

# SUMMARY

BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

## NOTES ON A NERVOUS PLANET

BY MATT HAIG



# **Summary of “Notes on a Nervous Planet” by Matt Haig**

**Written by Alyssa Burnette**

How to stay sane in an anxious world.

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# Introduction

A friend of mine recently received a gag gift: a coffee mug which sarcastically proclaimed, “Life is short, so make sure you get into arguments with strangers on the internet!” Although this mug gives us something to chuckle about, it also touches on a very realistic truth: many of us waste our time engaging in pointless arguments with strangers on the internet. And, as the author astutely observes, this is only one of many unique challenges that stem from living in our frenetic modern world. Over the course of this summary, we’ll explore our relationships with technology and learn how modern pressures have damaged and distorted our productivity, mental health, and relationships.



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# Modern Humans Are Under More Pressure Than They Can Bear

Remember that classic Queen hit, “Under Pressure?” If you’re a parent, there’s a good chance that you can relate to portions of the lyrics like:

“Pressure pushing down on me, pressing down on you, no man ask for/

Under pressure that burns a building down, splits a family in two/

Puts people on streets.”

In your experience, that pressure might manifest in the form of rushing home from work to pick the kids up from daycare and scrambling to craft a home-cooked meal while you hold the phone with one hand and your screaming baby with the other. And although you may not realize it, “everyday stress” scenarios like this one activate your body’s “fight or flight” response, flooding you with the same levels of adrenaline that would be produced if you were fleeing a serial killer or fighting off a bear. If we had encountered either of those scenarios, we would of course understand that our bodies have been traumatized and that we need time to recover. We would recognize our pounding hearts, throbbing temples, and shaky legs as cues that we had survived an ordeal and allow ourselves some time to rest. But when it comes to the “casual” stress of our daily lives, we simply suppress these signals and move on, burying our physical symptoms or telling ourselves that a glass of wine will do the trick.

But why do we do it? Why do we accept this stress? The author posits that we accept it because we have literally been conditioned to do so. We carry the expectations of our parents, who frequently reminded us that they had it much harder and that our generation is “weak.” And if you’re a woman, that stress is even more pronounced because of the social double standard that is placed upon you. In fact, when the Families and Work Institute surveyed working mothers with children under six to ask them about their happiness

and quality of life, every single mother reported that she had not a single moment to herself. Not one moment where she wasn't encumbered by the burdens of children, work, or household responsibilities. Unsurprisingly, these women also reported stress levels that went through the roof!

The Institute conducted another survey of families later in 2008, incorporating the perspective of both mothers and fathers, and found that their results worsened. Half of the participants reported that they were severely overworked and burdened with more tasks than they could ever hope to accomplish in a standard workday. Similarly, 75% of participants affirmed that they lacked time to develop their relationship with their partners, and an even higher percentage asserted that they struggled to find time for their children. It doesn't take much to imagine how this pressure could quickly lead to dangerous stress levels and an influx of family problems. And in fact, for far too many Americans, it does. As the author acknowledges, studies show that long-term stress is not only detrimental, it literally changes our brains.

For example, a study conducted by Yale psychology professor Emily Ansell found that when she compared brain scans of people with relatively calm lives to those who were under constant stress, the prefrontal cortex of the stressed people-- which regulates our ability to plan ahead, make decisions, and think clearly under pressure-- had literally shrunk! Put simply, their exposure to constant stress had minimized their ability to cope with the stress of their daily lives. Even more concerning is the fact that the prefrontal cortex is also responsible for skills like self-control. And while our prefrontal cortex is being diminished, our amygdala-- the part of our brain which regulates emotions like fear, anxiety, or anger-- is actually increasing in the brains of people who are under constant stress.

So, as you can imagine, this results in a host of people who are anxious, unhappy, and overwhelmed struggling to control their responses to intense and negative emotions. Unsurprisingly, this could lead to a spike in violence or abuse towards others or self-destructive behaviors. None of these outcomes are positive and they're not what we want for our society! So, how

can we combat the threat of stress? How can we live happier and healthier lives?



