ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - NIR EYAL
(Katie Elliott & Nir Eyal)

On today's show it's my pleasure to welcome Wall Street Journal bestselling author, Nir Eyal. Since publishing *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products* in 2013, Nir's interest has changed direction. His latest book, *Indistractable*, explores ways we can hack back against the habit-forming products in our lives.

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Nir, it's fantastic to talk with you - hello!

Hi Katie, it's so good to be here. Thanks for having me.

I'd love to find out a little bit more about how you've come to do the work that you're doing today.

Yeah. So let's take it back real far. I'll take you back to my childhood. So I as a child I struggled with obesity. I remember going to Fat Camp. I remember my parents taking me to the doctor and the doctor looking at a chart and saying, "Okay, here's normal. Here's overweight. Here's you." I mention this experience because I remember from a very early age being fascinated by how products, how something outside of me - in this case, food - could have such an impact on my behaviour. And I distinctly remember for many years of my life feeling out of control, because of my inability to stop eating food that I knew was bad for me. And I think along that journey, finding a way to have control over what I eat was kind of a, it was really formative experience in my life and I think it kicked off this fascination with how all sorts of products, not just food - and today, you know what I study in terms of technology is very similar, right? I think the way we use food and how sometimes we overuse food is very similar and analogous to how we consume technology. It's not something that we can completely avoid, like an addictive drug. We have to eat, we have to use technology these days, but it's up to us to learn how to put it in its place. And so that was a very formative experience.

Then I'll fast forward many years. I started a couple of companies, the last of which was at the intersection of gaming and advertising and from that vantage point I had this ability to kind of have a bird's eye view over these two industries that utilise the psychology of mind control - let's be honest here - to get people to do what they want. It doesn't mean we can't necessarily make our own choices. I do believe in free choice, of course - but it does have an influence on what we buy and what we consume. And so that's where I started writing and researching the deeper psychology behind how products and services change our behaviours. And

that became a course that I taught at Stanford for many years at the design school and the business school there. And then that turned into this book, 'Hooked', which was published about five years ago. And bringing us to the present day, I'm going to publish a book this year, in 2019, called 'Indistractable', which is coming out soon.

I'd love to find out a bit more about 'Indistractable' because I'm working really hard to be a bit less distractible here, but if you've got any top tips you could share with me, that would be much appreciated.

Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah. So it's kind of an insider's guide to reclaiming your brain. You know, I spent many years in the tech industry and I appreciate how technology can change our behaviour for the better. I mean, this is why I do what I do. You know, I didn't write 'Hooked' for the benefit of Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and Slack. They already know these techniques. They didn't need my help. The reason I wrote the book was for the little guy, it's for everybody else out there who was building a startup and who wanted to figure out how to make the kind of product or service that people would want to use as opposed to feeling like they had to use some terrible software interacting with our government services or at work or, you know, whatever it might be. The real idea behind the book was how do we kind of use some of the secret psychology behind some of the world's stickiest products to build healthy habits in people's lives. That's why I wrote 'Hooked'.

Now, fast forward several years and the problem today is not so much what it was when I wrote 'Hooked', which was software developers were telling me, "We've got this great technology, but we can't get people to actually use our product." You know, why aren't people using these apps to help them exercise more or save money or whatever the case might be? Why can't we get them to use our products? And so that's the problem I was fixing with 'Hooked'. Now the problem is that these designers have gotten so good at changing our behaviour that in many ways we are overusing these technologies. And so that's really what 'Indistractable' tries to address is - how do we do what we say we are going to do? And I started the book thinking, you know, what every book in this genre tells you is that technology is the problem, right? I mean, my bookshelves behind me, you know, are full of books that tell you basically, you know, Google's melting your brain and Facebook is melting your brain and slack is melting your brain. And all of these technologies are super horrible. They're all, you know, doing this to you. And in my research I realised that's not true. That, let's be honest with ourselves, it's really easy to deflect blame, but we do this to ourselves. And the problem is much bigger than just technology distraction. It's all sorts of distractions, right? The fact is that distraction is not a new problem. Socrates and Aristotle were debating the

