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## Context to the nugget

Ashley speaks about the notion of how we should outsource the task of staying productive to tools and apps that are out there and not leave it to the vagaries of our will power. She also speaks about how we should have a conversation with ourselves on why we might be reaching out to technology whenever we have a few residual moments to kill.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): In the book Ashley, you speak about the small why and the big way and you say that how we think about these two questions makes a difference to how we experience time affluence. Could you say more here?

Ashley Whillans (AW): Yeah. So, I mean we have been talking at length about how prioritizing time and having more time to spend on important domains of life like civic engagement, volunteering, spending time with our friends and family matters a lot for happiness, and this seems great on the surface. Of course, it seems obvious, we should all spend a little bit more time engaged in happier activities and a little less obsessed with whatever latest work projects that we are pursuing. However, where this data becomes interesting is trying to apply these insights into the context of our daily lives. So, the small why and the big why are means of implementation intentions to help all of us start not just knowing that time is our most valuable resource but living it on an everyday basis. So, the small why concept is this idea that we actually all have more discretionary time available as we were talking about earlier in this conversation, it's so much of these small moments of free time go missing they end up being wasted mindlessly throughout the day often because we are getting sucked into our technology. And so, the small why is this idea of creating reminders for ourselves, doing this subtle questioning, this self-questioning around out mindless behaviours. So, if you are someone who spends a lot of time on social media, which so many of us do; so, let's just say all of us who spend probably more time than that we would like to in our inbox or on social media, every time we go to pick up our phone to check an alert, we should ask ourselves why am I doing this? Do I feel anxious, am I bored, am I looking for a piece of information that's not actually important or urgent? And so, by asking ourselves these small why questions we can then begin to notice where our time goes missing on an everyday basis and begin to substitute these activities for other more positive uses of time such as going for a walk around the block or connecting with a colleague you haven't talked to in a while. So, this small why is really just to start questioning our use of technology or other ways that we let time go missing like researching for the best deal that we have talked about over the part of this conversation, asking yourself why you are doing it and then thinking about whether you might be able to substitute that activity for something else instead.

DJ: And in the beginning of the conversation you did allude to this notion of time confetti, Ashley. I guess, in a way it's a related point. So, from a tactical perspective for the listeners, if you could just maybe share your headline thoughts on how do we... in a way it's sort of related to this point around distraction and focus, right? What's...? I guess there's a lot of research has been done from different directions from the perspective of habit formation, from the perspective of deaddiction and so on and so forth, but from your lens Ashley if you had to sort of share your headline thoughts on how people should manage this phenomenon of time confetti to ensure that they are productive and they experience time affluence, what would be some of the headline themes you would like to share?

AW: So, the best emerging evidence suggests that we should pay to remove our distractions. So, if there are technology platforms or blockers that prevent us from checking our email or being distracted with alerts during certain periods of the day either in our leisure or our work lives where we are trying to spend time present in the moment, then we should pay for and use those services. My PhD student has an interesting set of research findings suggesting that when it comes to personally important goals, we rely on willpower too much. Actually, we are more effective at reaching goals, like reducing our use of technology or spending less time on social media by relying on external constraints or situational constraints and not relying on willpower. So, I would say give up your control to an application that would block you so that you do not have to use any of your bandwidth to try to stop your own behaviour. You should outsource keeping yourself distraction-free instead. So, there are things like alarm clocks; one of my friends started a company called Lofty, which is an alarm clock that automatically will turn off your phones in the bedroom as soon as it picks up your Bluetooth, it turns off your phone so you can't be distracted by your phone at night. So, technologies such as that alarm clock are things that we should all think about looking to and purchase to prevent ourselves from being distracted, while we are trying to engage in happy, productive and meaningful pursuits. Again, related to this small why question it is important that we write down and become aware of when we are engaging in mindless uses of technology. For my book editor when I was writing the book, he said, oh, until we chatted, I never realized that 10 minutes before an important meeting I would scroll on social media out of anxiety. And he said instead now I try to listen to a headspace recording or take a deep breath and really think about the upcoming meeting and I have noticed that really helps me reduce my time stress. So, that's where this noticing and recognizing when you are engaging in these mindless uses of technology become really important as well both from a productivity perspective but also from a mental health perspective. And then just circle back on this idea of the big why; this is very relevant to the conversation we are having. This came up I think as a sort of Meta point on this conversation of why time matters. People often ask me how did I become really interested in the study of time and of course it's a completely empirical interest, it's a professional interest but also, I have personally experienced the struggles of not making time and money trade-offs in a way that allows me to have a life outside of work. And so, I struggled in the first year, I was on faculty and ended up breaking up with a partner after 10 years and losing a cousin; both of my cousins had Duchene Muscular Dystrophy and passed away before the age of 30. And these two experiences happened simultaneously around the same time in my first faculty year and I sometimes will remind myself of these experiences and as I read about in the book, I actually have my cousin's initials tattooed on my wrist as a constant reminder of the fleeting nature of life and how there's no better time than the present to put the people and the causes that you care about first.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: It's interesting that Ashley says that our will power is of no use when it comes to fighting with the seductive and the addictive forces of technology. Something similar came up in my conversation with James Clear (JC), the author of Atomic Habits. He speaks about the role of environment in helping build habits.

