A portion of this book includes the authors’ thoughts on diet and exercise. It is supplied for informational purposes only and is not meant to take the place of a doctor’s advice. Before embarking on any regimen of diet and exercise you should first consult your own physician.

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First Edition
INTRODUCTION

This is how people talk nowadays:

How ARE you? BUSY!

And this is how our calendars look:
All day, our phones never stop:

And by evening, we're almost too tired for Netflix:
Do you ever look back and wonder “What did I really do today?” Do you ever daydream about projects and activities you’ll get to someday—but “someday” never comes?

This is a book about slowing down the crazy rush. It’s about making time for things that matter. We believe it’s possible to feel less busy, be less distracted, and enjoy the present moment more. Maybe that sounds a little hippy-dippy, but we’re serious.

Make Time is not about productivity. It’s not about getting more done, finishing your to-dos faster, or outsourcing your life. Instead, it’s a framework designed to help you actually create more time in your day for the things you care about, whether that’s spending time with your family, learning a language, starting a side business, volunteering, writing a novel, or mastering Mario Kart. Whatever you want time for, we think Make Time can help you get it. Moment by moment and day by day, you can make your life your own.

We want to start by talking about why life is so busy and chaotic these days. And why, if you feel constantly stressed and distracted, it’s probably not your fault.

In the twenty-first century, two very powerful forces compete for every minute of your time. The first is what we call the Busy Bandwagon. The Busy Bandwagon is our culture of constant busyness—
the overflowing inboxes, stuffed calendars, and endless to-do lists. According to the Busy Bandwagon mindset, if you want to meet the demands of the modern workplace and function in modern society, you must fill every minute with productivity. After all, everyone else is busy. If you slow down, you’ll fall behind and never catch up.

The second force competing for your time is what we call the Infinity Pools. Infinity Pools are apps and other sources of endlessly replenishing content. If you can pull to refresh, it’s an Infinity Pool. If it streams, it’s an Infinity Pool. This always-available, always-new entertainment is your reward for the exhaustion of constant busyness.

But is constant busyness really mandatory? Is endless distraction really a reward? Or are we all just stuck on autopilot?

Most of Our Time Is Spent by Default

Both forces—the Busy Bandwagon and the Infinity Pools—are powerful because they’ve become our defaults. In technology lingo, default means the way something works when you first start using it. It’s a pre-selected option, and if you don’t do something to change it, that default is what you get. For example, if you buy a new phone, by default you get email and Web browser apps on the homescreen. By default, you get a notification for every new message. The phone has a default wallpaper image and a default ring tone. All these options have been preselected by Apple or Google or whoever made your phone; you can change the settings if you want to, but it takes work, so many defaults just stick.

There are defaults in nearly every part of our lives. It’s not just our devices; our workplaces and our culture have built-in defaults that make busy and distracted the normal, typical state of affairs. These standard settings are everywhere. Nobody ever looked at an empty calendar and said, “The best way to spend this time is to cram it full of random meetings!” Nobody ever said, “The most important thing today is everybody else’s whims!” Of course not. That would be crazy. But because of defaults, it’s exactly what we do. In the office, every
meeting defaults to thirty or sixty minutes even if the business at hand actually requires only a quick chat. By default other people choose what goes on our calendars, and by default we’re expected to be okay with back-to-back-to-back meetings. The rest of our work defaults to email and messaging systems, and by default we check our inboxes constantly and reply-all immediately.

React to what’s in front of you. Be responsive. Fill your time, be efficient, and get more done. These are the default rules of the Busy Bandwagon.

When we tear ourselves away from the Busy Bandwagon, the Infinity Pools are ready to lure us in. While the Busy Bandwagon defaults to endless tasks, the Infinity Pools default to endless distraction. Our phones, laptops, and televisions are filled with games, social feeds, and videos. Everything is at our fingertips, irresistible, even addictive. Every bump of friction is smoothed away.

Refresh Facebook. Browse YouTube. Keep up on the nonstop breaking news, play Candy Crush, binge-watch HBO. These are the defaults behind the ravenous Infinity Pools, devouring every scrap of time the Busy Bandwagon leaves behind. With the average person
spending four-plus hours a day on their smartphone and another
four-plus hours watching TV shows, distraction is quite literally a
full-time job.

