



ELKE GERAERTS

FOCUS

IS THE NEW

GOLD

How to Reduce Stress and Increase
Productivity in a Distracted World

Lannoo

CONTENTS

Prologue	7
1. Why we are all pigeons.....	11
2. Unfocusing is the key to true focus	47
3. We all have the same brain (except we don't)	95
4. The myth of the multitasking brain.	129
5. Enter open-plan office, exit focus?	151
6. We need to meet again.	179
7. It's not just companies that need a mission statement	197
Epilogue	229
Acknowledgements	239
References	241

Prologue

“I’m late! I’m late! For a very important date! No time to say hello, goodbye!” The famous White Rabbit quote from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* still sounds topical today, even though the world that felt so fast and busy to Carroll in the mid-1800s is nothing compared with the way we hurtle through life in the 21st century. We have shifted up a few gears. And perhaps more importantly, we have forgotten where the off switch is.

Our clever human brain has helped us create a world we can no longer keep up with. The result? Stress, lots of it. Every day we wake up in a world where constant connectivity sets the agenda. Smartphones, social media and a relentless stream of notifications make it ever harder for us to focus on the tasks that really matter. That constant bombardment of information has the added side effect that our attention is constantly fragmented. Distraction lurks everywhere and it is difficult to focus our attention on just one thing.

Check for yourself: how full-to-bursting is *your* schedule? How many to-do’s are still waiting to be ticked off? Or do you have a to-do list of to-do lists that you need to finish? They reflect the chaos in our heads: many of us are in constant overdrive and have completely lost our focus. Are *you* managing to keep up?

No wonder rates of stress and burnout are at an all-time high. The crazy thing is, we know what we need to do to stop this brain health crisis. Except our overstimulated brains seem unable to grasp that knowledge yet, let alone put it into practice. We know that plenty of sleep, regular exercise, and rest and relaxation are essential to keep us healthy and resilient, but modern life makes it hard to apply this good advice consistently. The social pressure to be available and productive anytime, anywhere, is undermining our mental health. We

I CHALLENGE YOU
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⇒ JUST ONE PAGE ⇐
WITHOUT STOPPING.

feel guilty if we don't respond instantly to messages or if we take a moment to ourselves, when in fact it's precisely these moments of rest that are crucial for our mental and emotional health.

The result is that we spend most of our lives on autopilot. Day in, day out, we perform the same actions without ever questioning them. This works fine in more predictable times, but we're currently in the throes of an unprecedented polycrisis – think pandemic, wars in Ukraine and Gaza, energy crisis, inflation and climate change. We can no longer afford to cling to the past. To echo the lyrics of a classic from the music archives: “The times they are a changin'” Those who remain passive will be left behind. Those who seize control of their lives will be the winners.

It's more important than ever to actively increase our focus and resilience. And we *can* do that: our brain has a lot to deal with, but it's also much more resilient than we think. The key to success? Understanding how your brain works, so you can make the targeted adjustments you need. So you can stop feeling as if your life is being lived for you, and can actively choose what to focus on and when.

That is the purpose of this book. My aim is to help you identify what keeps hijacking your focus and then equip you with the tools you need to regain that focus. Are you ready?

CHAPTER 1

WHY WE ARE ALL PIGEONS

“ARE YOU READY?”

In spring 2024 during a busy week of lecturing, I was settling down for a lovely al fresco lunch in London’s Covent Garden when a striking scene caught my attention. For anyone who’s never been, Covent Garden is a melting pot of activity where people of all ages and backgrounds come together under the inviting canopies of trendy little boutiques and hip eateries.

I watched a street performer take to the central stage in the piazza. Noticing the charismatic figure, a number of passers-by stopped in their tracks. Then, without much further ado, he launched smoothly into his act. The handful of onlookers soon mushroomed into a small crowd. It was as if they were all bound together by a secret agreement: to be in that place at that time to see that performer at work, which, of course, was not the case. The scene that played out in front of me was fascinating because most of the onlookers remained stock-still. They didn’t want to miss a single second of the show. There was a tangible sense of FOMO, fear of missing out.

“Are you ready?” The performer’s commanding voice rang through the crowd like a mantra, compelling them to focus on the spectacle. He captured the attention of everyone in the piazza. And he held it: as his act continued, he strengthened his grip on the crowd, like a conductor blending hundreds of voices and hands into a harmonious whole. The audience’s enthusiasm grew to a crescendo and was translated into enormous generosity after the performer’s final bow. The hat on the ground in front of him quickly filled up with donations.

