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I was walking down Forty-Eighth Street in Midtown Manhattan, when a man, well-dressed in a nice suit and shined shoes, with coiffed hair, and a leather briefcase, brushed by me. Then I saw him turn his head and spit out his gum.

I kept my eyes on the wad of gum to be sure I didn’t step on it. The gum flew maybe three feet in front of me, bounced off a tree, and then rolled onto the sidewalk, landing right underneath his foot as he took his next step. He kept walking without noticing his own bright blue gum stuck to the sole of his shoe.

I laughed out loud.

And then I got to thinking. How often do we all do the same thing? How often do we take an action that we think is in our interest but ultimately ends up as gum stuck to our shoes? How often do we engage in behaviors that backfire?

Sometimes the ways in which our actions work against our interests are blatantly obvious—and easy to avoid. I just heard a story of someone who worked in a senior role at a Wall Street bank. Like the bank, he was highly leveraged; he’d bought an apartment well beyond his means. When he heard he wouldn’t be getting a bonus as big as he’d expected, he yelled and cursed and disparaged his boss to other people in the firm. Now he doesn’t have a bonus or a job.
Other times our self-sabotaging ways are more subtle, like the time I was running late for dinner with my wife, Eleanor. We had agreed to meet at a restaurant at seven o’clock, and it was already half past. I felt guilty but had been stuck in a client meeting that ran over. When I arrived, I apologized and told her I didn’t mean to be late.

“You never mean to be late,” she answered. Uh oh. She was mad.

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” I said, “but it was unavoidable.” I explained why I was late, describing details about the client meeting, maybe exaggerating a little to convey to her how important, how inescapable the meeting really was.

But instead of soothing her, I only made things worse. Now she was angry and annoyed.

Which made me angry and self-righteous. “Look,” I said, “I’m working really hard.”

The conversation continued to spiral down, each of us reacting to the other’s response. We both wanted the same thing—to enjoy a nice dinner together. But our reflexive responses moved us apart, and we ended up feeling separate and angry, the exact opposite of what we intended.

The culprit: our counter-productive, knee-jerk reactions.

My knee-jerk reaction to being late was to offer an explanation. Eleanor’s knee-jerk reaction to my explanation was impatience. My knee-jerk reaction to Eleanor’s impatience was anger. And on and on the argument went, each of us mindlessly following our instinct-driven script, no matter how ineffective.

Obviously, I didn’t intend to get into an argument with Eleanor. In fact, the reason I offered an explanation for my lateness was not to get into a fight. Yet, at the end of the day, my intention alone wasn’t the most important thing. What mattered even

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more was how my action—explaining my lateness—affected Eleanor. Pretty poorly, it turned out. I basically spit out my gum and then stepped on it.

When Bad Habits Happen to Good People

The basic things we all want—fulfilling relationships, accomplishments of which we’re proud, meaningful success at work, to be of service to others, peace of mind—are surprisingly straightforward to achieve. But, in many cases, our best efforts to achieve them are built on habits and behaviors that, simply put, don’t work.

When we feel overwhelmed and stressed by our growing to-do list, our knee-jerk reaction is to work longer hours and pack more into the hours we are already working. We multitask, dash from meeting to meeting, sneak e-mails under the conference-room table, and work early in the morning and late into the night. Our intention is to reduce our stress and overload. But our actions have the exact opposite effect: we end up more stressed and more overloaded.

Or we say things we think will impress someone but, instead, prompt rejection. We reach out to comfort a friend but, somehow, make her more upset. We give a team a pep talk, but without knowing why, we discourage them.

Each time we feel stunned. What just happened? we wonder. In the end, we spend days trying to repair the damage of those knee-jerk reactions that have backfired on us. We spend countless hours and energy thinking about what we said, talking to others about how we handled a situation, planning our next move, and maybe even walking the long way to the bathroom so we don’t have to pass someone we’ve inadvertently offended in the hallway.
Four Seconds to a Better Habit

There is good news: this is not a hard problem to solve. In fact, all you need is four seconds. Four seconds is the amount of time required to take a single breath. That short pause is all you need to see where you’re going wrong and to make a little shift.