There you are in the middle, pulled in opposite directions by the
Busy Bandwagon and the Infinity Pools. But what about you? What
do you want from your days and from your life? What would happen if
you could override these defaults and create your own?

Willpower isn’t the way out. We’ve tried to resist the siren song of
these forces ourselves, and we know how impossible it can be. We also
spent years working in the technology industry, and we understand
these apps, games, and devices well enough to know that they eventu-
ally will wear you down.

Productivity isn’t the solution, either. We’ve tried to shave time off
chores and cram in more to-dos. The trouble is, there are always more
tasks and requests waiting to take their place. The faster you run on the
hamster wheel, the faster it spins.

But there is a way to free your attention from those competing dis-
tractions and take back control of your time. That’s where this book
comes in. Make Time is a framework for choosing what you want to
focus on, building the energy to do it, and breaking the default cycle so
that you can start being more intentional about the way you live your
life. Even if you don’t completely control your own schedule—and few of us do—you absolutely can control your attention.

We want to help you set your own defaults. With new habits and new mindsets, you can stop reacting to the modern world and start actively making time for the people and activities that matter to you. This isn’t about saving time. It’s about making time for what matters.

The ideas in this book can give you space in your calendar, in your brain, and in your days. That space can bring clarity and calm to everyday life. It can create opportunities to start new hobbies or get to that “someday” project. A little space in your life might even unlock creative energy you lost or never found in the first place. But before we get into all of that, we’d like to explain who the heck we are, why we’re so obsessed with time and energy, and how we came up with Make Time.

Meet the Time Dorks

We are Jake and JZ. We are not rocket-building billionaires like Elon Musk, handsome Renaissance men like Tim Ferriss, or genius executives like Sheryl Sandberg. Most time-management advice is written by or about superhumans, but you will find no superhumanity in these pages. We’re normal, fallible human beings who get stressed out and distracted just like everyone else.

What makes our perspective unusual is that we’re product designers who spent years in the tech industry helping to build services like

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1 In this book, “JZ” stands for John Zeratsky. Not to be confused with the musician and business mogul Jay-Z. Try not to be disappointed.
Gmail, YouTube, and Google Hangouts. As designers, our job was to turn abstract ideas (like “Wouldn’t it be cool if email sorted itself?”) into real-life solutions (like Gmail’s Priority Inbox). We had to understand how technology fits into—and changes—daily life. This experience gives us insight into why Infinity Pools are so compelling, and how to prevent them from taking over.

A few years ago, we realized we could apply design to something invisible: how we spent our time. But instead of starting with a technology or business opportunity, we started with the most meaningful projects and the most important people in our lives.

Each day, we tried to make a little time for our own personal top priority. We questioned the defaults of the Busy Bandwagon and redesigned our to-do lists and calendars. We questioned the defaults of the Infinity Pools and redesigned how and when we used technology. We don’t have limitless willpower, so every redesign had to be easy to use. We couldn’t erase every obligation, so we worked with constraints. We experimented, failed, and succeeded, and, over time, we learned.

In this book, we’ll share the principles and tactics we’ve discovered, along with many tales of our human errors and dorky solutions. We thought this one was a good place to start:

The Backstory, Part 1: The Distraction-Free iPhone

Jake

It was 2012, and my two sons were playing with a wooden train in our living room. Luke (age: eight) was diligently assembling the track while Flynn (age: baby) drooled on a locomotive. Then Luke picked his head up and said:
His question wasn’t intended to make me feel bad; he was just curious. But I didn’t have a good answer. I mean, sure, there was probably some excuse for checking my email right at that moment. But not a great one. All day, I’d been looking forward to spending time with my kids, and now that it was finally happening, I wasn’t really there at all.

At that moment, something clicked. It wasn’t just that I had succumbed to one moment of distraction—I had a bigger problem.

Every day, I realized, I was reacting: to my calendar, to incoming email, to the infinite stream of new stuff on the Internet. Moments with my family were slipping past me, and for what? So I could answer one more message or check off another to-do?