But it wasn’t just him: almost every performer who followed him – and who also had twenty minutes to do their thing – succeeded in capturing the audience’s attention. Each of them held the audience in the palm of their hand for twenty whole minutes. No one

got distracted. Yes, a few smartphones were fished out, but only to capture this unique moment, not to disappear down some rabbit hole of breaking news.

As I watched the show, I saw it as a brilliant allegory for focus and engagement, in sharp contrast with the constant distractions of our modern lives. Because that's how we now manoeuvre through our day: though we have work to do, we are constantly having to fend off distractions lurking just around the corner, whispering in our ear that we've earned a short break.

A PERFECT DAY

Imagine you wake up one morning and feel completely rested. The total relaxation you had last night led to an invigorating sleep, so you can start today's to-do list full of energy. You get into the flow right away, and it's lunchtime before you know it. In normal circumstances, the work you've done over the past few hours would have taken you two days. But today? You're flying through it. In the evening, you're still bursting with energy. You decide to go for a 5K run and then chill out by cooking a nice meal.

Wouldn't it be great to look back on an almost perfect day? Unfortunately, for many people, it's a scenario they can scarcely imagine. How often do you feel you can work with 100% focus? We live in a world where our attention spans are under increasing pressure. A new distraction lurks around every corner. The result? At the end of the day, we feel we haven't even achieved all that much, and yet we're tired. Dead tired.

How did it come to this point, where our focus and attention are getting weaker every year? Where we can barely read even one page of a book any more without reaching for our smartphones? Over the

last two decades, we've trained our brain to give in continuously to all sorts of internal and external impulses. And every year that distraction grows, like an unstoppable snowball rolling down a mountainside, getting bigger and bigger.

THE TEMPTATION OF DISTRACTION

In his bestseller *Hooked. How to Build Habit-Forming Products*, Israeli-American author Nir Eyal introduces a technique to help companies create products and services that tap into the psychology of habits. If your company can get people addicted to its products, you will retain customers more easily. This opens the way to faster growth and bigger profits: for example, you'll be able to be much more creative and flexible with your pricing. Why is that? Customers who are already hooked on your product are less sensitive to price changes.

Translating this to our modern-day smartphone usage, it's clear that many people are not afraid to dig deep into their pockets every time a big phone brand releases a new model. The app developers too do their utmost to keep their users as tied in as possible. And it works: we scroll like mad, often sharing our personal data without thinking, so companies can keep refining their already clever apps and control our behaviour even more. We arrange our lives to suit the delusion of the latest apps: we are all connected, but often no longer with each other.

What makes Eyal's story remarkable is the fact that he wrote a second book, *Indistractable. How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life*, in which – ironically – he aims to help people distance themselves from the distractions they are addicted to, so they can take back control of their own lives.

First tell companies how to engage consumers more easily, then write a book for consumers on how to win that battle for attention and distraction for themselves? Is this some carefully crafted master plan? No, Eyal is genuinely concerned about the devastating impact that smartphones, apps and social media are having on our attention span. In a world full of devices angling for our attention by sending notifications every five minutes, it seems only logical that we should lose control. Haven't you ever thought: I could have spent this hour much more usefully rather than sitting here scrolling aimlessly on my phone.

Luckily, we are not powerless, says Eyal. Our main weapon in the battle for our attention is understanding how big tech companies exploit the way our brains work. Facebook and co. know all too well that we humans are easy prey when we feel boredom, stress or some other discomfort. We go looking for distractions. An endless stream of TikTok reels? Our brain likes nothing better: it stops us having to think about difficult things.

According to Eyal, the first and most important thing to do is to identify our own internal triggers. When do you seek distraction? When do you get bored? What stresses you out? Only when you know your internal triggers can you start looking for strategies to tackle them differently.

That's what we're going to do in this book. I want to explain to you how the brain works and then explore together how to train your attention muscle in a targeted way. So that, even in this distracted world, you can get back in control of your own life and find your focus.

WE'RE JUST PIGEONS TOO

In my lectures, when talking about distraction and how human beings are constantly on the lookout for new input, I often cite the pigeon experiment conducted by American psychologist B.F. Skinner. Because make no mistake: we too are just pigeons pecking away at random.

