



289: How to Find Relief From Information Overload

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 289.

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If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing. Well, today's episode is about that constant stream of information. If we're going to be on the internet, because we are, how can we stay sane and remain soul minimalist in the midst of all this information? Listen in.

Our brains were not made for what the internet has become. Within the same minute, I'll get a message from someone telling me how much one of my books has meant to them and another one, in the same minute, that reads, and I quote, "Emily, I'm trying to be kind. Your glasses are great but you have a tiny face and I'm afraid they're too big and distracting. Just trying to help." From unsolicited advice to kind support, from anger to tearful gratitude, the potential for emotional whiplash is high. This we know full well. And that's just the personal messages. I don't need to explain to you our strange now normalized reality of watching a funny cat video and then immediately after that literal war footage, to a thoughtful post about grief, to a beautifully curated kitchen, to a headline with terrible breaking news.

In an opinion piece for the New York Times from 2019, writer Tristan Harris quotes Harvard professor Edward O. Wilson, who said, "The real problem of humanity is the following. We have paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and God-like technology." And by the way, he said that in 2009. The article is called Our Brains Are No Match for Our Technology, and in it, Harris submits we should not only worry about our online privacy, which is a concern, but more about our ability to take collective action. This was compelling to me. He points out that our brains aren't meant for what he calls omniscient awareness of the world's

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suffering. He writes, "Our online newsfeeds aggregate all of the world's pain and cruelty, dragging our brains into a kind of learned helplessness. Technology that provides us with near complete knowledge without a commensurate level of agency isn't humane. Technology has outmatched our brains, diminishing our capacity to address the world's most pressing challenges."

Now, all that was a quote from that article from the New York Times, *Our Brains Are No Match for Our Technology*. And listen, we could spend an entire year's worth of episodes talking about this tension that I know we all feel between our awareness of suffering in the world and our perceived lack of ability to do much about it. That's why I think this conversation is important, maybe even especially for this time of year when a lot of people are coming back online, they're getting back to their schedules, back to routines. Maybe in the summer we may have scrolled endlessly but now we're trying to actually do some work and we realize like, oh, my brain's not working the way maybe it used to because it's focusing in a different type of way. Well, it's an important conversation, one, because I don't think we lack as much agency as we think we do. But two, we won't realize what we do have capacity for if our heads are cluttered up, distracted and stuck.

So this conversation, while the conversation about that tension is very important, it's not specifically what today's conversation is about because today I want to talk about what we can do today to begin to find relief from information overload so that we can move forward in discernment about what is ours to do. We know the Internet's not going away. I make my living on the internet. I think the Internet's fantastic. But it's also the worst. And we all I think could agree with that depending on the minute. How we consume content is always going to involve screens to some extent but we don't have to be all or nothing people. But we do want to purpose to engage in a mindful awareness of what we're doing and why we're doing it. So think of this as a decluttering exercise for your mind.

I'll have four small actions that we can all take today, things I'm doing too, so we're in this together, all under the umbrella of this one thing, which is it might be time to check your guru collection. Way back in 2017, I created an episode called *Stop Collecting Gurus* and I confessed there that when I'm procrastinating on making a decision, when I lack confidence in my own ability to know what to do next, and sometimes that subconscious, but I will seek out gurus in the form of online courses, downloads, helpful apps, newsletters, email subscriptions, you name it. Anything where it seems like someone knows what they're talking about and has some clarity, even if their clarity and knowledge is only loosely connected to what matters most to me in the moment. There's something compelling about someone giving me four steps to something, even if it's not four steps to the thing that I actually have a problem with. You know what I'm saying?

It's just clarity is compelling and when it seems like someone has it, man, I want more of it.

Well, if you want to check your own guru collection, if you want to see which voices you need most in this current season of life, see which ones may be serving you well in the past,

but maybe you don't need them as much now. Well, this episode is for you. And I'm talking about when I say the word guru, that's kind of a funny word. It's not one we use in everyday language so much anymore. But really it's just ... what I mean by that is writers, coaches, counselors, encouragers, musicians, artists, even me, someone who you might turn to help you do a thing that is important to you. But maybe you have collected too many voices all at one time. And so the idea here is to begin to curate your collection.

