to disseminate accumulated scientific knowledge within ongoing computer science research. Here, I put that experience into realm of my personal interests with hope to contribute to lives of my children and teenagers in a new way: through a written medium of more substantial length than a letter, but a less substantial length than a typical size novel. On pages that follow you will find text presenting

- What Digital Minimalism is
- Why it is of Value
- How to Achieve it

These bullet points will be the titles of the only chapters of this book. The chapters will be to the point and brief. In the narrative, I avoid presenting stories of individuals that illustrate the arguments made. Such stories tend to scatter reader's attention. Instead, I ask readers to think of their own experiences to support claims made here. The narrative will contain several hypothetical scenarios to underpin some stated arguments.

One question posed to me by my husband when I started writing this book was *why do I believe teens will read the book and take anything useful from it*. The truth is that I do not know that any of that will happen. However, the intention to make this book short and to the point is meant to remove a

big obstacle in accessing its key messages. Other than that, my motivation can be visualized using this short hypothetical scenario. Think of a brilliant Italian violin player of the nineteenth century — Niccolò Paganini. Or maybe contemporary British violinist Vanessa-Mae resonates with you. In 2006, she was the wealthiest entertainer under 30 in the United Kingdom. Now, imagine that they would never come across a violin in their lives. Then, they would have no chance to become who they are, renowned musicians. This book is meant to equip teenagers with a concept of a “violin” in the shape of digital minimalism so that one day this knowledge may help them.



# What Digital Minimalism is

As these lines are being written, it is two days till the eighth anniversary of the blog titled *On digital Minimalism* by Cal Newport. The blog<sup>1</sup> was published on December 18, 2016 and contained the following definition of digital minimalism:

*“Digital minimalism is a philosophy that helps you question what digital communication tools (and behaviors surrounding these tools) add the most value to your life. It is motivated by the belief that intentionally and aggressively clearing away low-value digital noise, and optimizing your use of the tools that really matter, can significantly improve your life.”*

Here, we view digital minimalism broader. In the definition above, we consider streaming services and video games as “digital communication tools”. Yet, it is social platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, Snapchat and many others that are under special attention. Notably, each of the mentioned platforms has close to a billion or more active monthly users. Facebook is at the top with more than 3 billion. Currently the world population is close to 8.2 billion (December, 2024). For these numbers to

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<sup>1</sup><https://calnewport.com/on-digital-minimalism/>

be the case, many of us have to actively use several of these platforms.

The digital minimalism philosophy acknowledges the universal presence of social platforms. It also recognizes many social incentives that may lead to obtaining more and more apps across the spectrum of services. An individual may be driven by curiosity, prompted by friends and family, or required professionally to become a user. What digital minimalism suggests is that an individual *has to be* truly mindful and intentional in which platforms to join and how to use them. In other words, one has to develop *principles and rules* for making decisions with regard to the use of the digital world.

Now, that we are familiar with the definition of digital minimalism and the basics that it implies, we are about to discuss why this philosophy is of value and what motivates its supporters.

# Why Digital Minimalism is of Value

*Time is money.*

The quote that we start this chapter with is a commonly used phrase. While this phrase may trigger thoughts about some kind of hourly rate, it can also be understood more broadly. Indeed, time is an amazing resource that has to be used wisely. Let us go back to Italian violin player Niccolò Paganini. Imagine, he was given a violin as a gift. Now, we complicate this thought experiment and take away time from Paganini that he was allowed to devote to practicing his violin. Without all that time, once more, he would never become a famous violinist. Time is much more than money.

Are you wondering why we discuss time? Well, there are two reasons. Time is a priceless resource that once spent will never be regained, so be mindful how you spend it. Another reason is that social platforms and other digital services are carefully designed with an intention to consume as much of your time as possible. So, you have to become a warrior and fight back. For these technologies, the more time you spend utilizing them the more money they make. In other words, *your* time earns *their* living. Do you believe it is in your interest to ensure that *your* time earns *your* living? Unfortunately, each one of us is outnumbered by the digital industry. These

are gigantic corporations. For example, Apple and Meta Platforms – formerly known as Facebook – are among the 10 most profitable US companies in 2024 according to the Fortune 500. These giants spend a lot of resources in designing and improving techniques to ensure that we do not leave their platforms. Even dating platforms are designed with an intention that you stay as their user indefinitely. As a result, we keep on checking whether someone liked our last picture or someone answered our last comment. Or we simply never leave streaming services Sunday afternoons as an episode after an episode after yet another episode ... unfolds. On the side of the platforms, they ensure that it is close to effortless to send a like. This keeps the endless feedback-reaction loop going. It is also effortless to continue watching endless stream of episodes as they will be started automatically by a service provider.