The realization was frustrating because I was already trying to find balance. When Luke was born in 2003, I’d set out on a mission to become more productive at work so that I could spend more quality time at home.
By 2012, I considered myself a master of productivity and efficiency. I kept reasonable hours and was home in time for dinner every night. This was what work/life balance looked like, or so I believed.

But if that was the case, why was my eight-year-old son calling me out for being distracted? If I was so on top of things at work, why did I always feel so busy and scattered? If I started the morning with two hundred emails and got to zero by midnight, was that really a successful day?

Then it hit me: Being more productive didn’t mean I was doing the most important work; it only meant I was reacting to other people’s priorities faster.

As a result of being constantly online, I wasn’t present enough with my children. And I was perpetually putting off my big “someday” goal of writing a book. In fact, I’d procrastinated for years without typing so much as a page. I’d been too busy treading water in a sea of other people’s emails, other people’s status updates, and snapshots of other people’s lunch.

I wasn’t just disappointed in myself, I was pissed off. In a fit of irritation, I grabbed my phone and furiously uninstalled Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. As each icon disappeared from my homescreen, I felt a weight lift.

Then I stared at the Gmail app and gritted my teeth. At that time, I had a job at Google, and I’d spent years working on the Gmail team. I loved Gmail. But I knew what I had to do. I can still remember the message that popped up on the screen asking me, almost in disbelief, if I was sure I wanted to remove the app. I swallowed hard and tapped “Delete.”
Without my apps, I expected to feel anxiety and isolation. And in the days after that, I did notice a change. But I wasn’t stressed; instead, I felt relief. I felt free.

I stopped reflexively reaching for my iPhone at the slightest hint of boredom. Time with my kids slowed down in a good way. “Holy smokes,” I thought. “If the iPhone wasn’t making me happier, what about everything else?”

I loved my iPhone and all the futuristic powers it gave me. But I also had accepted every default that came with those powers, leaving me constantly tethered to the shiny device in my pocket. I started wondering how many other parts of my life needed to be reexamined, reset, and redesigned. What other defaults was I accepting blindly, and how could I take charge?

Soon after my iPhone experiment I took a new job. It was still at Google, only now I worked at Google Ventures, a venture-capital firm that invested money in outside startups.
The first day there, I met a guy named John Zeratsky.

At first, I wanted to dislike him. John is younger and—let’s be honest—better-looking than I am. Even more despicable, however, was his constant calm. John was never stressed. He completed important work ahead of schedule yet somehow found time for side projects. He woke early, finished work early, went home early. He was always smiling. What the hell was his deal?

Well, I ended up getting along just fine with John, or as I call him, JZ. I soon discovered he was a kindred spirit—my brother from another mother, if you will.

Like me, JZ was disillusioned with the Busy Bandwagon. We both loved technology and had spent years designing tech services (while I was at Gmail, he was at YouTube). But we were both beginning to understand the cost of these Infinity Pools to our attention and time.

And like me, JZ was on a mission to do something about it. He was kind of like Obi-Wan Kenobi about this stuff, only instead of a robe, he wore plaid shirts and jeans, and instead of the Force, he was interested in what he called “the system.” It was almost mystical. He didn’t know exactly what it was, but he believed it existed: a simple
framework for avoiding distractions, maintaining energy, and making more time.

I know; it sounded kind of weird to me, too. But the more he talked about what such a system could look like, the more I found myself nodding my head. JZ was way into ancient human history and evolutionary psychology, and he saw that part of the problem was rooted in the huge disconnect between our hunter-gatherer roots and our crazy modern world. He looked through the lens of a product designer and figured this "system" would work only if it changed our defaults, making distractions harder to access instead of relying on willpower to constantly fight them.

Well, heck, I thought. If we could create this system, it would be exactly what I was looking for. So I teamed up with JZ, and the quest began.
The Backstory, Part 2: Our Dorky Quest to Make Time

JZ

Jake’s distraction-free iPhone was a bit extreme, and I admit I didn’t try it right away. But once I did, I loved it. So the two of us began searching for other redesigns—ways to switch our default setting from “distracted” to “focused.”