And I mean little. The alternatives I suggest in the pages that follow are amazingly straightforward. They give you the results you want, and you won’t have to spin your wheels endlessly. They are ways of thinking, speaking, and acting—ways of being—that are simpler than the old ways and far more effective. They take less time and less energy. They help you become hyperproductive without being hyper.

In my book, 18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done, I offered a way for you to regain your focus and reshape your days around what matters most to you. I asked you to be strategic and intentional about what you do.

In 4 Seconds, I’ll show you how to be strategic and intentional—at the speed of light—about how you do what you do. 18 Minutes helped you focus on the right things. 4 Seconds will help you get the most out of that focus.

After all, it’s not enough to excel at managing your time; you need to excel at using that time powerfully. How you act during those hours determines your success: how you frame your mind, how you relate to others, how you speak and act at work and with your teams. The goal is not just to survive a busy life but to thrive in your most important endeavors and relationships.

You’ll learn to replace time-sucking, energy-wasting, counterproductive knee-jerk reactions with new habits and behaviors that are time saving, energy boosting, and productive. You’ll
learn new ways of living, working, and connecting in this fast-paced world that bring results and peace.

A New Habit Is Born

What could I have done differently when I arrived late so my valuable time with Eleanor was spent enjoyably instead of fighting? I could have taken just four seconds—enough time for a deep breath, a pause, a reset of my perspective—and then resist the urge to explain my lateness, and instead acknowledge Eleanor’s experience of waiting for me:

“I’m sorry I’m late. You’ve been sitting here for thirty minutes, and that’s frustrating. And I know it’s not the first time. I can see how it seems like I think being with a client gives me permission to be late. That’s disrespectful of your time, and I’m sorry you had to wait here for so long.”

This is easier said than done. My intuitive, gut-instinct, knee-jerk reaction is to validate my tardiness rather than my wife’s feelings. Doing so makes me feel better, like I’m not so bad for being late because there’s a specific reason. But the intuitive response is counter-productive. While it makes me feel better, it makes Eleanor—who’s been waiting for me—feel worse. It reinforces the point that whatever I was doing that made me late is clearly more important than she is. And just like that, without even realizing why, our nice evening is destroyed.

On the other hand, avoiding any explanation but reflecting on how my lateness affects Eleanor, while counterintuitive, actually makes her feel better. That’s because it shows her that I see her. And it’s an admission that there’s no good explanation for keeping her waiting. And just like that, our nice evening is saved.

And a new habit is born. When I’m late, my new knee-jerk response is still to apologize, but now I don’t explain—or make
excuses for—why I’m late. Instead, I acknowledge the other person’s experience of waiting for me.

There’s an added bonus to this new habit: I’m late less often. Explaining to Eleanor how my lateness affected her made me want to change in general. I don’t want to be disrespectful of her or anyone else’s time. And I don’t want her or others to feel frustrated. Somehow, acknowledging and coming clean to Eleanor about how my behavior affected her made me face my behavior in a new way. In other words, my new automatic response to being late hasn’t just improved my relationship with Eleanor; it’s improved my behavior too.

That’s the power of a productive habit.

But changing our habits is not easy to do. Our intuitive responses are, well, intuitive. They’re habits that feel natural and are hard to break. Even if they don’t work, relying on them is what we know. In the heat of the moment, it’s how we react. Knowing a new, effective, automatic response is half the battle. The other half is using it under stress. I’ve written *4 Seconds* to help you win both halves.

In part 1, “Change Your Mental Defaults,” you will learn how to regain control of your behaviors and actions—in the short term and the long term—that serve your best interests, draw you toward your objectives, and make you happy. You will learn how to master your impulses and temptations. You will become calmer and more peaceful. The advice in part 1 will help you become grounded.

In part 2, “Strengthen Your Relationships,” you will increase your capacity to handle difficult emotions—your own and other people’s—and you will become a master at reacting and responding productively to difficult conversations and situations. The
advice in part 2 will help you become connected to the people around you.