By utilizing techniques that feed on basic human psychology, the digital industry proved successful in controlling time of many. For some, the use of digital platforms turns into a *behavioral addiction*. This is an addiction that involves a desire to participate in a non-substance-related behavior that leads to some sort of award. This award can be monetary as practiced by casinos or sales. Or, social as practiced by social media. I bet you can remember a relative or a friend who keeps on checking their phones constantly while having a face-to-face conversation with you. It is likely that they are aware that this is not polite or respectful. Yet, losing control of their behavior is what happens to someone who falls prey to an addiction.

Let us go back to the point that it is in your interest to ensure that *your* time earns *your* living. Trust me, as an educator, time is essential to earn a living. Here, we are not referring to time that you will have to spend at your job one day. This one is a simpler concept that you grasp while growing up by observing your parents' commitment to being at work eight hours a day five days a week. We are referring to time that

you will have to spend to learn skills in order to perform your future job. In the modern world, young people are required to obtain more and more education to join workforce as more complicated skills are necessary. That education, among other resources, will cost your time, lots of it. We are talking about years to be dedicated to degrees and certificates beyond high school. As of now in the United States, 61.28% of the people in the age group 25-30 years old have some college education. It is more likely than not that high school is not the last educational institution you will face.

Let us now work out some numbers hypothetically. Imagine a college student who among other things each day during a work week spends roughly

- forty five minutes texting with a couple of different groups of acquaintances
- thirty minutes browsing internet pages
- fifty minutes on streaming services
- twenty minutes gaming

We are looking at roughly two and a half hours a day spent as a consumer of the digital industry. In five days, this translates into about twelve hours. Later, this student comes across a flyer on digital minimalism and changes their routine on usage of electronics. This way he frees up nine hours a week. Within typical US college settings, a three hour course is estimated to require nine hours committed to it per week. Also, twelve credit hours is a baseline semester workload of a full time student. Thus, assuming two years spent in college, redirecting nine hours from digital consumption weekly into course work could translate into a semester worth of credit hours. We leave it as an exercise for you to ponder what a second major or an earlier graduation could mean for that hypothetical college

student. Also, consider how an earlier graduation may impact their finances and their parents' finances.

So far we talked about economical factors in which the practice of digital minimalism could have a positive effect. In addition, it may improve your overall well-being.

Social platforms fragment their users attention through endless streams of messages and notifications via sound or visual aids. We are aware of the concepts of spam email and junk mail. We connect them to negative aspects of our life. In a way, endless streams of information have a similar effect. Mindful use of technologies suggests that you are in control and not the other way around. Thus, developing rules and incorporating some helpful techniques to assist you in being your own boss is a necessity.

The rules can be along the following lines

- Never carry a phone in your pocket when at home
- Set all sound notifications to silent except for phone calls from the closest relatives and friends
- Keep your phone away whenever you are in company with another person ...

The first two bullet points exemplify rules meant to help you ensure that it is you who dictates *when* to address demands for your attention and time. Without rules of this kind, it will be the world around you dictating when and what you read, listen to, watch, or do. The third rule will help you stay in the present and connect to people in a tangible reality. We assume that there is no need to argue that overall real world interactions are superior to virtual ones. If nothing else, non-digital communication contributes more to *emotional intelligence*. This is the ability to perceive, understand, and handle emotions of the self and others. Now, this is a good point for you to pause

and think about the listed rules. Would you introduce some modifications? Would you spell out more rules?

In addition, you may also wish to scrutinize a list of installed applications on your phone, tablet, and computer as well as devices themselves. Attempt to leave only apps that are *absolutely necessary*. Once more, ensure that these apps which you left in use do not bombard you with notifications. Remember, it should be you who decides when and why to invoke an application. This is another good point to pause. Spend a minute or two defining what “absolutely necessary” means to you in this context. You may wish to repeat this exercise when you finish reading this book. Overall, designing and incorporating rules that target mindful use of technology will help you

- regain focus and time
- fight back exogenous demands on your attention

There are yet more aspects that pertain to the value of digital minimalism than already mentioned. Below, we enumerate several points that probably will resonate with things that you already heard elsewhere. As Zig Zaglar, an American author, once said

”Repetition is the mother of learning...”

To begin with, there is evidence that screen time excites brains in ways that may result in difficulties falling asleep or interfere with sleep quality. Now, remember how each time during a yearly health care visit, your doctor reminds you about the importance of sleep. This is because it keeps your mental health in check and promotes your intellectual and physical abilities. Maybe a digital curfew rule is in order?

