

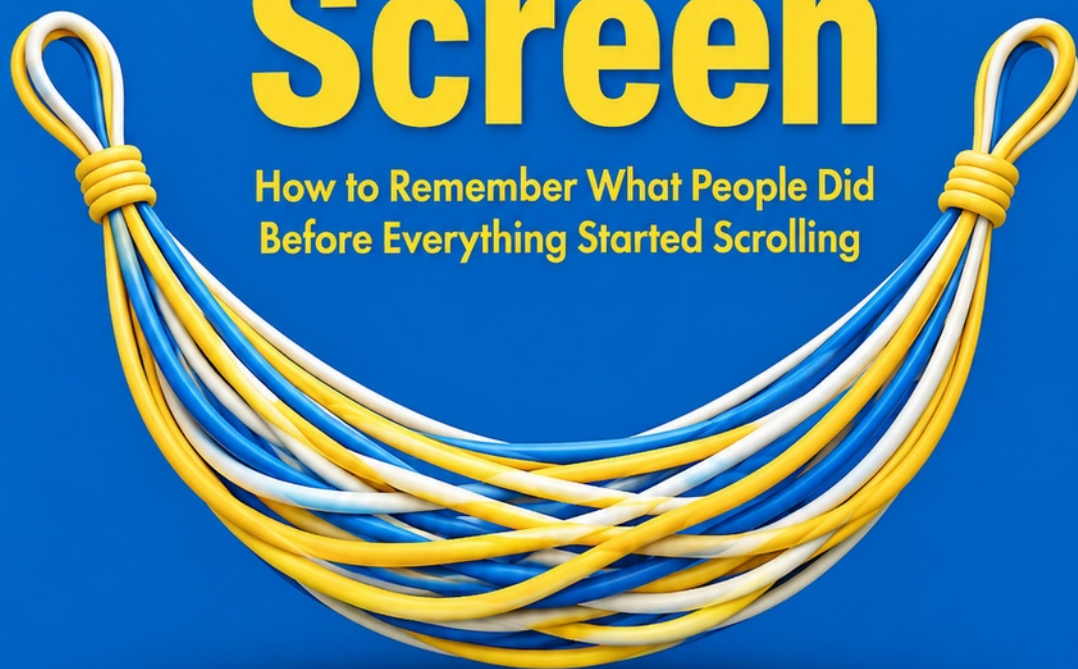
MAX PARADOX

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

Self-Help with a Sense of Humor ;)

I Can't Relax Without a Screen

How to Remember What People Did
Before Everything Started Scrolling



We have a problem. Relax. We can solve it—and
have a laugh along the way.

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INTRO

You sit down on the couch after a long day with one noble objective: relax.

Nothing ambitious. No personal growth. No learning Mandarin. No finally understanding retirement accounts. You just want your brain to stop behaving like it has seventeen browser tabs open, three of them playing music, and one asking whether you accept cookies.

So you reach for your phone.

Obviously.

You check one message. Then the weather, despite having windows. Then Instagram. Then a video. Then another video, because the first video ended and apparently this constitutes an emergency requiring immediate replacement content. Twenty-seven minutes later, you are watching a man in Ohio restore a rusty lawn mower you do not own, have never wanted, and now somehow feel emotionally invested in.

This is relaxation in the twenty-first century.

Your body is technically resting. You are horizontal. Nobody is asking you to answer an email. Your feet have achieved full sofa status.

Your brain, meanwhile, is working the night shift.

The strange part is that screens have become so closely connected with downtime that many of us no longer know what relaxing without one is supposed to look like. Remove the phone, television, tablet, laptop, gaming console, smartwatch, and possibly the refrigerator display that tells you the milk is getting nervous, and an uncomfortable question appears:

Now what?

You could read a book, except many books now live on screens. You could listen to music, but the music is on your phone, which means you first have to unlock it, which means you see a notification, which means twelve minutes later you are reading comments written by strangers arguing about whether someone cooked pasta correctly.