nature of Akrasia - this tendency that we have to do things against our better interests - 2,500 years ago, they were talking about how distracting the world was. And before Facebook and Instagram, it was the television. And then before that it was the radio. And then before that it was a pinball machine, the comic book and rock and roll music. But every generation has its distraction and it's not going away. You know, by shaking our fist at these companies and saying, "Why do you make products that make me want to use them all the time?" That doesn't make it go away. Right? That's not gonna happen. So my answer is to learn how to deal with these technologies to make sure that we can put them in their place - all sorts of distractions, not just technological distractions, any sort of distraction - by fundamentally understanding the deeper psychology behind what's going on. But you know, I think one of the problems with the world today is that nuance has disappeared. You know, we want the good guys versus the bad guys. The tech companies are evil and they're, you know, infecting our brains and hijacking us and everything is good and evil. It's just not the way the world works. There's a lot more nuance here. And the fact is we need to start looking at ourselves a little bit more because what I learned in the course of my research is that distraction always starts from within. That fundamentally, the reason we don't do what we say we're going to do is because we get distracted, because we do something against our better interests, because we are trying to escape an uncomfortable psychological state and we can go into that deeper psychology. But that was kind of a big revelation for me. When you look at the core of addiction, of overuse, of distraction, it all comes from the same core of trying to flee an uncomfortable state. And so the first step has to be learning to cope with discomfort. I like to say that time management is pain management.

Can you elaborate a little bit more on that?

Sure. Yeah, so it all comes down to what many people incorrectly believe drives human behaviour. You know, for decades now, people have believed what Freud called the Pleasure Principle, and the Pleasure Principle says that human behaviour is motivated by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, right? Pretty simple. Totally incorrect. Turns out that humans are not motivated by pleasure and pain. It's all pain. It's all pain.

Really?

Yes, that even - think about it - even the desire for something that brings you pleasure, desire itself is painful, wanting, craving, the brain neurologically speaking is driven by the desire to satiate discomfort. It's called the homeostatic response. Think about it physically, right? If you go outside and it's cold, you put on a coat because it feels uncomfortable to be cold. Then you go back inside. It's hot. You take the coat off. If you feel hungry, you feel hunger pains. That hurts. That doesn't feel good. You eat. When you feel stuffed, that doesn't feel good, you stop

eating. So those are physiological states. The same rule applies to psychological states, that when we feel lonely, we check Facebook. When we're uncertain, we Google, when we're feeling bored, we look at the news, we look at stock prices, sports scores, Reddit, all of these products and services cater to these uncomfortable emotional states. So any behaviour, not just distraction, any behaviour is motivated by the need to escape discomfort. And so that has to be the first step for how we manage distraction.

So that discomfort or pain is basically acting as a trigger or a cue for some sort of habitual behaviour. Is that what's going on?

That's exactly right. I, in fact, in my model, I call it an internal trigger. It's something that prompts you to action that comes from within you. So as opposed to an external trigger - that ping, the ding, the ring, the thing that tells you what to do next - an internal trigger is cued from within you. And so the model, I can kind of paint a picture for your listeners. The model that I use in 'Indistractable' - think of two arrows going like a number line in either direction, left and right. To the right is traction - actions that you take that you want to do, things that move you towards what you want in life. That's traction. Now, what's the opposite of traction? Distraction. Distractions are actions that you take that move you away from what you want in life. Okay, so you've got to the right, you've got traction to the Left, you've got distraction. Now look at how both words, traction and distraction, and in the same words, they both end with the word 'action', reminding us that traction and distraction are not things that happen to us. These are things that we do. They are our actions, but that's not how most people think about distraction. Most people, when they think about distraction, they say, "Oh, you know, I had that big project I needed to complete, but then the phone rang and I got distracted". But what they're doing is conflating the external trigger, the thing in their environment, that ring of the phone, with what they did in response to it. So if the external trigger leads you to distraction, leads you to something you didn't intend to do, that's distraction. But if it leads you to something you wanted to do, that's great. Right? An external trigger, for example, your alarm clock that gets you to wake up in the morning, that leads you to an act of traction. That's what you plan to do. That's what you wanted to do. But if it leads you away from what you wanted to do, that's a distraction. So the same rule goes for these internal triggers. What you do in response to a negative emotional state can also lead you towards traction or distraction.

It sounds like there's a fundamental misunderstanding there. It's as if we imagine that we're being passive, that this thing from outside is actually triggering us and we don't really have any control over that.

Yes.

But presumably if we are highly motivated to be doing something or if we're not in a state of discomfort or pain, we're going to be less susceptible to that external trigger?

