CHRIS DEALS WITH IT — episode notes

EP 55 - We're All Dizzy Being Busy

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I've been struggling to wrap my head around busyness. It seems unavoidable in our current culture. Everyone overworked, stressed out, to the point where they're virtue signaling about how much is on their plates.

This is a problem, and one that I can likely only solve for myself. Busyness fractures my focus, prevents me from achieving greater heights with my thoughts and actions.

This prevalent problem is often scrutinized & debated, yet many shrug their shoulders at it - resigned that it's just something we have to deal with. We give it fancy names and definitions like Hustle Culture, the Rat Race, Rise & Grind, Giving 110%, and my favorite: Cal Newport's description of The Hyperactive Hive Mind.

On today's episode, I'm reviewing my thoughts and feelings towards busyness, and the tactics I'm attempting to use in breaking free of its grip.

The Bane Of Busyness

Many of us are signaling our busyness without even realizing it. Just this past week I noted at least three times I commented about how much was on my plate. Using it as a reason I couldn't handle something in the moment.

I know that sometimes I claim busyness as a shield: A way of signaling that I'm overloaded and need to push work down in importance.

How many more times did I appear busy without noticing? Do others read the tone of my voice, the wording of an e-mail, or not getting a reply at all as signs that I'm not available or unwilling to do something?

There are also those who conflate busyness with importance - virtue signaling about how much they're getting done, or stating the number of meetings on their schedule as a sign of how crucial they are to a business or team. I know that this isn't my mentality - but I get the sense that this could also become an unintended perception of being busy all the time.

And all this busyness comes with real physical and emotional impacts:

- The stress & anxiety of trying to keep many plates in the air. To not be seen as failing in any area.

- Fractured attention making it hard to focus on the truly important work.

- The inability to get the actual work done during work hours: i.e.: overwork

- Even if we don't work on our off time, the background hum of how busy we are can overshadow time with family & friends

- Having little downtime to consider alternative options & novel solutions to important problems.

- Creating blind spots to areas that could become problems, risks, or opportunities.

Breaking The Pattern

Consider the ability we have as individuals in 2024: How the pace of life has increased throughout human development. The sheer amount of options we have, the vehicle of both tasks & transportation, the distances we can travel with them, and variety of things we can do.

On the time scale of humanity, my forty+ years is a tiny blip. Yet within my lifespan, e-mail became commonplace.

As a workflow, e-mail makes no sense. Would any of us sign up for it if given a chance to magically change how we work?

No doubt modern technology has a ton of advantages. But we were still able to get a lot of things done before computer systems, e-mail inboxes, zoom meetings, and cell phones invaded our offices.

And it's worth taking a moment to note how lucky we are to be able to be busy. Our lives have increased in comfort so much that many Humans can make themselves busy sitting in comfortable offices, sipping tea, and clacking little plastic keys to make a living. That's pretty amazing!

I know I'm over-simplifying, but I do feel fortunate that much of what I do doesn't come with real physical risks.

And yet, I desire to break this pattern of busyness. For me, this means:

- Doing less things: Freeing up time for what really matters

- Which means I must identify what does matter: If everything is important, nothing is

- Reduce context switching: Bouncing from task to task puts too much in our working memory, preventing us from deeper thought and action. Like driving a powerful sports car through a busy city: The constant stops & starts make it impossible to achieve our top speed & maintain momentum.

- Stop feeding this mentality of busyness. And where I can, actively work to create an environment that doesn't allow it to thrive for others. This means being mindful of what and how much I delegate. Maintaining an awareness of work loads, mental health, processes, and creating space for good ideas & solutions to develop.

- Unplugging: It's a choice we can make. Yet one that's become so difficult for many that some countries have to actively pass legislation to give people the right to do it! You have the ability to set realistic boundaries for your job. These boundaries can shift as you gain experience, go through life and family changes, adjust to health needs, change employers, etc...

From Strategy To Tactics

If being aware of busyness is the first step, and identifying strategies to break its hold the second, then the third is identifying the tactics at my disposal:

1. Say no: I don't have to take on every task given or offered to me. I don't have to jump on every creative idea that pops into my own head.

2. Lowering the noise level: Literally stepping away from the near-constant influx of e-mail, text messages, etc... And eliminating audible alerts, pop-ups, visual reminders of new actionable things that I could be doing.

3. No FOMO: For me this is most prevalent with social media. I avoid it. I don't give a crap that I'm missing out. It's mostly ephemeral B.S. anyway. This can also extend to not feeling excluded or unimportant by not being invited to a meeting, or living in constant fear I'm going to miss out on something important if I step away from an inbox or phone.

4. Organizing my time & life: Block out time slots to go through asynchronous communications like e-mails. I can't avoid e-mail right now, but it's a way more efficient way to process them, and it also creates permission to block time slots to focus on the work that does matter. I have to tailor this to my responsibilities, and be flexible, so this is aided by having my life organized at a high level. I know who I am, what my mission is, and how I do my best work. So I create an organizational structure that supports that.

5. Open up your calendar: Leave down time in there - opportunities to check-in with people, be approachable.

6. Being clear with others of your choices and boundaries: I tell others if something is truly important: To call me. Don't always expect a fast reply to e-mails or text messages. It's also being clear on living unhurried as often as I can: Creating space in conversations for nuance, depth, and deeper connections to evolve out of conversations.

7. Use environments to my advantage: Take conference calls out for a walk, force focus by working in a library, or note when a specific coffee shop or public space inspires higher quality work of a specific type.

   a. For example: I'll occasionally head over to Bell Works, the former Bell Labs research facility, which has been converted into a dynamic mix of office

park, shopping and dining destination, and public space. The main atrium features a very high glass roof that lets in lots of light, plenty of open space to not feel crammed. It's a great way to mix things up from my regular home office.

8. And lastly, recognize that this process will take time. I'm going to have busy periods, ones in which I might abandon some of these strategies & tactics. I'm aware that this may be temporary or seasonal: Catching up after a vacation, the trend of slower pace around major holidays, planning around major events like a convention or tasks such as annual budget reviews, needing to prepare extra time after being on the road visiting clients.

Sometimes going with the flow works better than constantly working steadfast against it.

🗨 Episode 55 Quote:

Highlighting Cal Newport's **Attention Capital Principle:**

> *The productivity of the knowledge sector can be significantly increased if we identify workflows that better optimize the human brain's ability to sustainably add value to information.*