You could go for a walk.

Without headphones?

Easy there, pioneer.

For most of human history, people had enormous amounts of time in which absolutely nothing scrolled. They sat on porches. They stared out windows. They walked places without receiving live updates about eight hundred people they barely knew. They cooked dinner without simultaneously consuming a podcast, a television show, three messages, and a short video explaining five signs that they might be emotionally exhausted.

Today, silence can feel suspicious.

You finish lunch and immediately reach for something. You stand in line and reach for something. You wait thirty seconds for the microwave and reach for something. You go to the bathroom and apparently require entertainment programming. A red light lasts forty-five seconds and your brain reacts as if authorities have placed you in solitary confinement.

The phone is not entirely to blame. It did not break into your home and force itself into your hand. You invited it in because it is genuinely useful, frequently entertaining, socially important, and extremely good at removing tiny pockets of boredom before you even notice they exist.

That last part matters.

Boredom used to arrive naturally. You waited for a bus. You stared around. You thought about things. Maybe you noticed a weird building. Maybe you remembered something. Maybe your brain wandered into a completely unnecessary debate about whether you would survive if civilization collapsed and the only food available was canned beans.

Now boredom gets intercepted at the border.

The moment nothing is happening, something happens.

Scroll.

Refresh.

Play.

Check.

Tap.

Congratulations. You have successfully prevented yourself from experiencing eight consecutive seconds of unstimulated consciousness.

This does not mean screens are evil. This book is not going to ask you to move into a cabin, throw your phone into a lake, grow potatoes, and communicate exclusively through handwritten postcards. That would create several new problems, including the fact that lakes do not offer device insurance.

The goal is much less dramatic.

You need to remember how to rest without requiring a constant stream of incoming material.

Because consuming content and recovering are not the same thing.

Sometimes they overlap. Watching a good movie can be relaxing. Playing a game can be relaxing. Laughing at videos your friend sends you can absolutely be relaxing, particularly when the alternative is discussing mortgage rates.

But automatic screen use often creates a weird imitation of rest. You stop doing work, yet your attention keeps sprinting. New image. New headline. New joke. New message. New outrage. New person renovating a kitchen. New person explaining why another person renovated the kitchen incorrectly.

Your thumb is relaxing beautifully.

The rest of you may not be.

This is why you can spend two hours “doing nothing” online and somehow finish feeling more scattered than when you started. You gave your body a break but kept feeding your attention small pieces of information at the speed of an airport conveyor belt.

Then you wonder why reading ten pages of a book feels difficult.

Nothing is wrong with your ability to relax. You have simply trained relaxation to require input.

That is fixable.

Not with discipline worthy of a Navy SEAL. Not with a thirty-day digital detox conducted in a mountain monastery. And definitely not with another app that sends you notifications reminding you to use your phone less.

That solution has always had a certain architectural flaw.

Instead, we are going to rebuild your ability to tolerate—and eventually enjoy—slower forms of downtime. You will learn how to create screen-free moments that do not feel like

punishment, how to deal with the automatic urge to check something, how to rediscover activities that are enjoyable without becoming projects, and how to make boredom useful again without turning it into a spiritual achievement.

You will also learn the important difference between choosing a screen and defaulting to one.

That distinction changes everything.

If you deliberately decide to watch a movie tonight, wonderful. Watch the movie. Eat something unnecessarily crunchy. Ignore anyone who says you should be optimizing this time.

But if you intended to rest for twenty minutes and instead spent ninety minutes bouncing between five apps because your hand kept opening them before your brain had submitted the paperwork, that is not really a choice.

That is a habit wearing your pajamas.

The good news is that you do not need to eliminate screens to change the relationship. You only need to create enough space for other kinds of rest to become available again.

At first, they may feel strangely empty.

You make tea and sit down.

No phone.

You look around.

The room appears to contain walls.

You hear a clock.

Apparently it has been there for years.