We want to learn from people. It's wonderful to be able to learn from people. But today might be an opportunity for a restart, to choose again on purpose for this current season. And I'll give you four places to look. So first of all, if you're wanting to curate your own collection and learn from people on purpose with purpose, number one, check your email. And I don't mean check your email for the day, like normal. I mean, look at your email, the past way you've responded and interacted with your email, and pay attention to a few things. Which ones am I always opening? What do I love about the emails that I open? Which ones do I avoid or leave unopened to read later? Am I leaving them for later as a reward because I'm so excited and I look forward to reading them later? Or am I ignoring them because they're actually not what I need right now or aren't providing me value? And by the way, you get to define value for your own life.

Now, of course, when I'm talking about this type of email, this isn't work emails that you get from your boss or for your family or things like that. But I'm maybe talking about those other things that you've opted into or chosen to subscribe to that maybe you're just sitting there or causing clutter, and you've been meaning to go through them, but they're just sort of there. Well, maybe this can be your invitation or reminder to begin to just pay attention to which subscriptions am I always opening and are always helpful and which ones do I ignore? When I did this for myself, I recognize I pay attention to a lot less than I think I do, and that's not such a bad thing. Another thing I noticed when I did this was what I pay attention to changes over time. Some of the subscriptions that I maybe used to open first thing, now I don't open as quickly for whatever reason.

So it's good to do this periodically and recognize how I'm collecting gurus in my email inbox and what I want to keep and what I might want to get rid of. How it might be time to do that. So first, check your email. Second, check your recent follows on social media. I'll use Instagram as an example because that's really the social media account that I use the most, but of course, whatever you use, you can do this there too. So if you go to your profile, then click followers, sort by, and then latest, that will show you the most recent followers in chronological order. So if you followed someone this morning, they're going to show up first and on and on, all the way to the person you followed back in 2012 when Instagram started. But your most recent follows can tell you a lot about what information you've been craving recently. That's why I like to sort by latest, so I can see who have I been following recently. So I'm going to be vulnerable with you and share with you some of my recent follows that I can tell by seeing them that I've been looking for rest and fun on Instagram. So here's some different accounts that I've followed. I'll just give you what they're about. I recently followed

a travel guide to the Carolinas, a writing community that I thought was compelling, a poet, an author whose work I've admired for a long time and didn't realize I wasn't following him on Instagram, so I followed him. A podcaster who makes me laugh, a church in another city that I'm interested in what they're doing, an actress with a really great voice, an account that has recommended books and an investment expert. That one may not be as fun but it was interesting content.

So these are some ways to recognize, okay, again, it's not bad or wrong to follow people and to curate the collection of people you're wanting to learn from or just be entertained by or be inspired by. But the invitation here is to pay attention to who they are, what they are, and what value they're bringing at this season in life. So for each of these places to check, I'd love to provide an arrow. So when you're checking your email and looking at who you've been following, who you've been reading and not reading, one arrow is simply the ones that have remained unopened for the last three to six emails they've sent. Maybe you want to unsubscribe from them or at least mark them and pay attention to them. So that could be your arrow for the email. And for the social media, for me specifically for Instagram, one arrow or one next right thing you could do as you pay attention to, okay, who have I been following here in this space and what am I craving here?

