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MBS ([00:00](#)):

Let me tell you about Nir, Nir is... I'm just going to read this so I make sure I get it right. He is a former lecturer at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, and he is the author of Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life. Now here's the thing, Indistractable, it's a brilliant book but it's not your first book. And, in fact, you really made your name with Hooked, the first book that you wrote. I'm curious to know what that book is about and actually how it might have led to you writing Indistractable?

Nir ([00:28](#)):

Absolutely, so Hooked was about how to build habit forming products, and it came out of a class that I taught the Stanford Graduate School of Business and then later at the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design. Hooked was all about how can we use the psychology behind what makes products like Facebook and



Instagram and WhatsApp and Slack and Snapchat, how all these products are designed to be so engaging? And what can we learn from these products and services so that we can make all sorts of other products more engaging? If Hooked was about how to build good habits, Indistractable, my second book is about how do we break the bad habits?

Nir ([01:01](#)):

It's about how do we disconnect from a lot of those, sometimes technologies, and there's all kinds of other distractions that we cover in the book as well. But, basically, how do we get rid of all the things that might pull us away from what we really want to do with our time, with our attention, and with our life?

MBS ([01:17](#)):

What's the price we pay for this sense of being distracted all the time?

Nir ([01:24](#)):

There's so many costs. For me, it was a very personal cost where the moment in my life where I really had to reassess my relationship with distraction was when I was with my daughter one afternoon. We had some daddy-daughter time plan together. I remember we had this activity book of things that daddies and daughters could do together. One of the activities in the book was to ask each other this question, that if you could have any superpower, what superpower would you want? I remember the question verbatim, but I can't tell you what my daughter said because, in that moment, I got distracted. I started pecking away at my device thinking that there was something important there-

Nir ([02:02](#)):

... exactly as opposed to being fully present with someone I love very much. If you asked me today what superpower I would want, I would want the power to be indistractable. Because if I'm honest with you, it wasn't just with my daughter, it was when I was at my desk at work and I would say, "Oh, I'm



definitely going to focus on that project. I'm not going to procrastinate. I'm going to do what I said I'm going to do. Here I go." But 30, 45 minutes, I'd be doing something else, checking email, doing that easy thing to do on my to-do list. Doing everything but the thing I said I was going to do.

MBS ([02:30](#)):

Sure.

Nir ([02:31](#)):

Or I would say I was going to exercise, but I wouldn't. I would say I would eat right and I wouldn't. So that's where I really figured if I could just have that superpower of just following through, let me just do what I say I'm going to do, wouldn't that be amazing? And so that's really what I decided then and there that I would spend the next five years of my life understanding the deeper psychology of distraction. Look, there's a lot of unconventional techniques out there that people don't know as well as a lot of really bad conventional wisdom that doesn't work.

MBS ([03:01](#)):

Well, look, I'm excited to hear more about those. But, for now, let's go to your two pages and read to us what you got? I'm excited to hear what you picked for us.

Nir ([03:08](#)):

Absolutely. This section is actually the last chapter of the book, and so I wanted to jump ahead of here for a little bit. The chapter, it's the start of a chapter that's titled, Be An Indistractable Lover. So that's why we have the mood lighting here, right? [inaudible 00:03:25] so I put the stage here.



MBS ([03:28](#)):

I just have to pour myself a little glass of champagne perhaps just [inaudible 00:03:31]-

Nir ([03:31](#)):

Exactly, exactly.

MBS ([03:32](#)):

... into the mood.

Nir ([03:33](#)):

Cue the mood music, some Barry White or something. All right, so here we go.

MBS ([03:38](#)):

Sure.

Nir ([03:39](#)):

How to be an indistractable lover? Every night, my wife and I engaged in the same routine. She put our daughter to bed, brushed her teeth and freshened up. Slipping under the covers, we exchanged glances and knew it was time to do what comes naturally for a couple in bed. She began to fondle her cell phone while I tenderly stroked the screen of my iPad. Ooh, it felt so good. We were having a love affair with our gadgets. Apparently, we weren't the only one substituting Facebook for foreplay. According to one survey, "Almost a third of Americans would rather give up sex for a year than part with their mobile phones for that long."

Nir ([04:19](#)):

Before we learn to become indistractable, the allure of notifications on our smartphones proved hard to resist. Promising to reply to just one more email after dinner quickly turned into 45 minutes of lost intimacy later that night.