Skinner isolated a pigeon in a chamber (the Skinner Box) that also contained a push-button. When the pigeon pressed the button, it received a reward. We call this operant conditioning or positive reinforcement: something for something, a quid pro quo. Interestingly, when the reward was variable and unpredictable, the pigeon pressed the button much more often. You never know if something else might be coming. Just as we keep doggedly pressing the send-and-receive button or refreshing the news feed in our favourite app over and over, to be sure not to miss a single post.

Follow the algorithm

You've probably experienced this too: you watch an entertaining clip in your Instagram feed and, before you realise it, you've suddenly lost an hour. How is it that you get sucked into that whirlpool of content? It's the algorithms that get you every time.

Notifications. Algorithms keep your smartphone constantly sending out a volley of notifications. A new email? A friend who's liked your photo? A post on your community app? Breaking news? Bang: four fresh notifications on your screen, each with or without an accompanying ping.

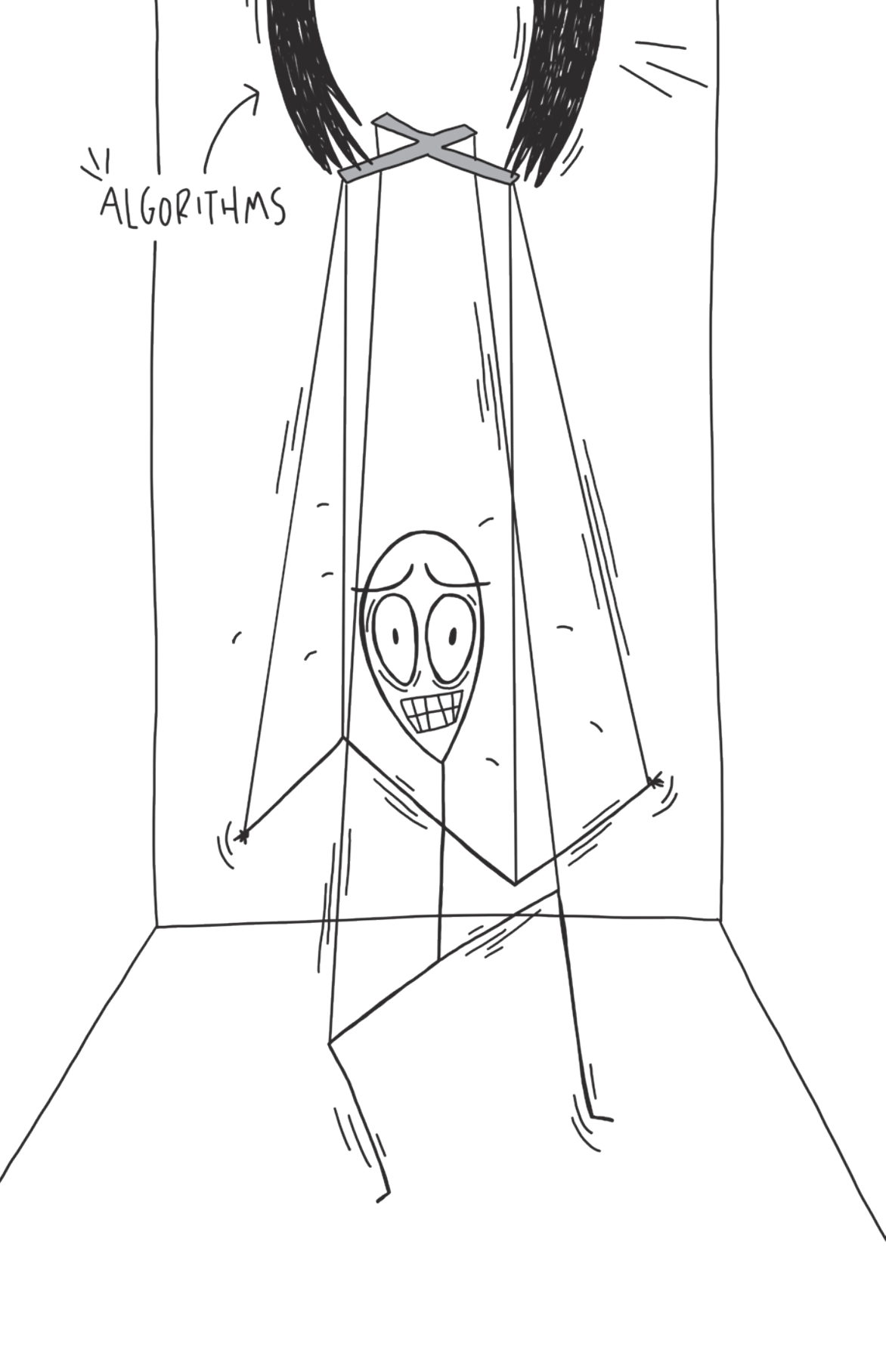
Content personalisation. How does Instagram know what you want to see? Why does a search lead to the same sites over and over? Algorithms! They're like super-spies that customise the content we are shown, based on our preferences, interests and behaviours. Yes, this can help us find relevant information, but it also means we get distracted by interesting but non-urgent 'must-reads', 'you-need-to-see-this! videos' or 'super-cute posts' and so linger on social media for much longer than we want to. The same goes for Netflix and other streaming services: you've only just finished binge-watching one series when a suggestion pops up for the next.