In part 3, “Optimize Your Work Habits,” you will learn to work—and lead—in a way that inspires the motivation, loyalty, and commitment of the people around you. You’ll subvert any tendencies that end up alienating colleagues or instigating opposition; instead, you’ll encourage self-motivation, positivity, and support in your organization. The advice in part 3 will help you lead courageously, authentically, and with impact.

My hope is that 4 Seconds will help you overcome your self-defeating habits and behaviors. While your counter-productive impulses may not disappear completely, I hope the advice in the pages that follow will help you gain power over them and help you develop new habits that advance your true interests, that help you make the impact you intend to make. The amount of time you will save by making better choices will be immeasurable. The positive impact you will have—on your life, your relationships, and your work—will be invaluable.

I can only assume that the guy with the gum on the bottom of his shoe hasn’t yet noticed. He’s probably still leaving a bright blue sticky trail in his wake. But you don’t have to.
PART ONE

Change Your Mental Defaults
It wasn’t easy getting into my writing chair. The obstacles weren’t physical—I was perfectly able to sit down and write. The obstacles—like most obstacles that distract us from achieving the things that are important to us—were mental.

I was busy, with lots of urgent things to get done, so sitting to write felt almost indulgent. The challenge of writing always invites procrastination even in the best of circumstances, but this morning I had been moving at a furious pace and was stressed about a client issue, both of which were in conflict with the slow, thoughtful pace that writing demands.

But, against all odds, there I was, finally settled into my writing.

I had just written my first sentence, when the door suddenly flew open and my daughter Sophia, who was seven-years-old at the time, rushed in.

“The kitchen is flooded!” she yelled. “Help!”

Seriously? Apparently, Daniel, who was five-years-old, filled a glass of water and neglected to turn off the tap. Oops.

My knee-jerk reaction was to yell at both Daniel and Sophia. I could feel energy surge in my body as my muscles tensed. In that moment, yelling felt both justified and appropriate.

But I paused and took a breath. Four seconds.

That breath was the hardest thing I did all day. In concept, breathing is easy. But pausing for a few seconds to take a breath in the midst of the swirling emotions I was feeling? When I was frustrated and mad and tired and worried? Not so easy.
Those four seconds—and the presence of mind to take them—are the first step to subverting our counter-productive knee-jerk reactions: the first step to making the smartest choice in the moment.

In part 1, you will learn to slow down—to create space between what you feel and what you do—and to make smarter snap decisions that move you toward the outcomes you desire. The chapters that follow will help you find that space, solidify it, and notice what happens in it. But more important, it will help you ditch your self-defeating mental habits that get in your way and replace them with productive ones. You will discover things like

• how indulging temptation is the key to overcoming it;
• why setting goals can actually derail performance;
• how strategic disengagement can recover your focus and willpower;
• how doing nothing at all can solve the most difficult problems; and
• why most of our stress is caused by events of minimal consequence and how changing our expectations—not external reality—is the key to success.

I hope the advice in the following chapters helps you better master your impulses and temptations and adopt mental habits that lead to a productive, but calmer and more peaceful, life.

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THIS MORNING, LIKE EVERY MORNING, I SAT CROSS-LEGGED ON A cushion on the floor, rested my hands on my knees, closed my eyes, and did nothing but breathe for twenty minutes.

People say the hardest part about meditating is finding the time to meditate, which makes sense. Who these days has time to do nothing? It's hard to justify.

Meditation brings many benefits: it refreshes us, helps us settle into what’s happening now, makes us wiser and gentler, helps us cope in a world that overloads us with information and communication, and more. But if you’re still looking for a business case to justify spending time meditating, try this one: meditation makes you more productive.

How? By increasing your capacity to resist distracting urges.

Research shows that an ability to resist urges will improve your relationships, increase your dependability, and raise your performance.1 If you can resist your urges, you can make better, more thoughtful decisions. You can be more intentional about what you say and how you say it. You can think about the outcome of your actions before following through on them.
Our ability to resist an impulse determines our success in learning a new behavior or changing an old habit. It’s probably the single most important skill for our growth and development. As it turns out, that’s one of the things meditation teaches us. It’s also one of the hardest to learn.