We've fallen into an evening ritual of solitary tech checking until Midnight. By the time we each got to bed, we were too tired to talk. Our relationship, not to mention our sex life, suffered. We were among the 65% of American adults, who according to the Pew Research Center, sleep with their cell phones on or next to their beds. Since habits rely on a cue to trigger a behavior, action is often sparked by the things around us.

Nir ([05:03](#)):

We decided to move our phones from our bedroom to the living room. With the external triggers gone, we regained a bit more control over our techno infidelity. But after a few phone free evenings, I began to notice a stressful anxiety. My mind became occupied with all the things calling for my attention. Had someone sent me an urgent email? What was the last comment on my blog about? Did I miss something important on Twitter? The stress was palpable and painful, so I did what anyone who makes a firm commitment to break a bad habit would do, I cheated. With my cell phone unavailable, I needed to find a new partner. To my relief, I felt the anxiety melt away as I pulled out my laptop and began to bang on the keyboard.

Nir ([05:51](#)):

My wife, seeing what I was doing, pounced on the opportunity to relieve her own stress and we were back at it again. After a few nights on our machines, we sheepishly admitted that we had failed. Embarrassed but determined to understand where we'd gone wrong, we realized we had skipped a critical step. We hadn't learned to deal with the discomfort that had drawn us back in. With self-compassion this time, we decided to start by finding ways to manage the internal triggers driving our unwanted behaviors. We implemented a 10-minute rule and promised that if we really wanted to use the device in the evening, we would wait 10 minutes before doing so. The rule allowed us to do what we call surf the urge and insert a pause to interrupt the otherwise mindless habit.



Nir ([06:40](#)):

We also connected our internet router and monitors to \$7 timer outlets purchased at a local hardware store and set them to turn off at 10:00 PM each night. Using this effort packed meant that in order to cheat, we would have to uncomfortably contort behind our desks and flip the override switch. In short, we were making progress by using all four methods for becoming undistractable. We learned to cope with the stress of stopping our compulsion to use technology in the evening, and over time, it became easier to resist. We scheduled a strict bedtime claiming the bedroom as a sacred space and leaving external triggers like our cell phones and the television outside.

Nir ([07:23](#)):

The outlet timer that turned off the unwanted distractions made compliance with our pre-commitment something we came to expect every night. We began to use our reclaimed time for more productive purpose, and we gained greater control over our habits. Distraction can take a toll on even our most intimate relationships. The cost of being able to connect with anyone in the world is that we might not be fully present with the person physically next to us.

MBS ([07:54](#)):

Nir, that is awesome. What a fantastic couple of pages to read.

Nir ([07:58](#)):

Thank you.

MBS ([07:59](#)):

I am now wondering where exactly your book gets filed. I'd always assumed it was in the kind of business management section, but perhaps it's right next to like 35,000 shades of gray. Now there's like all those shades of gray and then a little bit of yellow.



Nir ([08:17](#)):

We've been married now for 18 years, so it's definitely not that exciting.

MBS ([08:21](#)):

Well, congratulations and congratulations for negotiating with your wife to be able to put that chapter in the book, or maybe there's hidden-

Nir ([08:29](#)):

There's a reason that her name is on the cover, by the way. It says Nir Eyal with Julie Li.

MBS ([08:32](#)):

That's fantastic.

Nir ([08:37](#)):

She's quite a big part of this book.

MBS ([08:37](#)):

Nir, you tell a great story. This is one of the reasons you're such a popular speaker around the world is like it's funny to hear that chapter. And it's funny the way you tell it, but funny also because we're like, "Oh my God, I recognize all of that." The thing I would love you to talk more about is that moment of, as you called it, surfing the urge. And then noticing the discomfort of the new habit and you're like, "I feel irritated and scratchy and anxious and unsure." What I'm hearing from you is you've got to find a way of managing your way through that. How do you help people just get better at that moment of vulnerability and weakness?

Nir ([09:28](#)):

This was a huge revelation for me because we tend to blame what we call the external triggers. External triggers are the pings, the dings, the rings, all the



notifications, all the things in our environment that can lead us towards distraction. That's what we tend to blame. But it turns out, in my research over the past five years, I discovered that external triggers are not the leading cause of distraction. The leading cause of distraction are not what is happening outside of us, but rather most distraction begins from within us. These are the internal triggers. Internal triggers are uncomfortable emotional states that we seek to escape from. So one of the biggest aha moments I had in writing this book and applying these techniques to my own life is this mantra that I repeat to myself, which is that time management is pain management.