I started reading the news only once a week and reprogrammed my sleep schedule to become a morning person. I experimented with eating six small meals a day and then tried eating just two large ones. I adopted different exercise regimens, from distance running to yoga classes to daily push-ups. I even persuaded my programmer friends to build me customized to-do-list apps. Meanwhile, Jake spent a full year tracking his daily energy levels in a spreadsheet, trying to understand whether he should drink coffee or green tea, whether he should exercise in the morning or the evening, and even whether he liked being around people (the answer: yes . . . mostly).

We learned a lot from this obsessive behavior, but we were interested in more than just what worked for us; we still believed in the idea of a system that anyone could tailor to their own life. To find it, we’d need some human test subjects besides ourselves, and as luck would have it, we had the perfect laboratory.

While working at Google, Jake created something he called a “design sprint”: basically a workweek redesigned from the ground up. For five days, a team would cancel all meetings and focus on solving a single problem, following
a specific checklist of activities. It was our first effort at designing time rather than products, and it worked—the design sprint quickly spread across Google.

In 2012, we started working together to run design sprints with startups in the Google Ventures portfolio. Over the next few years, we ran more than 150 of these five-day sprints. Nearly a thousand people participated: programmers, nutritionists, CEOs, baristas, farmers, and more.

For a couple of Time Dorks, the whole thing was an amazing opportunity. We had the chance to redesign the workweek and learn from hundreds of high-performing teams at startups including Slack, Uber, and 23andMe. Many of the principles behind Make Time were inspired by what we discovered in those sprints.

Four Lessons from the Design Sprint Laboratory

The first thing we learned was that something magic happens when you start the day with one high-priority goal. Each sprint day, we drew attention to one big focal point: On Monday, the team creates a map of the problem; on Tuesday, each person sketches one solution; on Wednesday, they decide which solutions are best; on Thursday, they build a prototype; and on Friday, they test it. Each day’s goal is ambitious, but it’s just one thing.

This focal point creates clarity and motivation. When you have one ambitious but achievable goal, at the end of the day, you’re done. You can check it off, let go of work, and go home satisfied.

Another lesson from our design sprints was that we got more done.
when we banned devices. Since we set the rules, we were able to prohibit laptops and smartphones, and the difference was phenomenal. Without the constant lure of email and other Infinity Pools, people brought their complete attention to the task at hand, and the default switched to focus.

We also learned about the importance of energy for focused work and clear thinking. When we first started running design sprints, teams worked long hours, fueled by sugary treats. Late in the week, energy would plummet. So we made adjustments, and saw how things like a healthy lunch, a quick walk, frequent breaks, and a slightly shorter workday helped maintain peak energy, resulting in better and more effective work.

Lastly, these experiments taught us the power of, well, experiments. Experimenting allowed us to improve the process, and seeing the results of our changes firsthand gave us a deep confidence that we never could have built just by reading about someone else’s results.

Our sprints required a whole team and a whole week, but we could see right away that there was no reason individuals couldn’t redesign their days in a similar way. The lessons we learned became the foundation for Make Time.

Of course, it wasn’t a yellow brick road to perfection. We still got swept up in the Busy Bandwagon and sucked into the Infinity Pools of distraction now and again. Although some of our tactics turned into habits, others sputtered and failed. But taking stock of our results each day helped us understand why we tripped up. And this experimental approach also allowed us to be kinder to ourselves when we made mistakes—after all, every mistake was just a data point, and we could always try again tomorrow.

Despite our stumbles, Make Time was resilient. We found ourselves with more energy and headspace than we’d ever had, and we were able to take on bigger projects: the kinds of “someday” things we’d never been able to get around to before.
Jake
I wanted to start writing in the evenings, but realized that the lure of watching TV was a big problem. So I experimented and made a serious change to my defaults, putting the DVD player in the closet and unsubscribing from Netflix. With the freed-up time, I started working on an adventure novel, and I stuck with it, pausing only when we wrote our book Sprint. Writing was something I’d wanted to do since I was a kid, and making time for it felt awesome.