Your brain immediately proposes several urgent alternatives. Perhaps check email. Perhaps investigate whether that actor from the show is married. Perhaps

compare air fryers even though you already own an air fryer and have never once complained about its performance.

This is the point where most people conclude, "I guess I just can't relax without my phone."

You can.

You are simply out of practice.

And practice is much less dramatic than transformation. It means ten minutes here. A small rule there. One activity that does not involve a glowing rectangle. A few moments in which boredom arrives and you do not immediately call security.

Eventually, something interesting happens.

Your mind starts supplying its own material again.

You notice things. Ideas appear. Conversations last longer. A walk becomes a walk instead of mobile content consumption with legs. Waiting becomes mildly boring instead of intolerable. Even television gets better when you actually watch one thing instead of watching one thing while checking four other things.

The objective is not to return to 1987.

You do not need a cassette player, a landline, or wallpaper with tiny flowers.

You just need to recover one surprisingly modern luxury: being unavailable to content for a while.

That is what this book will help you do—practically, gradually, and without treating your phone like a radioactive artifact.

We are not declaring war on screens.

We are just reminding them they are furniture.

Not management.

Chapter 1 - When Rest Became Another Feed

You get home, drop your keys somewhere you will later accuse the universe of hiding them, take off your shoes, and announce that you are done for the day.

Then you sit down and immediately begin consuming information.

Messages. News. Videos. Posts. Comments. Recommendations. A review of a restaurant in a city you are not visiting. Someone explaining the correct way to fold a fitted sheet. A stranger revealing the “three biggest mistakes” people make when buying olive oil.

Twenty minutes ago, your brain was tired from work.

Now it is tired from learning that you have apparently been buying olive oil incorrectly for years.

This is one of the central problems with modern relaxation: we often confuse stopping one activity with resting. Work stops, so we assume recovery has begun. But your attention does not care whether the incoming information is labeled “work,” “entertainment,” or “a surprisingly detailed argument about cordless vacuum cleaners.”

Attention still has to process it.

That does not make every screen activity exhausting. A familiar sitcom may be exactly what you need. A game can absorb you in a pleasant way. Calling someone you like can improve your evening considerably, assuming the call does not begin with, “Do you have a minute?” which has never once meant a minute.

The issue is not screens.

The issue is automatic stimulation.

You finish one thing and immediately request another. Then another. Then another. Your brain never gets the small empty spaces in which it can reduce speed.

Imagine finishing a twelve-hour road trip and deciding to relax by driving around the neighborhood because technically this is recreational driving.

The scenery changed.

The engine is still running.

The Resting Position of the Human Thumb

Watch what happens during an ordinary pause.

The elevator is coming.

Phone.

The microwave has forty seconds left.

Phone.

Your friend goes to the restroom at a restaurant.

Phone.

A website takes slightly longer than expected to load, so while waiting for the website on your laptop, you check another website on your phone.

Humanity waited thousands of years for this level of efficiency.

You may not even consciously decide to do it. Your hand reaches before your mind has formed a request. That matters because habits thrive on transitions: after finishing something, while waiting, during uncertainty, before sleep, after waking, while eating, while sitting down.

The screen fills the gap before you have time to notice there was a gap.

This creates a loop:

You feel a tiny moment of boredom, discomfort, restlessness, or emptiness.

You check something.

The feeling disappears.

Your brain learns: excellent, whenever nothing is happening, we know what to do.

Repeat this hundreds of times and eventually “nothing happening” starts to feel like a problem.

Not a major problem. You are not standing in the kitchen screaming because Spotify is unavailable.

Usually.

It is subtler. You feel itchy. Impatient. You reach for your phone without purpose. You open an app, realize there is nothing interesting there, close it, and then reopen the same app six minutes later as if the employees may have restocked.

This is not stupidity.

It is training.

And if you trained it, you can train something else.

You Are Not Bad at Relaxing

People often describe the problem as a personality defect.

“I can’t sit still.”

“I need background noise.”

“I get bored immediately.”

“I don’t know how people just sit there.”