

The Slow Down Method

Attention, deliberate work and a pace you can keep



THE UNPLAIN TEAM

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A note before you begin

This is a small book about a large habit: the habit of hurrying. Most of us did not choose it. It came with the job, or the phone, or the quiet understanding in every office that the person who answers fastest cares most. Somewhere along the way, speed stopped being a tool and became a tone of voice.

The Slow Down Method is not a system. There is no app, no planner, no acronym. It is a set of ideas about attention, three routines and six exercises you can do with a kitchen timer. It is not a promise that you will feel calm by Friday. It is a plain account of what attention costs and what it buys, and a practical way to spend it better. Read the chapters in order the first time. Then put the book down and go for a walk. That is the first exercise.

What attention actually is

A narrow beam

Picture the last time you really worked. Not the last time you were at work, but the last time you were inside a task: the spreadsheet that finally made sense, the paragraph that came together, the bug that gave way after an hour of staring. If you can remember it at all, you probably remember it as a kind of absence. The room went away. The clock went away. You surfaced later, slightly surprised, with something made.



Attention is a narrow beam: it lights one thing at a time, and everything else waits in the dark.

That is attention doing what it is for. It is a narrow beam, and for anything demanding it is a serial one: it does one thing, then another thing. Daniel Kahneman described the slow, effortful mode of thinking that handles hard problems as a limited capacity that tires, resists being summoned, and cannot run two demanding jobs at once [1]. The fast, automatic mode can hum along while you walk or drive. The slow mode cannot. It needs the whole beam.

This is not a character flaw. It is the architecture. Everything in this book rests on the fact that your capacity for difficult thought is small, precious and easily spilled.

What switching costs

Sophie Leroy gave people a task, interrupted them before they finished, moved them to a second task, and then tested how well they did on the second one. People who had been pulled off an unfinished job performed worse on the next job, and the effect was stronger when the first job had been left hanging under time pressure [2]. She called what lingers attention residue. Part of you is still in the room you left. It is the reason you read the same sentence three times after checking your messages.

You do not lose attention all at once. You lose it in slivers, and the slivers do not announce themselves.

Gloria Mark and her colleagues interrupted people while they wrote. The surprising result was that interrupted workers finished in less time than uninterrupted ones. They compensated by working faster. But they also reported significantly more stress, frustration, time pressure and effort [3]. Speed was purchased, and the receipt was stress.

The phone on the desk

One more study, because it is the one people least want to believe. Ward and colleagues tested working memory with participants' phones either on the desk, in a bag, or in another room. The phones were silenced and nobody touched them. People whose phones were in another room did measurably better [4]. A visible phone is a standing invitation, and declining an invitation takes effort. Some of the beam is spent not looking.

Fast is a feeling

Speed has a sound. The quick reply, the instant decision, the meeting that ends with a plan. It feels like competence, and it is rewarded as competence, which makes it hard to question. But recall the writing experiment. The interrupted workers were faster, and they got there by compressing their thinking into the gaps. Speed, in that study, was not a sign of skill. It was a symptom of pressure.

Kahneman adds a warning that applies directly to the hurried mind. When a question is hard, the fast system quietly substitutes an easier one and answers that instead, without telling you [1]. The slow system can catch the substitution, but only if it is given the chance. Hurry removes the second look.

A test

A hurried decision is a loan taken out against a future afternoon, and hurry as a default tempo means borrowing on everything without checking the rate.

Here is a simple test to apply to anything you are about to do quickly. Ask: if this turns out to be wrong, how much will it cost to fix, and who will pay? If the answer is "a minute, and me," go fast. If the answer is "a week, and three other people," slow down. The gap between those two answers is where most of the unnecessary hurry in working life lives.

Deliberate work

One thing

Every method for working well eventually arrives at the same inconvenient question: what is the one thing? Not the list; the list is easy. The question is which item, if it were the only thing you finished today, would make the day worth having. Most days have an answer. Most days we do not ask.

Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer analyzed thousands of diary entries from people working on creative projects and found that the single strongest predictor of a good day, in mood and motivation, was making progress on meaningful work. Not praise, not pay, not a pleasant lunch. Progress [5]. Small progress counted. A day full of activity that moved nothing forward did not.

Choosing one thing is how you guarantee the progress. It does not mean you do nothing else. It means everything else is arranged around it. A day with a named center is also easier to judge: at six o'clock you know whether it went well, because you know what it was for.

Sessions

The second move is to work in sessions: bounded stretches with a beginning you chose and an end you can see. The length matters less than the edges. Fifty minutes with a hard stop and no messages will do more than three hours of open-ended availability, because the edges spare the beam the work of deciding whether to continue.



A session has a beginning you chose and an end you can see.

Anders Ericsson's study of violinists at a Berlin academy found that the best students practiced in focused sessions of roughly an hour, usually in the morning, and totaled around four hours of this kind of work a day. Beyond that, the returns fell off and fatigue set in. They also slept more than their peers and took afternoon naps [6]. Four good hours was the ceiling, and it was enough to make them the best in the building.

The hardest minute of a session is the first one. The task is vague, the inbox is specific, and the mind reaches for whatever is most specific. The fix is to write the first concrete step the evening before, so that the first minute does not have to contain a decision.

What deliberate work is not

It is not heroic. The person who works fourteen hours on one thing is not being deliberate; they are usually being late. It is not perfectionism, because it has an end you can see, and it stops there. And it is not slow for the sake of being slow. The pace inside the session may be quick. What is slow is the decision to begin, the refusal to switch, and the willingness to let the rest of the day wait its turn.

Deliberate work is not harder work. It is work with the door closed.

Ericsson's violinists were not gentle with themselves inside the hour. They were gentle with the hour: they protected it, and they let the rest of the day be ordinary.

A pace you can keep

Heroics and their hangover

Every workplace has a story about the sprint. The weekend the team pulled the launch together. The night before the pitch. The stories are told because they ended well. What is not told is the month after, when the same people were slow, irritable and sloppy, and the bugs surfaced one by one. Heroics have a hangover, and the hangover is usually longer than the heroics.

A pace you can keep beats a pace you can brag about.

A sustainable pace is not a lower ambition. It is the recognition that the work is long, that you are the main tool, and that tools wear out when run at full load without maintenance.

Sleep is not optional

Van Dongen and colleagues restricted healthy adults to six hours of sleep a night for two weeks and tested their cognitive performance daily. By the end, their lapses of attention were comparable to those of people who had been kept awake for two full nights. Worse, the six-hour group did not feel that impaired. Their sense of their own sleepiness leveled off while their performance kept falling [7]. They had adapted to feeling tired, not to being tired.

A night of short sleep is paid for again the next day, in every judgment, and you will not notice. If you take one thing from this chapter, make it this: the most productive thing you can do on most evenings is go to bed.

Recovery

Rest is not a single activity. Sabine Sonnentag and Charlotte Fritz, who study how people recover from work, identified four distinct experiences that predict good recovery: psychological detachment (actually not thinking about work), relaxation, mastery (doing something challenging that is not your job) and control (deciding how to spend your own time) [8]. Scrolling on the sofa scores well on none of them.



Rest that repairs asks nothing of you: a window, a chair, something green.

Detachment is the hard one. Checking email at nine in the evening does not take long, but it drags the day's unfinished business into the hours that were supposed to repair you. The beam, too, has its own kind of rest: it recovers in places that engage the mind gently without demanding anything, a garden, a shoreline, a window with trees in it. A park at lunch will do, as long as the walk asks nothing of you.

The shape of a sustainable week

Put these pieces together and a shape emerges. Three or four hours of real, closed-door work a day, in one or two sessions, is a lot. It is more than most knowledge workers currently get, and close to the ceiling Ericsson's violinists found. The rest of the day is for the shallower work every job contains: messages, meetings, helping other people. Evenings are for detachment. Nights are for sleep. One day a week, at least, should involve no input from work at all. This sounds modest. In practice it is ambitious, because the current default is to spread thin attention across the whole day and call the result productivity.