You could scroll through your followers and pick a number. Sometimes I pick the number 20, let's just say, and I'll tell myself, "Okay, I'm going to unfollow 20 accounts right now." Now, your criteria can be based on anything, from a business that you no longer frequent, a chamber of commerce account for a city you no longer live in, people who don't post anymore, they haven't posted since 2015. Maybe you unfollow those accounts. Or accounts that cause you to feel some kind of way when you see their post. And that kind of way could be guilt, jealousy, shame, fear, whatever. And I'm not saying you have to completely unfollow them. Maybe you just want to mute those accounts, just for a time, and then you can come back to them later. You get to choose, and this can be any way you want to do it. Again, it doesn't have to be 20, it could be two, it could be one, it could be 200. I don't know. I'm not the boss of you but I'm encouraging you to be the boss of you by paying attention to the accounts you're following on social and taking stock and seeing what feels really life giving here, what feels life draining here, and then acting accordingly. A third place to look is to check your to be read pile. This is another place that we collect gurus that's not necessarily online. It could be online but it might also just be from our bookshelves. I currently have nine or 10 ... I think I have nine books on a stack that I've either started reading or I want to read next. I am a slow reader. I read every word. I've seen Sharon McMahon talk about how she doesn't say the words in her brain when she's reading. I know some of you do that. It's amazing to me.

I'm reading exactly the way I'm talking right now, which is why it takes me forever because I read every word. And if I miss a word, I go back. And I try to skim and I've read the articles about how to read faster but I don't know if that's ever going to be my life. I'm telling you that because sometimes when I see a stack of nine books that I have to read next on my

bookshelf, I can get overwhelmed because I know that's going to take me a really long time.

And I also am overwhelmed because reading is something I really enjoy, and it's a place where I take in, learn and process so much information. I want to take notes and remember. And so I know that certain books that I read, I put off, not because I don't want to read them or it overwhelms me but because I so want to read them and learn from them but I know that the process is going to take me a really long time. And so I can get overwhelmed that way.

So what I have found to be most helpful, I will sing the praise of Laura Tremain in this arrow forever. She has taught us to set timers, set one for 20 minutes. Anytime of day that you have a window, choose one book and read it until the timer goes off. And this has been so helpful for me when it comes to information overload in the form of my bookshelves.

Because it forces me to pick something and just stick with it for 20 minutes. And that has been something that has really reduced that information overload feeling when it comes to my bookshelves. And then finally, another place to look, and this one might be silly, but just as a pulse is pay attention to what ads you're being fed on social, on Google, on Facebook, wherever. Personally, I'm getting lots of ads about eye cream, cellulite, belly fat, intermittent fasting. These are evidently things I have clicked on in the past that now want to sell me things. These are in some way related to different gurus that I've sought out.

If this is you or if you can relate, especially if it's health related things or health adjacent, an arrow that I have followed and it has been a really important arrow for me to follow right now, is that I have made my real appointments. In other words, I made an appointment to the dentist and went last week. I made an appointment to see my general doctor and I'm going to see her in January. And then I made an appointment with my gynecologist and I'm going to get a mammogram. All of these things are the real things we need. These are the real appointments, if we're able to make them, that we can make them. Rather than me seeking out sideways advice online for different health related things or skincare things, which are helpful and I love, but I probably have enough knowledge of things I can Google on the internet to last me a lifetime.

So that arrow of making my real appointments, and it could be your hair appointment, it could be whatever the appointments are in my real life that I need to make, paying attention to the ads you're being fed might be a nice reminder, a nice arrow to be like, actually maybe do that in real life for the people who are in your actual community who can maybe offer some true relief in different areas of your health journey. Well, a couple more practices for finding relief from information overload is ... one thing is to remember that we can't really limit the information available. The information is there and it's going to come at us. So we have to find ways to limit our own access to that information. One way I do this is to eliminate the extras. In other words, I choose a few places in life, and I don't do this perfectly, but I have a few places where I just have decided I'm not going to look at my phone.

And that is when I'm in a waiting room, when I'm in a checkout line and when I'm at a stoplight. Stoplights, y'all, there's not much we can accomplish at a stoplight, but sometimes it is like, "Oh, I got a text while I was driving." And you look down and you notice it at the stoplight. It's something that is a terrible habit. We've all done it. I also have tried to train myself that if the person in front of me is clearly looking at their phone and the light turns green, one of my own personal spiritual disciplines is not to honk and just to wait. And there have been times when we have waited a whole cycle through to another red light and that is a deeply formative moment for me in my own life. But that's just a personal thing that I try to practice. It builds patience and grace, and it helps me remember how annoying it is when someone's looking at their phone at the stoplight. So that's just a small thing.