To add on, interacting via social media with people around you including relatives, friends, and colleagues skews your perception of their lives and your own. Let us attempt a mental

exercise. Think about the emotions you have experienced today. Is it something along the complex mixture of

- splashes of excitement
- sprinkles of sadness
- elements of boredom
- spikes of happiness
- aggravations of anger
- satisfactions of content

These and many more feelings make up a complex emotional picture of each one of our days. Guess what, other people are not all that different. Each one of us is an individual with our personal traits and characteristics yet, we all share rather involved emotional rollercoasters in our every day lives. Now, recall some social media platform, where it is common or possible to post pictures. Unless we are talking about newsfeeds such as CNN, vast majorities of shared pictures portray happy occasions with a bunch of beaming faces. Do you notice the discrepancy between an emotional rollercoaster one experiences in tangible reality and emotional “paradise” one transmits into digital reality? This distorted digital reality may play a trick on social media consumers. Your average day will for the most part look worse than pictures that surround you digitally. It is not difficult for a human mind to jump to a conclusion that there is possibly something wrong with you. Indeed, “everyone” looks so happy and has so much fun whereas you have to deal with all your ups and downs! Obviously, even in face-to-face communication people are not necessarily acting out their real emotions. We are taught and accustomed to handle our emotions and overall transmit positivity around us. Nevertheless, face-to-face our real emotions do seep through. One can

always smile for an instant. It is harder to force a smile for a ten minute conversation when what you really feel is being upset about a poor grade in language arts.

Given the mention of newsfeeds in our discourse, let us briefly look into what is “wrong” with it. We leave aside problems such as fake news and polarization of news. Instead, we focus on the fact that negativity and disasters around the world are driving the news. Historically, humans evolved consuming local news that most of the time was not all that dramatic. It was mainly devoted to common events in every day lives. With that we are not necessarily psychologically wired to consume an avalanche of intense news around our country and the world involving extraordinary often disastrous events at a constant stream.

The last observation that we make concerns the shift to negativity, which happens when communication is managed through technology. There is something about the “screen” that makes people behind them lessen and at times abandon their sense of being polite to others. We tend to send unpleasant messages while texting that we would not dare to say in person. In addition, we tend to interpret written statements as more uncomfortable than similar face-to-face statements. Thus, consumers of these messages have to deal with an extra load of feelings. Currently, cyberbullying might be a more pronounced phenomenon than bullying. And here is a cherry on top of this negativity pie, voice and facial expressions are frequently lost within online spaces creating more miscommunications than already present in face-to-face settings.

Hopefully, the mentioned facets of the digital world are motivating enough for you to practice mindfulness while using technology. We are proceeding to a concluding chapter whose target is to help you with that. There we talk about guiding principles for navigating decisions about how and when to utilize digital services. We also talk about what kind of activities

can be used to substitute screen time. In fact, a list of possibilities is presented. This list assumes that you will first, attempt to be mindful about the use of technologies and second, find yourself in an uncharted territory titled *Life in the Physical World*. Good news! It exists! Your ancestors lived in that world for millenniums . Now it is your time to discover and rebuild elements of their world yourself.

# How to Achieve Digital Minimalism

“Use the WWW acronym ‘what for, why now, and what else’ when you pick up your phone to use it”

Dr. Laurie Santos

Coursera.org, Happiness Homework

The Science of Well-Being for Teens, Yale

In this part of the book we focus on setting up a stage for the coherent framework to carry out digital minimalism in practice. We start by briefly reviewing a theory in psychology called Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. We then convert that hierarchy into what we call life’s priorities. These priorities can help you to inspect and revise appropriateness of your use of digital platforms and devices. At last, we spell out a list of all kinds of activities. When you start practicing digital minimalism, you may experience a void, which is a sense of boredom. This list is meant to:

- provide you with ideas on what to do, while avoiding the use of technology
- encourage you to create your own portfolio of activities, which assist, inspire, and enrich your life and the lives of those around you.

In a nutshell, the *Maslow’s hierarchy of needs* is a theory proposed in the middle of the last century by an American

psychologist Abraham Maslow. He stated the existence of the following stages of needs, namely,

1. physiological (food, water, shelter)
2. safety and security (health, employment, property, family)
3. belonging and love (friendship, family, intimacy, sense of connection)
4. social needs or esteem (confidence, achievement, individuality, respect of others)
5. self-actualization (creativity, experience purpose, meaning)
6. transcendence (spiritual needs).