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## Practice Phone Abstinence

The author posits that breaking up with your phone is one easy step that can help you minimize your stress. Many books have been written on the topic of “breaking up with your phone,” but it’s possible that you might not have considered this option before. Maybe you feel as though your current reliance on technology is within the bounds of normalcy. Maybe you don’t think your relationship with your phone is hurting you. But the author’s research-- and his own personal experience-- indicates that our relationship with technology can be more toxic than we think. If you want to understand how that’s possible, start by asking yourself how many times you check your phone every day. Do you think it’s 15 times? 30? What if I told you that that number is actually closer to 100?

A 2016 study conducted by the British consulting firm Deloitte discovered that “more than 40% of consumers check their phones within five minutes of waking up. Likewise, we have trouble putting them down, with over 30% of consumers checking their devices five minutes before going to sleep, and half doing so in the middle of the night. All told, we look at our phones approximately 47 times a day, and that number rises to 82 for 18-24 year-olds. Collectively, US smartphone users check their phones in the aggregate more than 9 billion times per day.” Does that sound like a lot yet? If we break those statistics down, you’ll also see that Americans spend an average of four hours per day with their phones, seven days a week. That means that we spend 28 hours a week being consumed by our phones! That’s the same amount of time we’d spend in a pretty busy part-time job! So, if we go back to our earlier example, we can see that the issue at hand is actually much greater than just a few innocuous glances at our phones! Because, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, you’re considered a “heavy media users” if you spend more than 16 hours with digital media a day. And 28 hours a week definitely counts as an addiction!

So, as you can see from these statistics, our addiction to our phones is definitely worrying. But the author also observes that our phones have a

detrimental impact on our mental health that can't be adequately represented by numbers and data points. To flesh this point out, we have only to consider the term "doomscrolling." Kevin Roose, a business and technology editor at the New York Times explains that "doomscrolling" is defined as "falling into deep, morbid rabbit holes filled with coronavirus content, agitating myself to the point of physical discomfort, erasing any hope of a good night's sleep." Similarly, pop culture analyst Angela Watercutter echoes his sentiments and affirms that doomscrolling is slowly eroding your mental health. She observes that the portability of negative news makes it uniquely detrimental, writing that:

"as protests over racial injustice and police brutality following the death of George Floyd have joined the Covid-19 crisis in the news cycle, it's only gotten more intense. The constant stream of news and social media never ends. For years people have questioned the net benefits of platforms like Twitter and Facebook, and while some studies have found social media, when used responsibly, can have positive effects on mental health, it can also lead to anxiety and depression. Or, at the bare minimum, FOMO. And that's just the result of looking at too many brunch photos or links to celebrity gossip. Add in a global pandemic and civil unrest—and the possibility that social media networks are incentivized to push trending topics into your feeds—and the problem intensifies."

To put it simply, we're living in a very scary time and the constant presence of distressing news is making matters worse. So, maybe it's time to break up with your phone, even if it's only temporarily. To that end, the author offers some simple and practical tips for practicing technological abstinence. Because social media forms the bulk of our addictive time commitment to our phones, these apps should be the first to go when we initiate the breakup process. But as you contemplate deleting these apps, it's important to remember that that doesn't mean you have to delete your entire online presence.

If you decide you can later establish healthy boundaries with these apps, you can always download them again. And you can always check your accounts

from your mobile browser (a much more inconvenient alternative which will limit your time on social media!) And in the meantime, while you're not scrolling through Instagram, just think of all the real-life fun you could be having! You can keep that thought in mind if you need some extra motivation and remind yourself that social media is only a shallow reflection of the genuine life experiences you want. So, remember that your goal is to make human connections and real memories and that deleting these apps doesn't have to be permanent. They'll always be there to re-download and your accounts are still intact. You're just taking a healthy break for now.



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# Get Some Sleep and be Kind to Yourself

If you're like most people, then it's probably pretty safe to say that you don't get a regular 8 hours of sleep every night. For most people, the amount of sleep we should be getting is often cut in half. Sometimes, it's even less, as illustrated by the examples of the sleep-deprived college students who boasted about their suffering. And because this pattern of sleep deprivation is so common, you're probably familiar with the concept of a "sleep debt." According to the American Sleep Association, "sleep debt, also known as sleep deficit, describes the cumulative effect of a person not having sufficient sleep. It's important for people to understand that a large sleep debt can well lead to physical and/or mental fatigue. The two known kinds of sleep debt are the results of total sleep deprivation and the results of partial sleep deprivation. Total sleep deprivation is when a person is kept awake for a minimum of 24 hours, while partial sleep deprivation occurs when either a person or lab animal has limited sleep for several days or even weeks."