That's exactly right. And this has to do with all distractions. So what all distractions and overuse or addictions all have in common is the desire to escape an uncomfortable reality, right? That's what all of these things have in common. And so you have two choices. Either you can change the circumstance and change the pain so to speak, or you can learn to cope. And so in the book, you know, I talk about these sources of pain. The greatest source of pain of these internal triggers in most people's lives is the workplace. And I did some fascinating research as I dove into this realm of how there is actually a certain type of work environment that is not only correlated with mental illness, depression and anxiety, but can actually cause depression and anxiety. And so of course the response if you up someone's level of depression and anxiety, guess what? They're going to look for relief. They're going to use whatever is at their disposal to escape that uncomfortable emotional state. And so the real source of the problem has to be to understand where are these internal triggers coming from and the ones that we can fix, we definitely should fix. So I have a whole chapter in how do we create an 'Indistractible' workplace by changing the company culture. And I look through a bunch of different examples from the Boston Consulting Group to the company Slack to many different companies who have figured out that it's not about the tech per se, that's not what causes tech overuse. It's about this company culture that perpetuates a cycle of responsiveness where people aren't allowed to raise their hands and say, "Hey, this isn't working for me. I don't like this". And it's that type of work environment where people don't feel psychological safety, where they don't feel like they can talk about their problems. And this is, by the way, the same exact thing that happens in dysfunctional families, dysfunctional relationships. Anytime that a person has to keep their thoughts, their grievances inside, because they fear retribution, that's where you get this preponderance of these internal triggers. And of course they burst out so many times in unhealthy ways and addictions and overuse and distraction.

That's fascinating. So there's loads of research coming out at the moment that looks like it suggests that technology can be associated with increased mental health problems, increased isolation, all of that kind of thing. I'm on your mailing list. I've read a lot of the articles you've written and I'm really interested in this subject as someone who has had a long history of mental health problems as someone who's got two teenage sons who are very, very occupied with various forms of technology.

Yeah.

It's very easy to fall prey to scaremongering, I guess, in the same way that in the old days people would say, "Look, that's really unhealthy. He's got his nose in a book". It's very easy for us to demonise technology and to demonise apps, all of that kind of thing. My instinct is to try and find, as you say, a more nuanced view of that because it clearly isn't actually that black and white, but - what have you discovered about the links between technology use and mental health, for example?

Yeah, so the key word, what you said that is often forgotten is 'associated'.

Yeah.

That's the nuance here that's often forgotten, that there's a correlational effect but not causation. And in fact, even the correlational effect is pretty weak. What we see happening is that, you know, addiction has these three critical things that need to be in place. Kind of like, remember the fire triangle when you learned in school about how do you create a fire? A fire needs oxygen, it needs fuel, it needs heat. You need three things at once. Well, addiction also needs three things. Addiction needs a product - needs the thing that is used. You need the person who is susceptible towards addiction. And then the third factor is you need a pain, a source of pain, which they cannot cope with otherwise. So it's only when you have these three things at once, and this is what is so often, you know we talked about nuance, this is what is so often forgotten is that when it comes to addiction, the history of how people think about this is all about the product. It's only about that first, right? So, you know, drugs are bad - drugs cause addiction. Well, no, that's not true, right? You know, millions of women when they have a caesarian section every year are given Fentanyl. Fentanyl is a highly addictive - I mean, it's better than heroin, right? - it's incredibly potent stuff. A tiny fraction of those women ever get addicted. Well, why is that? If you think about alcohol, you know, for example, how many people have a drink with dinner? And there's nothing wrong with that. They don't become alcoholics. A very tiny percentage of people become alcoholics, and it's the same exact thing with gaming. It's the same exact thing with Facebook or Instagram. Do some people become addicted? Absolutely. But you need to have all three. You need to have the product, the person who has a susceptibility towards addiction, and a pain that that they cannot cope with otherwise. And then you get addiction.

Where I think this discussion has really gone off the deep end is that there are so many tech critics today who don't realise this nuance who don't understand the psychology of addiction, don't understand the difference between addiction and overuse. And what has happened is that we've allowed this to become an excuse. We've actually fallen into the hands of these tech companies by calling these

things addictive, by saying that they're hijacking our brain. You know, there's a phenomenon in psychology called 'learned helplessness', which says that over time we give up. We stop fighting because we think, "Well, there's nothing we can do, right? These tech products are so well made. They're so addictive. They're hijacking our brain, they're irresistible". And so people act accordingly. And studies have found that the number one determinant of whether someone can change their behaviour is their belief in their own power to do so. So when we give these things more power and more credit than they deserve, we're letting them win. And so the message I want to get out there is that you are only powerless if you think you are. So don't believe this BS that there's nothing you can do. There's so many things that we can do. And that's really what 'Indistractable' is about. It's meant to empower people as opposed to throwing in the towel and saying, "Well, if the government doesn't regulate these companies, well, what can I do about it?" That's BS.