Social interactions. Algorithms are great at filtering and foregrounding social interactions on social media and messaging apps. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok are designed to draw us in deeper and deeper. 'Oh, an interesting post!' Before you know it, you're scrolling through all the comments and joining in the discussion. Then you check back every ten minutes to see if anyone's responded to your comment.

SCROLLING PIGEONS

We're no cleverer than Skinner's pigeons: our brain, just like theirs, is guided by punishments and rewards. Gamification elements in apps use the principle of operant conditioning to motivate users to perform certain actions more and more often. Unlocking the next level in a game, the Duolingo owl that urges you on to one more language lesson, apps where you collect various tokens or virtual currencies: these are all rewards that encourage you to spend even more time in a game or app. Not all of this is negative, by any means: there are also many apps these days that help us to live healthier lives. Think

ALGORITHMS



of fitness apps that reward you when you've walked a certain number of steps or drunk enough water: some of these can definitely help you to be more active and healthier in life.

But there's no escaping the fact that all of these apps are extremely addictive. So conscious consumption is the message. If that little Duolingo owl helps you express yourself a bit more fluently while holidaying on the French Riviera, I certainly wouldn't stop you. But if you notice you're all too easily losing an hour on it every day, it might make sense to find a different way to learn a language.

The crazy thing is, we all know how addictive social media can be. But we still keep falling into the traps laid by various apps, only to realise to our disappointment after wandering for an hour that we've already lost precious time we could have spent a lot more usefully.

HOW DOPAMINE DERAILS OUR FOCUS

Why *do* we keep scrolling against our better judgement? Because every like, share or comment we receive rewards us with a shot of dopamine. To many people, dopamine is a kind of happiness drug with an instant feel-good effect. That's not entirely right: dopamine is a neurotransmitter that is indeed often mentioned in the same breath as pleasure, but that's only part of the story. The main role of dopamine is not to make us feel pleasure, but to determine our focus. Dopamine tells us where to direct our attention. Swedish psychiatrist Anders Hansen wrote about this at length in his book *The Attention Fix: How to Focus in a World that Wants to Distract You*, and offers some fascinating insights.

For example, if you're hungry and someone puts a plate of food in front of you, dopamine levels rise in your brain. It's the dopamine that says: 'You should eat that.' Interestingly, dopamine likes

uncertain rewards, probably because most rewards in nature are variable. Back in the early days of human history, if you climbed a tree in search of food, you never really knew if you'd be rewarded for that act. You might find a whole bunch of ripe fruits, or nothing at all. The same applied to hunting: there was no certainty of finding any prey, let alone outsmarting it. This might be the reason why our brains like to reward uncertain outcomes in particular.

I mentioned earlier the way that social media platforms keep luring you back. The system they use for this is entirely based on that dopamine rush. When you post a photo on Facebook and your friends give you a thumbs up, you don't see the likes all at once. Facebook spreads them out, to keep you coming back to see if there's anything new. Basically, your smartphone is a sort of gambling den that shows you every so often how many 'likes' you have won. This is just one of the many ways that tech companies capture our attention. Especially for companies like Meta, our attention is the world's most valuable commodity.

It's precisely because our phones raise dopamine levels in our brains so incredibly efficiently that they monopolise our attention. The outside world can't compete with this: it doesn't give us so many dopamine shots. American psychologist Larry Rosen researches the dynamics of the modern brain, especially in relation to our interactions with media and technology. He found that constantly checking smartphones and navigating between different media activities triggers the same reward circuits in the brain as drug use. This can lead to a kind of addiction to technology, with young people becoming increasingly dependent on constant stimulation and finding it hard to concentrate on a single task.

The consequences should not be underestimated. Even when we're not actively using our device, it still divides our attention. In some fascinating studies, for example, students were asked to complete a