JZ
For years, my wife, Michelle, and I had dreamed of taking long sailing trips together. So we bought an old sailboat and started spending our weekends fixing it up. We applied the same tactic of choosing one daily task and putting time on the calendar to get it done and as a result made time to learn about diesel engine maintenance, electricity, and ocean navigation. Together we’ve now sailed from San Francisco to Southern California, Mexico, and beyond.
We were so excited about our results that we started blogging about the Make Time techniques that worked for us. Hundreds of thousands of people read the posts, and many of those readers wrote to us. Of course, some of them wanted to inform us that we’re self-righteous morons, but the vast majority of responses were inspiring and awesome. People experienced dramatic changes from tactics such as removing apps on their smartphones and prioritizing one task each day. They found renewed energy and felt happier. The experiments worked for lots of people, not just for us! As one reader told us, “It’s weird how easy the switch was.”

And that’s just it: Reclaiming your time and attention can be weirdly easy. As Jake learned from his distraction-free iPhone, the changes do not require tons of self-discipline. Instead, change comes from resetting defaults, creating barriers, and beginning to design the way you spend your time. Once you start using Make Time, these small positive shifts become self-reinforcing. The more you try it, the more you’ll learn about yourself and the more the system will improve.

Make Time isn’t anti-technology; we’re both tech nerds, after all. We won’t ask you to disconnect entirely or become a hermit. You can still follow your friends on Instagram, read the news, and send emails like a modern person. But by challenging the standard behaviors in our efficiency-obsessed, distraction-saturated world, you can get the best of technology and put yourself back in control. And once you take control, you can change the game.
Make Time Is Just Four Steps, Repeated Every Day

The four daily steps of Make Time are inspired by what we learned from design sprints, from our own experiments, and from readers who have tried out the framework and shared their results. Here’s a zoomed-out view of how each day looks:
The first step is choosing a single **highlight** to prioritize in your day. Next, you’ll employ specific tactics to stay **laser-focused** on that highlight—we’ll offer a menu of tricks to beat distraction in an always-connected world. Throughout the day, you’ll build **energy** so you can stay in control of your time and attention. Finally, you’ll **reflect** on the day with a few simple notes.

Let’s zoom in for a closer look at those four steps.

**Highlight: Start Each Day by Choosing a Focal Point**

The first step in Make Time is deciding what you want to make time **for**. Every day, you’ll choose a **single activity to prioritize and protect in your calendar**. It might be an important goal at work, like finishing a presentation. You might choose something at home, like cooking dinner or planting your garden. Your Highlight might be something you don’t necessarily **have** to do but **want** to do, like playing with your kids or reading a book. Your Highlight can contain multiple steps; for example, finishing that presentation might include writing the closing remarks, completing the slides, and doing a practice run-through. By setting “finish presentation” as your Highlight, you commit to complete all the tasks required.

Of course, your Highlight isn’t the only thing you’ll do each day.
But it will be your priority. Asking yourself “What’s going to be the highlight of my day?” ensures that you spend time on the things that matter to you and don’t lose the entire day reacting to other people’s priorities. When you choose a Highlight, you put yourself in a positive, proactive frame of mind.

To help you do that, we’ll share our favorite tactics for choosing a daily Highlight and actually making time to accomplish it. But this alone isn’t enough. You’ll also need to rethink how you react to distractions that might get in your way, and that’s exactly what the next step is all about.

Laser: Beat Distraction to Make Time for Your Highlight

Distractions like email, social media, and breaking news are everywhere, and they’re not going away. You can’t go live in a cave, throw away your gadgets, and swear off technology entirely. But you can re-design the way you use technology to stop the reaction cycle.

We’ll show you how to adjust your technology so you can find **Laser mode**. Simple changes like logging out of social media apps or scheduling time to check email can have a huge effect—we’ll provide specific tactics to help you focus.
Energize: Use the Body to Recharge the Brain

To achieve focus and make time for what matters, your brain needs energy, and that energy comes from taking care of your body.

That’s why the third component of Make Time is to charge your battery with exercise, food, sleep, quiet, and face-to-face time. It’s not as hard as it might sound. The lifestyle defaults of the twenty-first century ignore our evolutionary history and rob us of energy. That’s actually good news: Because things are so out of whack, there are a lot of easy fixes.