Now, most of us aren't kept awake for 24 hours straight or for a period of several days. But we do get less sleep than we should and we regularly push ourselves past the point of exhaustion. And both of these things are extremely unhealthy! As you can see from the American Sleep Association's example, your sleep debt-- no matter how great it is-- can have a profound and detrimental impact on your daily life and cognitive function. It's also almost impossible to catch up or "pay off" that sleep debt. That's because your body remembers that lost sleep; the sleep deficit literally accumulates in your body, resulting in physical symptoms. And unfortunately, the same is true of traumatic experiences. So, if your body is constantly in "survival mode," battling perceived danger or experiencing chronic stress, the effects of operating in survival mode will accumulate in your body as well.

That's why the author believes that it's critical for every human being to get the right amount of sleep. Because we're under an obscene amount of stress and we're constantly bombarded by distressing news, we have to offset this negativity with rest and self-care. So, put down your phone, give yourself a

break, and try to get in bed a little earlier than you usually do. You might also want to construct a new bedtime routine that features a relaxing bath and a cup of herbal tea. For maximum relaxation, you might even try some refreshing bedtime yoga poses!

And while you're cultivating new and healthy habits, the author believes that you should also consciously infuse your life with a little extra positivity. As we've seen in the previous chapters, our lives are filled with an overabundance of negativity. So, if we don't actively work at finding things to be happy about, there's a pretty good chance that we'll stay stressed and depressed. So, how can you cultivate a more positive life? Well, for starters, you can play the "glad game!" You might remember this strategy if you ever watched the children's movie *Pollyanna* (although, if you're like most people, you probably haven't). *Pollyanna* is something of a vintage classic; this beloved Disney flick was released in 1960. But although it's unlikely to grace the shelves of many homes in 2020, its heartwarming message is timeless.

You see, *Pollyanna* follows the story of a cheerful orphan girl who is sent to live with her pessimistic aunt. Although the circumstances of *Pollyanna*'s young life are hardly ideal-- losing your parents as a child tends to put a damper on things-- *Pollyanna* remains steadfast in her optimistic worldview. Rather than engaging with toxic positivity, *Pollyanna* acknowledges that the world is full of loss and sadness. But that's exactly why she believes that it's important to look on the bright side. So, to keep herself from succumbing to depression, little *Pollyanna* invents a game that she calls the "glad game," challenging herself and others to find things to be glad about.

Sadly, however, most of us don't play this game. So far from challenging ourselves to find things we can enjoy, we often allow our bad days and trifling inconveniences to ruin our moods and our outlook on life. So, if you frequently find yourself arriving at the office in a huff about your burnt Egg McMuffin or the fact that your coffee has cream in it (when you specifically said no cream!), it might be time to play the glad game. Okay, so your breakfast didn't turn out the way you wanted. Maybe you can't even eat breakfast at all. That's a bummer for sure. But you can be glad that you can

afford breakfast when so many people can't afford food at all. You can be glad that you arrived at work safely and that you weren't injured in a terrible crash. You can be glad that you have a steady income or a pleasant office in which to work. You can be grateful for your family, for your friends, and for the fact that you're in good health. You can be glad that you'll enjoy a nice dinner when you go home tonight.

All of these things are simple blessings, but imagine where your life would be without them! And imagine how much better your life will be because you took time to appreciate the little things! It might sound a little corny, but appreciating these small pleasures can radically improve your day-- and your outlook on life! And as you go through the day playing the glad game, you might find that you're so full of energy and enthusiasm that you can't wait to share the good news with others!



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## Final Summary

We live on a nervous planet that's populated by people who are overworked, anxious, and unable to get the right amount of sleep. And when you add uniquely modern issues like doomscrolling, phone addictions, and the toxicity of social media, it's no wonder we're nervous all the time! That's why the author believes that it's vital for us to counteract this toxicity with some healthy habits that will reduce our stress. Understanding our relationship with technology is key because we can use this knowledge to identify the impact of digital media on our mental health. And ultimately, we can use this information to formulate a plan for stress reduction through phone abstinence. Lastly, it's also important that we get enough sleep, practice self-care, and seek out positivity.



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