But also, when I went to my dentist appointment last week, I only waited maybe six minutes in the waiting room, and the pull was strong to pull out my phone because I didn't bring a book with me. There was nothing else that I was really to do. But I just sat there old school and looked around the dentist office. And it was nice actually but it was just a small amount of relief from information overload. And then finally, the checkout line, this is probably the hardest one for me. Because those target checkout lines can be really long, y'all. And so not looking at my phone during that time is tricky but the information is there. If you just look to your left, you see all the magazine headlines. There's always information. But I think paying attention to the places where I'm inputting things is helpful, even if it's just noticing it.

And maybe that's your action this week is just noticing where am I taking in information that I actually have control to not take information? Because there's some places where we don't have that control. And so paying attention to them could be one way to begin to reduce that information input. And then another thing that can be helpful is to assign certain phone tasks to other tasks. I think James Clear talks about, well, maybe he's not the only one, in *Atomic Habits*, talking about habit stacking. Where, for example, whenever I take my neighborhood walk, sometimes my morning walk is when I also listen to Voxer messages or I'll send Voxer messages. So those two things are stacked together so that I'm not necessarily tempted to pick up my phone at other times. Well, I'm Voxing someone and I do that, but then I'm also ... I've got my phone in my hand, so I may as well do these other things too. So connecting a habit or a action with the phone with something else that's maybe physical, that has been helpful for me.

And then finally, Ms. Freddy's daily delete. I still practice that. I heard her talk about that. I think it was on *The Lazy Genius* or maybe it was just on Instagram. Another guru. But doing that every day, just typing in the date and then going through all the photos that were taken on that date over time and just getting rid of some of the old ... I mean, every day I'm deleting 50 to 100 photos, which is wild to me. But even my own photographs can be a source of information overload, especially when I'm someone who uses my images a lot for different parts of my work. So scrolling through them, the more there are, the more information there is to have to sort through. So getting rid on a daily basis and just having a habit of getting rid has been really helpful and actually fun too. So that's been something I

have really enjoyed. I'll link to the article from the New York Times that I quoted earlier. And I'll also link to an essay that Ally Fallon wrote about the same topic on her website, findyourvoice.com.

I know there can be a lot of shame and fatigue tied up in this conversation. I know that it feels like we as a culture have been talking about this stuff for an eternity. There've been books about it. We've been sackcloth and ashes lamenting all of the internet-y things and it feels like we've been doing it forever. But in the scope of history, it's still a relatively new issue. As we continue to discern how to navigate this, I hope these simple practices can be just the smallest arrows for you to help you find some relief from the information overload in your own life. Not for the sake of being screen-free necessarily, but for the sake of your own wellbeing, your own interior freedom, your own enjoyment and daily life. So here's to your flourishing. Here's to finding small ways to clear out what you no longer need in order to make room for what matters most as you continue to do your next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 2 89 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope the simple practice of checking your guru collection can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it's true this is a podcast about making decisions, the bigger truth is that our daily decisions are making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman or online at emilypfreeman.com where you can find a transcript of this and every episode. If you like what you hear, I hope you'll consider not just continuing to listen, but to subscribing or following wherever you listen to podcasts. And even better, leave us a review.

Well, in closing, a few words from John O'Donohue's blessing, *For Longing*, because at the root of the information we're gathering could be a longing we haven't yet named. He writes, "Blessed be the longing that brought you here and quickens your soul with wonder. May you have the courage to listen to the voice of desire that disturbs you when you have settled for something safe, may you have the wisdom to enter generously into your own unease to discover the new direction your longing wants you to take. May the forms of your belonging in love, creativity, and friendship be equal to the grandeur and the call of your soul. May the one you long for long for you. May you come to accept your longing as defined urgency. May you know the urgency with which God longs for you." Thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time.