See, what really appeals to me is that there are obviously so many benefits associated with the different platforms, with the different forms of software and technology that we're encountering in our everyday lives - we can't really deny that they do bring enormous benefits in a range of ways. Last year I deleted my Facebook account because I felt that my relationship with it wasn't healthy, but I'd much prefer not to have an all or nothing experience of that because I'm aware that Facebook is a great place for building communities and engaging with people. It has all sorts of assets. So I'm trying to find a way of developing a healthy response to a form of technology which wasn't addictive for me, but I didn't find that I felt very good when I was using it. And so I want to have a new relationship with that rather than just giving up and saying, I'm never going to use it again.

Absolutely.

Have you got any pointers, from what you've been learning - have you got any pointers that could help somebody like me who would like to have a healthier relationship, let's say with the use of social media?

Yeah, and this is terrific. Again, you know the nuance here. Some people are confused: "Wait a minute - you wrote a book about how to build habit-forming products and now you're telling people how to unhook?" And I think that's great. Yeah, there's a quote, I can't remember who said it - that wisdom is found in the contradictions and that's exactly right. There's nuance here, right? Technology is wonderful if we know how to use it correctly, if we figure out how to get the benefits without the drawbacks. And so if a product like Facebook isn't serving you, great, uninstall it, I think that's wonderful. But the idea here is how do we make sure that it serves us as opposed to us serving it?

So let me walk you through very quickly this four part model. So remember that picture I drew for you mentally of traction to one side, distraction to the other. We've got internal triggers and we've got external triggers - two arrows pointing to the centre, pointing to 'action' in the middle. So let's go around in a circle clockwise.

Starting with these internal triggers, the first thing we could do is to learn to cope with discomfort. There's all sorts of techniques that we can use that I describe in the book about how we can reimagine our discomfort. We can reimagine the triggers. We can reimagine the task. We can look at the task we're doing differently. If there's something that we're trying to focus on that we feel constantly distracted from, we can use a technique called 'Play Anything' to reimagine that task. We can reimagine the discomfort itself in some ways. We can use these techniques - many of the techniques I describe help us cope with a discomfort in healthier ways. There's a technique I use all the time called the '10 minute rule', where if there's a temptation, whether it's to, you know, go online and do something I don't want to do - let's say I want to write and I'm tempted to check email or look at Google or maybe I want to eat something unhealthy that I know is tempting me. So instead of giving in to that temptation right away, I give myself this 10 minute rule of 'I can give into that temptation in 10 minutes, but in those 10 minutes I have to write down the distraction. I have to write down the internal trigger, what I'm feeling, and I just have to kind of feel that sensation for just a few minutes'. 90% of the time, that sensation just washes over you like a wave. It's called 'surfing the urge'. So that's just the very, very tip of the iceberg. There's a lot more we can do there.

The second step after we've managed internal triggers is to make time for traction. So now we're on the the right hand side of that arrow pointing towards traction. How do we make more time to do the things that we want to do? Well, it turns out, believe it or not, that only 10% of the population keeps a calendar. 10% of the people out there keep a calendar. Now here's the thing, we have no right to say that something is distracting unless we know what it is distracting us from. So when I talk to people about this problem and they say, "Oh my God, everything's so distracting these days. You've got Facebook, you've got my boss yelling at me, my kids, my…. aargh, so much distraction!" And I say, "Wow, I'm really sorry about that. Can I see what you were distracted from? What was it that you planned to do that you didn't do?" And they sheepishly take out their phone and they open up their calendar app and they show it to me and it's blank. There's nothing on it. It's just white space. Maybe there's a dentist appointment or something. So that doesn't count. You have no right to say something is distracting unless you know

what it is distracting you from. And in this day and age, that means accounting for every minute of your day. You need to use a technique called time-boxing where you are planning in advance what it is you want to do during every minute of your day. If I showed you my calendar, you'd see every minute is accounted for, right? Because now that's the only way that you can tell the difference between traction and distraction, is to know what it is you plan to do. And so there's a lot more you can do here. So there's a lot of comments. I know that people are thinking, "Well, I can't do that because of this and I can't do that because of that". I answer all of these objections in the book. We don't have too much time for it, but there's lots of, I'm going to walk you through exactly how to time-box appropriately. But for the sake of of moving through the model, the third step, now we're talking about those external triggers that influence our actions towards traction or distraction.