Nir ([10:18](#)):

That if we don't understand what is the discomfort that we are trying to escape, whether it's loneliness, check Facebook, uncertainty, Google, boredom, lots of boredom relievers, right? Check the news so you can take your mind off of what's happening in your life by distracting yourself with what's happening with somebody's life halfway across the world. Whether it's Pinterest or the news or stock price or sports scores, lots of these things, they take us away from these uncomfortable sensations of boredom. So procrastination distraction is not a character flaw, it's not some kind of-

MBS ([10:56](#)):

Moral failure.

Nir ([10:57](#)):

... problem that something's broken with you. Nothing's wrong with you, it's simply an emotion regulation problem. I think most people don't realize that before we can manage our time, we have to learn how to manage our emotions, manage our pain. So that's where those internal triggers, mastering internal triggers is the very first step. I've read, over the past five years now, every bit of research on time management and productivity, and I've read pretty much all the research there is to read and none of the techniques, none



of the life hacks work if you don't tackle this area first. Of having new habits that help us cope with that emotional discomfort in a healthy way that leads to traction rather than an unhealthy way that leads to distraction.

MBS ([11:39](#)):

I mean, you talked about some of those... you labeled some of those emotions, there's loneliness, there's uncertainty, there's boredom. Are those the big three or are there other kind of states that are internal triggers that will take us off track from our commitments?

Nir ([11:57](#)):

Oh, there's a long, long list. Especially, now in the days of COVID, I mean, the emotion, the internal triggers have been ratcheted up now between the uncertainty in the world. The loneliness that we get from having to be in quarantine, the boredom, the uncertainty, the anxiety, the stress. All of these things can lead us to search for escape, and so how do we escape discomfort? We look for whatever relieves that pain reliably. Whether it's too much news, too much booze, too much football, too much Facebook, we will always find something to take our mind off of that discomfort. And that is the nature of distraction. It's what you do in response to that discomfort.

Nir ([12:40](#)):

Because I think there's a myth in the self-help community that feeling bad is bad, and that's not true. But, in fact, discomfort, disquiet hood, helps us move forward. It's when we recognize that we want, that we crave, that we desire, that can actually be a very helpful sensation if we use it as rocket fuel to propel us towards traction rather than trying to escape these uncomfortable sensations and leading us towards distraction.



MBS ([13:08](#)):

I love that. It's a paradox that actually being able to sit in the discomfort longer provides acceleration and direction out of that rather than a kind of, "Let me meander around this and get stuck with temporary relief." Rather than a more permanent sense of purpose and traction in your life.

Nir ([13:29](#)):

Right, absolutely.

MBS ([13:30](#)):

Yeah, this has been brilliant. Thank you. Thank you for picking such two satisfying more pages to read. Look, for people who want to find out more about you and your work... obviously, they can find the books in good bookstores but where can they find out more about you?

Nir ([13:44](#)):

Sure, so my blog is at nirandfar.com. Nir spelt like my first name, so that's N-I-R-and far.com. The book is called-

MBS ([13:51](#)):

This is a man who loves a good pun, so you can tell that from his writing. So that's right [nirandfar](http://nirandfar.com).

Nir ([13:58](#)):

That's right. Then the book is called *Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life*. And if you go to nirandfar.com, on the homepage, there's actually a complimentary 80-page workbook that we actually couldn't fit into the book. The book became too long. But there's actually a workbook that you can use, whether you buy the book or not, doesn't matter, you can download that workbook and get started on your journey to becoming indistractable right away.



MBS ([14:19](#)):

Nir, thank you. This has been absolutely brilliant. It's so nice of you to join us late in the evening, your time, in Singapore. So thank you very much.

Nir ([14:26](#)):

My pleasure. Thanks so much for having me.

MBS ([14:28](#)):

For all of you who are watching, just a reminder, that the 2 Pages Festival is brought to you by the Year of Living Brilliantly, a curation of 52 extraordinary teachers. Every week, you get a two to six minute video from them teaching some of their best stuff and it last a whole year. Absolutely free, all available at [mbs.works](#). Thank you for listening. It's lovely to have you listen all the way through. My usual request, pass the word along. If you like this, find somebody who else might like it and share it because word of mouth is the best way this little podcast grows. If you really love it, give me some love on whatever your podcast platform is or a view or some stars or whatever it might be. And I just want to say and appreciate you and say thank you, you're awesome, and you're doing great.