Routines

Handrails, not cages

A routine is a decision you only have to make once. That is the entire case for it. The three routines described here are not a system to be obeyed. They are handrails. On a good day you may not touch them. On a bad day, when the inbox has eaten the morning, they are what gets you back to the work. Adapt the details freely. Keep the shape.

A morning shape

The first hour of the working day sets the tempo of the rest. If it begins with the inbox, the day belongs to whoever wrote to you overnight. The morning shape takes fifteen minutes and claims the day back.

1 Do not open messages. Not email, not chat, not the feed.

2 Read the note you left yourself the evening before.

- 3 Name the one thing, as a sentence: "Today's one thing is to finish the pricing section."

- 4 Decide when the first session starts and ends, and put it in the calendar.

- 5 Close the tabs that belong to yesterday and put the phone where you cannot see it.

- 6 Start the timer and do the first step from the note. Do not plan further than that.

By the time you are capable of being distracted, you are already working.

A shutdown ritual

The end of the day is where attention residue is manufactured. Work that is simply abandoned at six follows you home. A written plan for what remains lets the mind let go. The ritual takes ten minutes.

- 1 Look at the inbox once, to check that nothing is on fire. Reply only to what cannot wait.

- 2 Capture every open loop: tasks, worries, things to tell someone. All of it goes on the list.

- 3 Look at tomorrow's calendar and note where the sessions can go.

- 4 Write tomorrow's first step in one concrete sentence: "Open the draft and rewrite the opening paragraph."

- 5 Close everything: tabs, documents, the chat client. Shut the laptop.

- 6 Say it is done, out loud if you can bear it. The body hears the boundary.

If you work from home, add a seventh step: leave the room.

A weekly review

The daily routines keep the work moving. The weekly review keeps it pointed somewhere, by answering a question no daily list can: is this still the right work? Give it an hour at the same time each week.

Part of the review	The question it answers	Time to give it
Clear the inputs	What is still unprocessed, and where does each item belong?	About fifteen minutes
Look back at the week	What got done, and where did the hurry come from?	About ten minutes
Check each project	Does every active project have a next step written down?	About fifteen minutes
Look ahead two weeks	Where will the sessions go, and what needs preparing?	About ten minutes
Choose the one things	What matters most on each day of next week?	About five minutes
Decide what to drop	Which meeting, commitment or project can quietly stop?	About five minutes

When the routine breaks, do the shutdown ritual that evening and only that. The shape returns from the edges inward.

Six exercises

The exercises that follow are practical and short. None needs equipment beyond a timer, a notebook and a door that closes. Each ends with a minute of writing down what happened. The noticing is not optional; the exercise does its work in the minutes after it ends.

An exercise is only an idea until you set the timer.

If you want a sequence, start with the walk, the log and the closed-door session, then add one a week.

Exercise	How long it takes	What it is for
The Unhurried Walk	Twenty minutes, outdoors	Restoring the beam
The Interruption Log	One working day	Seeing where attention goes
The Closed-Door Session	Fifty minutes, then a break	Practising single-tasking
The Three Breaths	One minute between tasks	Draining attention residue
The Phone in Another Room	Half a working day	Feeling the cost of the phone
The Low-Input Day	One full day	Real recovery

The Unhurried Walk

Twenty minutes, outdoors, with as much green as you can find. The walk works because it asks nothing of you, so if you spend it planning, note that and try again tomorrow.

- 1** Leave the phone behind, or put it on airplane mode in a pocket you will not reach into.

- 2** Walk at a pace slightly slower than feels natural.

- 3** Do not set a destination. Turn where you like.

- 4** Every few minutes, name one thing you can see, one you can hear and one you can feel.

- 5** When thoughts about work arrive, let them pass. If one is useful, you will remember it.