The third step is to hack back the external triggers. So a big part of 'Hooked" and how products form these habits are these external triggers, right? These pings that prompt us to action and these are used to hack our behaviour, so to speak, to get us to use these products. Well, here's the thing. We can hack back. Two thirds of people with a smart phone never change their notification settings. Did you hear that correctly? Two thirds of people with a smartphone haven't taken the 10 minutes to change their notifications settings, and you're going to tell me how technology is hijacking our brains when you haven't taken 10 minutes to turn off those notifications? The way you do this is by starting with a simple question - is the external trigger serving me or am I serving it? There's nothing wrong with an external trigger. Again, if an external trigger reminds you to go to the gym or do something you plan to do, great, that's a useful external trigger. But if it's not serving you, you have got to dispose of it. You have to put it away. And so you take those few minutes, change your notification settings. Now it turns out that when I did my research, that's actually a small part of the distractions we encounter in our day. What turns out to be a much more pernicious source of these external triggers is the work environment, right? So open office floor plans - oh, the bain of distraction. And so I talk about techniques that you can use to hack back external triggers on your phone, on your desktop, in physical space, all of these areas where you might get distracted.

And then finally, the last set of techniques, this has to do with ways to prevent distraction. This is called preventing distraction with pacts. That's the fourth step. So this is what we do last after we've managed internal triggers, after we've made time for traction, after we've hacked back those external triggers, the last thing we should do is to use what's called a pre-commitment device. A promise, a pact that we make to ourselves to make sure as a fail safe that we don't rely back on a

distraction. So how do we do that? There are three types of pacts that we can make. We can make an effort pact, a price pact or an identity pact. An effort pact is something that we do that inflicts some kind of work, some kind of friction in our way to make sure we don't get distracted. So for example, in my house, every night at 10:00 PM the Internet shuts off. Today I have a special router that does this automatically called the Eero. But actually about five years ago, I went to the hardware store and I bought an outlet timer and I plugged in my router into this outlet timer so that my Internet router shut off every night at 10:00 PM. Now I could go underneath my desk and I could unplug it and replug it in, but now that takes effort. That takes work and so I'm less likely to do it right? When the Internet shuts off at 10:00 PM - oh okay, great. that's what I wanted to do. I did not want to be on the internet past 10:00 PM and now to do something I don't want to do to get distracted, I would have to exert effort. So I've increased the amount of effort that it would take to get distracted. The next type of pact is a price pact, so this is where you inflict some kind of cost to a distraction. So it could be a bet, it could be some kind of monetary cost, it could be a social cost. That's another type of pact. And then finally, another type of pact that I think few people know about is called an identity pact. So anything that you can do to solidify the way you see yourself, right? So we know that longterm behaviour change necessitates identity change. So let me give you a good example. Every religion in the world, every major religion I should say, has people who proselytise the religion, right? And on one hand you think, oh well the reason they do this because they want to find more converts, right? Well, I would argue actually that that practice is really about the preacher and the teacher more than the convert. Because every time you tell somebody about what you are, the noun that you are, you are reinforcing your identity. And what we find is that when you become a noun, you are basically making it easier to make those set of decisions in the future. So, you know, a religious Jew doesn't ponder, "Ooh, should I have that BLT today?" A devout Muslim doesn't think to themselves, "Ooh, you know, should I have that beer or not?" It's just something they don't do. It's part of their identity and their identity pact doesn't let them do what they don't want to do. So the reason the book is called 'Indistractible' is because this is the noun I want you to become. I want you to say to yourself and say to others that you don't get distracted. You don't do these behaviours that the rest of the world seems to do. You don't do them - why? Because you are 'Indistractible'.

Thank you so much. Do you know what, I normally edit these interviews down to about 20 minutes, but there isn't anything that I could cut out there - so this one's just going to have to be a little bit longer.

Alright!

So I ask each guest if they can suggest a 'Little Challenge' for the listeners at home. So is there anything that you can think of that somebody sitting at home listening right now could do that's not reliant on them having any particular equipment or state of physical health or skill or whatever it is - it's something they could easily do, and if they did it regularly, they would see some kind of benefit?

Oh man, there's so much. I gave so many little tidbits here. I think that probably it's just to become familiar with the technology you already have. You don't need to go buy any new technology. Just use the technology you have an understand the settings, right? Understand how to use 'Do not disturb mode' on your phone. Understand how to change the notification settings. I mean, this takes just a few minutes and can have a massive impact on how distracted you feel throughout your day.

That's wonderful advice. Well, there's a little bit of music playing there.

Sorry there. My wife is next to me. Her phone just rang. That's an example of an external trigger there.

Thank you. Fantastic that you managed to build that in specially. Nir, I'm so grateful to you. It's fascinating to hear what you've got to say. I'm very, very much looking forward to reading the book and I wish you the best of luck with getting that out to the market. Thank you so much for your time today.

My pleasure. Thank you. And keep in touch.