When I sat down to meditate this morning, relaxing a little more with each exhale, my concerns drifted away. My mind was truly empty of everything that had concerned it before I started meditating. Everything except the flow of my breath. My body felt blissful, and I was at peace.

For about four seconds.

That’s how long it takes to take one breath. And within one breath, thoughts came flooding in. I felt an itch on my face and wanted to scratch it. A great title for my next book popped into my head, and I wanted to write it down before I forgot it. I thought of at least four phone calls I wanted to make and one difficult conversation I was going to have later that day. I became anxious, knowing I only had a few hours of writing time. What was I doing just sitting here? I wanted to open my eyes and look at how much time was left on my countdown timer. I heard my kids fighting in the other room and wanted to intervene.

Here’s the key though: I wanted to do all those things, but I didn’t do them. Instead, every time I had one of those thoughts, I brought my attention back to my breath.

Because, while four seconds is all it takes to lose focus, that’s all it takes to regain focus too. Four seconds—one breath—is all it takes to stop yourself from a counter-productive knee-jerk reaction. And four seconds is all it takes to make a more intentional, more strategic choice that’s more likely to get you where you want to go.

Sometimes, not following through on something you want to
do is a problem, like not writing that proposal you’ve been procrastinating on or not having that difficult conversation you’ve been avoiding.

But other times, the problem is that you do follow through on something you don’t want to do, like speaking instead of listening or playing politics instead of rising above them.

Meditation teaches us to resist the urge of that counterproductive follow-through.

Later in this book, I will suggest that it’s easier and more reliable to create an environment that supports your goals than it is to depend on willpower, but sometimes you do need to rely on plain, old-fashioned, self-control.

For example, self-control is useful when an employee makes a mistake and you want to yell at him even though you know that it’s better—for him and for the morale of the group—to ask some questions and discuss it gently and rationally. Or when you want to blurt something out in a meeting but know you’d be better off listening. Or when you want to buy or sell a stock based on your emotions even though the fundamentals and your research suggest a different action. Or when you want to check e-mail every three minutes instead of focusing on the task at hand.

Each time you meditate, you will be proving to yourself that temptation is only a suggestion. You are in control.

Does that mean you never follow an urge? Of course not. Urges hold useful information. If you’re hungry, it may be a good indication that you need to eat. But it also may be an indication that you’re bored or struggling with a difficult piece of work. Meditation gives you practice having power over your urges so you can make intentional choices about which to follow and which to let pass.
So how do you do it? If you’re just starting, keep it very simple.

Sit with your back straight enough that your breathing is comfortable—on a chair or a cushion on the floor—and set a timer for however many minutes you want to meditate. Once you start the timer, close your eyes, relax, and don’t move except to breathe, until the timer goes off. Focus on your breath going in and out. Every time you have a thought or an urge, notice it and bring yourself back to your breath.

That’s it. Simple but challenging. Try it—today—for five minutes. And then try it again tomorrow.

And if you don’t have five minutes? Then try it for four seconds.

A four-second pause—the time it takes to take one breath in, one breath out—can be powerful enough to subvert a poor decision and replace it with a smarter one.
“SOPHIA! DANIEL! ISABELLE!” I YELLED ACROSS THE APARTMENT AT my three children who were playing together in their bedroom. “The school bus arrives in ten minutes. Let’s see who can brush their teeth and get to the door first.”

They dashed toward the bathroom, giggling. Two minutes later, Daniel had won with Sophia in close second, and Isabelle right after her. I smiled at my own victory. I had achieved my goal of getting them to the door with their teeth brushed in record time.

Or did I?

Yes, they were at the door in time. But two minutes from start to finish meant that they didn’t brush their teeth very well, they definitely didn’t floss, and the bathroom was a mess.

We all know how important it is to have goals, right? And not just any goals, but stretch goals. Big Hairy Audacious Goals (or BHAGs, as they’re known to the inner goal-setting crowd).