- 6** Return, sit for two minutes before touching a screen, and write down how long it took before the mind stopped reaching for something to do.

The Interruption Log

One working day, with a sheet of paper beside the keyboard. Today is for counting, not improving. The total is usually higher than you guessed, and more of it is your own hand than you would like.

- 1** At the top of the sheet, write the date and the one thing you intend to finish.

- 2** Every time you switch away from the task, make a mark and add a word for the cause: message, colleague, phone, own wandering, meeting.

- 3** Do not try to reduce the switches.

- 4** At lunch, tally the morning and note the longest unbroken stretch.

5 At the end of the day, tally again and group the causes.

6 Write three sentences about what the log shows.

The Closed-Door Session

Fifty minutes, then a ten-minute break, on one task. Afterwards, note the minute at which the first urge to switch came. The next day, try again and see whether it arrives later.

1 Choose a task that is meaningful, somewhat hard and finishable in a session or two. Write it at the top of a page.

2 Close every application that is not needed. Quit the chat client; do not just minimize it.

3 Put the phone in another room. Tell anyone nearby when you will be available.

4 Set a timer for fifty minutes and start.

5 When the urge to switch arrives, and it will, write the thing you wanted to do on the page and return to the task.

6 When the timer ends, stop, even mid-sentence. Write one line about where you are, then take the ten minutes away from the desk.

The Three Breaths

One minute, in the gap between tasks. This is the smallest exercise in the book and the easiest to dismiss. It inserts a boundary where there was none, so that attention residue has a moment to drain [2]. Try it for a week before deciding it is too simple.

- 1** Finish the task, or reach the point where you are stopping. Write a one-line note of where it stands.

- 2** Take your hands off the keyboard. Sit back.

- 3** Breathe in slowly, out slowly, three times. Count them.

- 4** Say silently what you are about to do next. One sentence.

- 5** Only then open the next thing.

The Phone in Another Room

Half a working day. The experiment on phone proximity found a measurable cost to simply having the device in view [4]; this exercise lets you feel the cost by removing it. Afterwards, note what you actually missed, as opposed to what you worried about missing.

- 1** Choose a morning or afternoon with at least one session planned.

- 2** Tell the people who might genuinely need you how to reach you: a desk line or a colleague.

- 3** Put the phone in a different room, in a drawer. Not face down on the desk; in a different room.

- 4** Work the half day as normal.

- 5** Collect the phone at the end and spend five minutes catching up.

- 6** Write two lines about the half day.

The Low-Input Day

One full day, ideally at the weekend. Sonnentag and Fritz's four recovery experiences, detachment, relaxation, mastery and control, are all built into it [8]. If you can only do one exercise every week, do this one.

- 1** The evening before, do the shutdown ritual and tell anyone who might need you that you will be unreachable until morning.

- 2** On the day, no news, no feeds, no email, no work chat. Phone calls from people you love are allowed.

- 3** Plan one thing that counts as mastery: cooking something difficult, a long ride, an instrument, a project in the garage.

- 4** Plan one thing that counts as relaxation: a bath, a nap, a novel, a long lunch.

- 5** Decide for yourself when and how, not by a schedule.

- 6** Go to bed early, and the next morning write down how it felt compared with a usual Monday.

Closing

This book has argued a simple thing in several ways. Attention is small and serial. Hurry spends it badly. Deliberate work spends it well, and deliberate work needs rest the way a field needs fallow years.

None of it is new. People made good things slowly long before anyone measured switching costs. What is new is the strength of the pull in the other direction: a working environment engineered, with great skill and vast budgets, to keep the beam moving.

Against that, the method is modest. One thing. A session. A door. A walk. A line written at the end of the day. Enough sleep. A day without input.

The work will still be there tomorrow. The question is whether you will be.

Try one of the exercises this week. Not all six; one. Write down what you noticed, then try it again next week and see whether the first urge to switch arrives a little later. That is the whole method. It will not feel like much. Neither does a good night's sleep, until you have missed a few.

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