The Energize section contains many tactics you can choose from, including sneaking a nap, giving yourself partial credit for exercise, and learning how to use caffeine strategically. We won’t ask you to become a fitness freak or adopt a wacky diet. Instead, we’ll offer simple shifts you can make for the immediate reward of having energy for the things you want to do.
Reflect: Adjust and Improve Your System

Finally, before going to bed, you’ll take a few notes. It’s super simple: You’ll decide which tactics you want to continue and which ones you want to refine or drop.² And you’ll think back on your energy level, whether you made time for your Highlight, and what brought you joy in the day.

Over time, you’ll build a customized daily system tailored to your unique habits and routines, your unique brain and body, and your unique goals and priorities.

The Make Time Tactics: Pick, Test, Repeat

This book includes dozens of tactics for putting Make Time into practice. Some tactics will work for you, but some won’t (and some may just sound nuts). It’s like a cookbook. You wouldn’t try all the recipes at once, and you don’t need to do all the tactics at once, either.

Instead, you’ll pick, test, and repeat. As you read, take note of any tactics you want to try. Fold the corner of the page or make a

² Or, in the immortal words of Rob Base and DJ Easy Rock: “Take it off the rack, if it’s wack, put it back.”
list on a piece of paper. Look for tactics that seem doable but a little challenging—and especially, look for tactics that sound like fun.

On your first day using Make Time, we suggest trying one tactic from each step. That is, one new tactic to help you make time for your Highlight, one that keeps you laser-focused by changing how you react to distractions, and one for building energy—three tactics total.

You don’t necessarily have to try something new every day. If what you’re doing is working, keep it up! But if it isn’t or if you think it could work better still, each day is a chance to experiment. Your version of the Make Time system will be totally personalized, and because you built it yourself, you’ll trust it, and it will fit into your existing lifestyle.

**No Perfection Required**

While developing Make Time, we immersed ourselves in books, blogs, magazines, and scientific research. A lot of what we read was intimidating. We were confronted with hundreds of glossy, perfect lives: the effortlessly organized executive, the enlightened mindful yogi, the writer with the perfect process, the carefree host pan-searing trumpet mushrooms with one hand while blowtorch crème brûlées with the other.

It’s stressful, isn’t it? None of us can be perfect eaters, perfectly productive, perfectly mindful, and perfectly rested all the time. We can’t do the fifty-seven things bloggers tell us we’re supposed to do before 5 a.m. And even if we could, we shouldn’t. Perfection is
a distraction—another shiny object taking your attention away from your real priorities.

We’d like you to forget the idea of perfection when it comes to Make Time. Don’t even try to do it perfectly—there’s no such thing! But there’s also no way to screw it up. And you won’t have to start over if you “fall off the wagon,” because each day is a clean slate.

Keep in mind that neither of us uses all the tactics in this book all the time. We use some tactics all the time and some tactics some of the time, and we each use some tactics none of the time. There are things that work for JZ that do not work for Jake and vice versa. We each have our own imperfect formula, and that formula can change depending on what’s going on. When Jake is traveling, he temporarily installs an email app on his phone, and JZ has been known to binge-watch Netflix on occasion—*Stranger Things* is so good! The goal is not monastic vows but a workable and flexible set of habits.

**The “Everyday” Mindset**

If you read Make Time cover to cover, it can feel like a lot to do. Heck, even if you skip around the book—which we encourage—it can still feel like a lot to do. So instead of thinking of these tactics as “more things you have to do,” consider ways to make them part of your normal life. That’s why we suggest, for example, walking to work (page 181) and exercising at home (page 184) rather than an expensive gym membership or an hourlong fitness class every morning.

The best tactics are the ones that fit into your day. They’re not something you force yourself to do; they’re just something you do. And in most cases, they’ll be things you *want* to do.

We’re confident Make Time will help you create space in your life for the things that matter most. And once you start, you’ll find that Make Time is self-reinforcing. You can begin with one small change. Positive results will compound as you go and you’ll be able to tackle bigger and bigger goals. Even if you’re already a master of efficiency,
you can use Make Time to bring attention and satisfaction to what's working well.

We can’t get you out of every pointless meeting or magically set your inbox to zero, and we won’t try to turn you into a Zen master. But we can help you slow down a little, turn down the noise of the modern world, and find more joy in each day.
For more information about Make Time, plus articles, tools, and other resources, please check out maketime.blog.