It makes sense: if you don’t know specifically where you’re going, then you’ll never get there. And if you don’t set the bar high enough, you’ll never live up to your potential.

Goal setting is accepted common sense in the business world, and it’s reinforced by research. Like that study done on the 1979
class in the Harvard MBA program, which you may have heard of: Only 3 percent of the graduating students wrote down clear goals. Ten years later, those 3 percent were worth ten times the worth of the rest of the class combined. Compelling, right?

It would be if it were true. But it isn’t. That study doesn’t exist. It’s pure urban myth.

Still, that’s just one specious story. Questioning the wisdom of setting stretch goals is like questioning the very foundation of business. We might debate which goals to set, or how to set them, but who would debate whether to set goals at all?

I’d like to.

It’s not that goals, by their nature, are bad. It’s just that they come with a number of side effects that suggest you may be better off without them.

The authors of a Harvard Business School working paper, “Goals Gone Wild,”2 reviewed a number of research studies related to goals and concluded that the upside of goal setting has been exaggerated, and the downside, the “systematic harm caused by goal setting,” has been disregarded.

They identified clear side effects associated with goal setting, including “a narrow focus that neglects non-goal areas, a rise in unethical behavior, distorted risk preferences, corrosion of organizational culture, and reduced intrinsic motivation.”

Here are two examples of goals gone wild the authors described in their paper:

• Sears set a productivity goal for their auto-repair staff of bringing in $147 for every hour of work. Did this motivate employees? Sure. It motivated them to overcharge on a companywide basis.
• Remember the Ford Pinto? A car that ignited when it was rear-ended? The Pinto resulted in fifty-three deaths and many more injuries because workers omitted safety checks in pursuit of Lee Iacocca's BHAG goal of a car that would be “under 2,000 pounds and under $2,000” by 1970.

And here’s another via the New York Times:

• Ken O’Brien, the former New York Jets quarterback, was throwing too many interceptions. So he was given what seemed to be a pretty reasonable goal—fewer interceptions thrown—and penalized financially for every one. It worked. He threw fewer interceptions. But only because he threw fewer passes. His overall performance suffered.

It’s practically impossible to predict the negative side effects of a goal.

When we set goals, we’re taught to make them specific and measurable and time bound. However, it turns out that those characteristics are precisely the reasons goals can backfire. A specific, measurable, time-bound goal drives behavior that’s narrowly focused and often leads to either cheating or myopia. Yes, we often reach the goal. But at what cost?

So what can you do in the absence of goals? It’s still often necessary to drive toward achievements, especially in business. We need help setting direction and measuring progress. But maybe there’s a better way to achieve those things while sidestepping a goal’s negative side effects.

I want to propose one approach: instead of identifying goals, consider identifying areas of focus.

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A goal defines an outcome you want to achieve; an area of focus establishes activities you want to spend your time doing. A goal is a result; an area of focus is a path. A goal points to a future you intend to reach; an area of focus settles you into the present.

A sales goal, for example, might name a revenue target or a specific number of new clients won. An operations goal might articulate a cost savings.

An area of focus in sales, on the other hand, might involve having lots of conversations with appropriate prospects. An operations area of focus might identify areas you want to explore for cost savings.

Obviously, these aren’t mutually exclusive. You could have a goal and an area of focus. In fact, one could argue that you need both together—the goal specifies where you’re going, and the area of focus describes how you plan to get there.

But there is a benefit to concentrating on an area of focus without a goal.

An area of focus taps into your intrinsic motivation, offers no stimulus or incentive to cheat or take unnecessary risks, leaves every positive possibility and opportunity open, and encourages collaboration while reducing corrosive competition—all while moving forward on the things you and your organization value most.

In other words, an area of focus offers all the advantages of a goal without the negative side effects.

How do you do it? It’s simple: identify the things you want to spend your time doing—or the things that you and your manager decide are the most valuable use of your time—and spend your time doing those things. The rest takes care of itself. I have found that five major areas of focus are about the limit before your efforts get diluted.
The key is to resist the temptation to identify the outcome you want to achieve. Leave that open and allow yourself to be pleasantly surprised. I’m not suggesting that this is easy to do. I never realized how goal focused I was until I tried to stop focusing on goals. Without goals, I found it hard to trust that anything would get done at all.