The theory presupposes the order among the needs belonging to different levels. A person is not able to consider satisfying needs at a higher level prior to satisfying more basic needs. For example, physiological level includes such needs as making sure one has food and shelter. Safety level includes needs for maintaining some quality of life, in a long term. According to the Maslow's hierarchy, prior to devoting our time to rigorous exercise programs meant to keep us healthy till eighty years old, we need to be seeking and maintaining our ability to have food and shelter. The Maslow's hierarchy is a rather fascinating theory, which you may find of use to explain and rationalize certain decisions by people around you. But as far as this book is concerned the Maslow's theory backs up what we here call life's priorities. Use these priorities to guide your decisions on when and how to utilize digital platforms. It is not the case that every single time you take out your phone you have to make a decision. Rather, we suggest that you develop specific habits for technology usage with guiding principles and

rules. In the previous chapter we gave examples of rules and discussed their roles.

Alright! Here we come with *life's priorities* – each priority has a title and a list of questions meant to clarify it:

1. *Your health*

Do you get enough sleep? Do you eat healthy? Do you exercise enough?

2. *Health of your family members*

Can you help your loved ones get enough sleep, eat healthy, and incorporate exercise into their life?

3. *Home/Space around you*

Do you take care of the space you live in? Do you make your bed? Do you clean your home? Do you do laundry? Do you fix things that are broken? Do you cook meals? Do you assist those who take care of your needs? Do you help those around you take care of their needs?

4. *Respect one another; nurture healthy meaningful relationships*

Do you treat your loved ones and people you come by in life the way you want to be treated?

5. *Work, School responsibilities*

Are you a responsible and reliable participant in tasks that you have an obligation or commitment to?

6. *Work, School responsibilities of your loved ones*

Can you help your loved ones to be responsible and reliable participants in tasks that they have an obligation or commitment to?

7. *Entertainment*

This item differs from prior ones. Now is a good time

to enumerate activities that you would mark as an entertainment. These should be considered once no harm has been done to the other priorities.

The presented priorities provide a guideline for crafting your rules on whether, when, and how to use digital platforms/screens. It is not too challenging to guess that a bulk of these uses will fall into the entertainment zone. While it is important to relax and engage in meaningful joy bringing activities, these should not dictate your life. Remember how the term absolutely necessary was placed into the discourse? That term can now be grounded within the settings of the enumerated priorities. To develop your digital world rules scrutinize your interactions with technologies with regard to life's priorities.

For majority of youth in the US, it is rather safe to assume that if they take this book seriously and work on minimizing their involvement with the digital world, they will find themselves not knowing what to do frequently enough. Remember that word *boring*? It may come to mind that it is a dreadful feeling, but in fact it is a good one! Boredom leads to creativity and innovation! But above all experiencing “not-knowing-what-to-do” means you actually have some time on your hands and can intentionally and mindfully find yourself something to do! How great is that!?! This book is written considering that a modern teen has been born and raised in a world abundant with digital platforms and various “screens”. Thus, they may not know which things a human is able to do without electronics. Here is a list of activities one can engage in to fight the sense of boredom. By all means, enlarge and mend this list to your needs and liking:

- Make your bed every day
- Clean up your desk
- Do the laundry

- Clean your house
- Help your family to shop
- Find a way to a local library to fetch a book or two for yourself, your parents, your siblings
- Read the book
- Discuss that book with your parents, siblings, and friends
- Ride a bike to a friend or friends
- Walk to one of your friends
- Walk around a block or more
- Take your friends on a walk
- Take a dog on a walk
- Knock on a neighbors door and strike up a conversation or at least say hello and ask how they are doing
- Say hello to a stranger
- Check out a neighborhood or school playground
- Write a log about your day in a journal
- Compose a poem
- Create or sing a song
- Write a book or a chapter
- Design a cover for the book
- Go on a run around your neighborhood (routinely)
- Do yoga (routinely)
- Play pretend with your siblings, for example, build a fort from pillows and blankets
- Clean up after yourself
- Bake cookies and surprise your family and friends
- Bake a meatloaf and treat your family with dinner
- Doodle
- Make a birthday card for your friend or parent
- Prepare pancakes for breakfast
- Pick up a math textbook and do some problems that have not been assigned to you before
- Ask a librarian to help you find more resources about a subject that interests you

- Fetch a music instrument that you have been learning to play and practice
- Switch on a radio and listen to the music or dance
- Examine objects around you
- Find one of the activity kits you got for your birthday and play with it
- Play with a sibling
- Talk to your parents
- Hang out with a friend
- Learn how to stitch and sew
- Learn how to knit
- Knit something for a sibling or friend
- Style your hair or a friend's hair

Congratulations! Finishing reading this book is a solid step towards practicing mindfulness and digital minimalism.

The end.



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## About the Author

Yuliya Lierler is a mother of five and a Professor of Computer Science at the University of Nebraska Omaha. At the time of this writing, two of Yuliya's children and her only niece reached the glorious teenage stage, her nephew became ten — a step toward teenhood. Four of them were truly inspiring motivators for this writing to take place. Her youngest child was a month old providing sprinkles of time here and there for the writing.