*JC: "Yeah, so environment is a huge driver of our habits and behaviour, I think, perhaps the most overlooked driver of them because we are constantly surrounded by an environment and so a lot of the times we don't even think about it but the items that are on your desk at work, the things on your kitchen counter at home, the way your living room is laid out, all of those environments influence and shape your habits to a certain degree and the same is true for your digital environment. So, the icons that are on your home screen or the way that your desktop is laid out or what tabs you have open on your web browser, all of those are pieces of the digital environment that nudge and shape and suggest certain habits and behaviours to you.*

*For example, when I want to build a reading habit I moved to pocket and audible which are two... a pocket lets you save articles to read for later and audibles for audio books, I put those right on the home screen in the home bar so they were the first two apps that I would see every time I opened my phone. So, I made that app more visible which increased the odds that I was going to perform the reading habit. The second thing you can do to shape the environment to kind of nudge or improve your habits is to either increase the number of steps between you and the bad behaviour or decrease the number of steps between you and the good behaviour. So, basically you want to make the good habit the path of least resistance".*

DJ: To share a personal example, I have a standing desk in my office and that ensures that when I am in office, I end up standing at least for 3-4 hours on the desk. Rather than having a seat and reminding myself that I need to walk every now and then, having a standing desk sets the right default in terms of standing and moving around when I am working.

If you want to know more about how you bake in habits, you will enjoy my conversation with James Clear and also with BJ Fogg, the author of Tiny Habits. I don't know which is smaller, Atomic or Tiny but I guess they are making a similar point. BJ speaks about how we should think about 3 elements – Our motivation, Our Ability and our Prompt to ensure that we bake good habits. You might also like the Playlist Habits that you can access in the Curated Playlists section. Else you can just go to [playtopotential.com/tags/habits](http://playtopotential.com/tags/habits) (spell it out).

## End of nugget transcription

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Nugget from James Clear that is referenced: [Environment and habits](#).

## RELATED PLAYLISTS YOU MIGHT LIKE

**Habits:** Habits are routine behaviours done on a regular basis. They are recurrent and often unconscious patterns of behaviour and are acquired through frequent repetition. Guests on the podcast share their experiences in baking habits in their lives. You can access the playlist [here](#).

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### Ashley Whillans - Nuggets

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- 66.02 Ashley Whillans - When money stops moving the needle
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- 66.04 Ashley Whillans - Career choices in the future
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- 66.06 Ashley Whillans - Optimizing versus Satisficing mindset
- 66.07 Ashley Whillans - Big why, Small why and Time Confetti
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### About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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Podcast Transcript [66.07 Ashley Whillans - Big why, Small why and Time Confetti](#)

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