But things got done. And in my experience, not only will you achieve at least as much as you would have if you had set goals, but you’ll enjoy the process far more, avoiding unnecessary stress and temptation.

In other words, if we focus on the tasks instead of the outcome, my kids will still get to the door on time, but they will have flossed, brushed thoroughly, and left the bathroom clean too.

Setting goals isn’t always a beneficial habit. Identify and spend your time on areas of focus instead and you’ll get where you want to go more effectively.
Byron’s Real Problem

Commit to Following Through

“PETER,” MY FRIEND BYRON E-MAILED ME A FEW DAYS AGO. “I HAVEN’T been diligent about working out over the past five years and I’m trying to get back in the gym and get myself into a healthier state. I’ve found that on my quest for a Mind, Body, Spirit balance, my body has been neglected. I need to fix it, and it’s VERY hard for me to get motivated. Any insight?”

Something you should know about Byron is that he recently started a business, and he’s constantly developing his skills through training programs he pays for with his own money. So it’s not that Byron is unmotivated in general. It’s just that he thinks he’s unmotivated to work out.

But Byron is wrong. “I need to fix it,” he wrote. He is motivated to work out; otherwise he wouldn’t have e-mailed me. He clearly cares about getting fit, and when you care about something, you’re motivated.

No, Byron’s challenge isn’t motivation. It’s follow-through.

It’s important to realize this distinction because as long as Byron thinks he’s solving a motivation problem, he’ll be looking for the wrong solution. He’ll try to get himself excited. He’ll re-
mind himself that being in shape is really important. Maybe he’ll visualize the partners he’ll attract if he looks better or the years he’ll add to his life if he gets in better shape.

Each attempt to motivate himself will only increase his stress and guilt as it widens the gap between his motivation and his follow-through, between how badly he wants to work out and his failure to do so. We have a misconception that if we only cared enough about something, we would do something about it. But that’s not true.

Motivation is in the mind; follow-through is in the practice. Motivation is conceptual; follow-through is practical. In fact, the solution to a motivation problem is the exact opposite of the solution to a follow-through problem. The mind is essential to motivation. But with follow-through, it’s the mind that gets in the way.

We’ve all experienced our mind sabotaging our aspirations. We decide to go to the gym after work, but then, when it comes time to go, we think, *It’s late. I’m tired. Maybe I’ll skip it today.* We decide we want to meditate, but then, we look at our watch and decide, *I don’t have the time.* We decide we need to be more supportive of our employees, but then, when someone makes a mistake, we think, *If I don’t make a big deal about this, he’s going to do it again.* We decide we need to speak more in meetings, but then, when we’re sitting in the meeting, we think, *I’m not sure what I’m going to say really adds value.*

Here’s the key: if you want to follow through on something, stop thinking. Shut down the sabotaging conversation that goes on in your head before it starts. Don’t take the bait. Stop arguing with yourself. Make a very specific decision about something you want to do and don’t question it. By very specific, I mean decisions like these: “I will work out tomorrow at 6:00 a.m.,” or “I will meditate for fifteen minutes as soon as I wake up,” or “I will

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only point out the things my employee does right,” or “I will say at least one thing in the next meeting.”

Then, when your mind starts to argue with you—and I guarantee it will—ignore it. You’re smarter than your mind. You can see right through it.

I once took a golf lesson with a pro who taught me a certain way to swing the club. After the lesson, he issued a warning.

“When you play with others, some people will want to give you advice. Just listen to them politely, thank them for their advice, and then completely ignore it and do exactly what I’ve just told you to do.”

That, Byron, is precisely how you should respond to your mind.

If you are having trouble accomplishing a task or activity, the culprit might be follow-through. Rather than motivating yourself with an internal pep talk, shut down your mind: decide on a specific action or task, and don’t allow your internal thoughts to talk you out of it.