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UNIVERSAL
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Issue 204 AUS \$12.00*
NZ \$12.00 (Both incl GST)

23

ISSN: 0812 - 8220



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Ditching distraction

We all know that life is short, but we inevitably allow ourselves to be distracted, spending our valuable time on snapping, scrolling, binge-watching, procrastinating and putting off until tomorrow what should be done today. So how do you swap distraction for meaningful traction in your life?

Words: LAURA KELLY

When the Rolling Stones sang "Time Is On My Side" in 1964 they surely would not have predicted or presumed that, almost 60 years later, they would still be strutting on centre stage. As octogenarians, this song is surely not on their playlist now. In the 21st century the average lifespan is 80 years. Now that seems like an awfully long time. But if we were to change the mode of measurement from years to weeks, then that time translates to 4000 weeks. When we look at it using that metric, life suddenly seems very finite. It is easy to conceptualise how long a week feels, so 4000 of them feels makes it real.

At the time of reading this you may want to reflect on your own age and where you sit on the time continuum. Which end are you closer to? How many weeks down are you? And how many to go? Time is not an infinite commodity — it runs out. When you put this more sombre perspective on your life, you come to realise that time may not be on your side for as long as you would like. So why is it that we spend so much of this precious and irrecoverable time lost in distraction?

Driven to distraction

The advent of email, social media, streaming platforms and gaming has meant that we are easily distracted, but what is more problematic is we often seek out distraction. We even subconsciously look to be distracted

from the meaningful or essential task at hand so that we can mindlessly drift or be taken to worlds far away from our own. This is, effectively, avoidance of life.

Scrolling endlessly or getting distracted by the cacophony of pings on your phone takes up those valuable hours in a day, yet we do it day after day. What is it about life today where we can so easily and even deliberately check out? Is it boredom, fear of failure, emotional avoidance, the distress of facing up to the reality of our lives or not knowing what to do with our lives? Today, we have a better quality of life than our predecessors who were occupied in just surviving. Yet, with more time to think, with more time to compare ourselves with others and with our universal fixation on happiness, we tend to opt out rather than opt into our own lives as these existential issues can be just too challenging to deal with.

Distraction is a form of escapism, which in small doses is fine as we all need to get away from the reality of life from time to time. But when distraction becomes a way of life it takes on the form of a chronic addiction. Chronic distraction stops us from doing all the things that matter to us — it also prevents us from being and becoming our whole selves. We effectively confer the best part of ourselves to algorithms designed to keep us addicted.

Being distracted is more than mere time-wasting. For many of us it has become, unknowingly, a serial



occupation preventing us or making it very difficult to cut back into real life. This can have serious health and wellbeing side effects.

For instance, many clients who present to therapy with issues that encompass anxiety and depression have their root causes in a sense of hopelessness and helplessness that emanates from a lack of purpose or direction. This can lead to a range of coping behaviours and distractions, from shopping online racking up debt to scrolling through Pinterest pining for the dream life we will never have. While seemingly harmless at the time, these unproductive activities can lead to disillusionment and self-recrimination. But with focus and attention, we can get back on track.

Losing distraction and finding traction

No matter your age, there is always time to lead a purposeful and meaningful life. Yet we don't. John Lennon from the legendary 60s band The Beatles, who were contemporaries of the Rolling Stones, famously said, "Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans." Sadly, time was not on his side as his life was tragically cut short at the age of 40. Yet he was still making memorable music that remains in our social consciousness and living his purpose right to the very end.

How many of us have dreamed about setting up that little business, yearned to write that novel or to take up dance or pottery but got distracted with life's preoccupations? Job or career, children, caring for others, dealing with life's daily menial tasks and challenges from health to finances all take time, yet we still find ourselves wasting so much of it doing nothing of any value. You run to distraction only to find yourself becoming enslaved by it.

So how do you distract yourself from distraction? How do you find a way to reconnect with yourself? How do you deal with the discomfort of life without seeking the refuge of distraction? It's not easy but it matters as we're all on a daily countdown. Digital detoxes, meditation, being inspired by meaningful pursuits and fronting up to life's challenges comprise parts of a cocktail of solutions. When you start with grasping the true value of your time then you feel compelled and less prone to give it away for nothing.

The 19th century playwright George Bernard Shaw said, "Those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything." This is easier said than done as there are many antecedent reasons as to why people find it difficult to switch gears. But the essence of this epithet is that if you are open to a new perspective or approach you can effect real change in your life. So how can you make the most of your time without getting derailed with distraction?

5 ways to get traction from life

1 Plan, Prioritise, Prepare: These three Ps will ensure you head off Procrastination (that other terrible "P") at the pass. Often we talk about getting motivated but research shows that motivation doesn't actually work. Effectively, you only get motivated once you start the activity. Lists are your friends. Being organised and planning your day, week, month and even year allows you to find that elusive focus. Prioritise what matters and give yourself realistic, achievable deadlines and a reward system for when you tick those boxes.

2 Seek meaning and purpose, not happiness. The problem with happiness is that it is transitory and dependent on events exterior to your life going well, hence the reason you move to distraction or even to addictive behaviours. Leading a meaningful existence imbued with purpose is not contingent on external factors. So find what really matters to you and do it using the three Ps.

3 Be intentional. Evaluate what you are about to do and if it really matters or has any purpose. Does the activity add any real value to your life? If not, think again and move to something that gives you real joy or satisfaction in the moment. You might swap out scrolling for strolling along the beach. Think about how you will feel after assessing your choice of activities or outlets.

4 Make time for distraction. Yes! Make time to time-waste. Slot in those times for unmitigated useless and unproductive activity. Escapism in small doses is actually good for you. So make time to scroll, snap and binge. But be mindful that this does not go into overflow. Contain your distraction.

5 Live mindfully. When you live in a conscious way you don't rid yourself of your problems or worries but you also don't avoid them. You opt back into life, existing in, rather than escaping from the now. As such,



you take back control and agency, rather than being a passive player in your life.

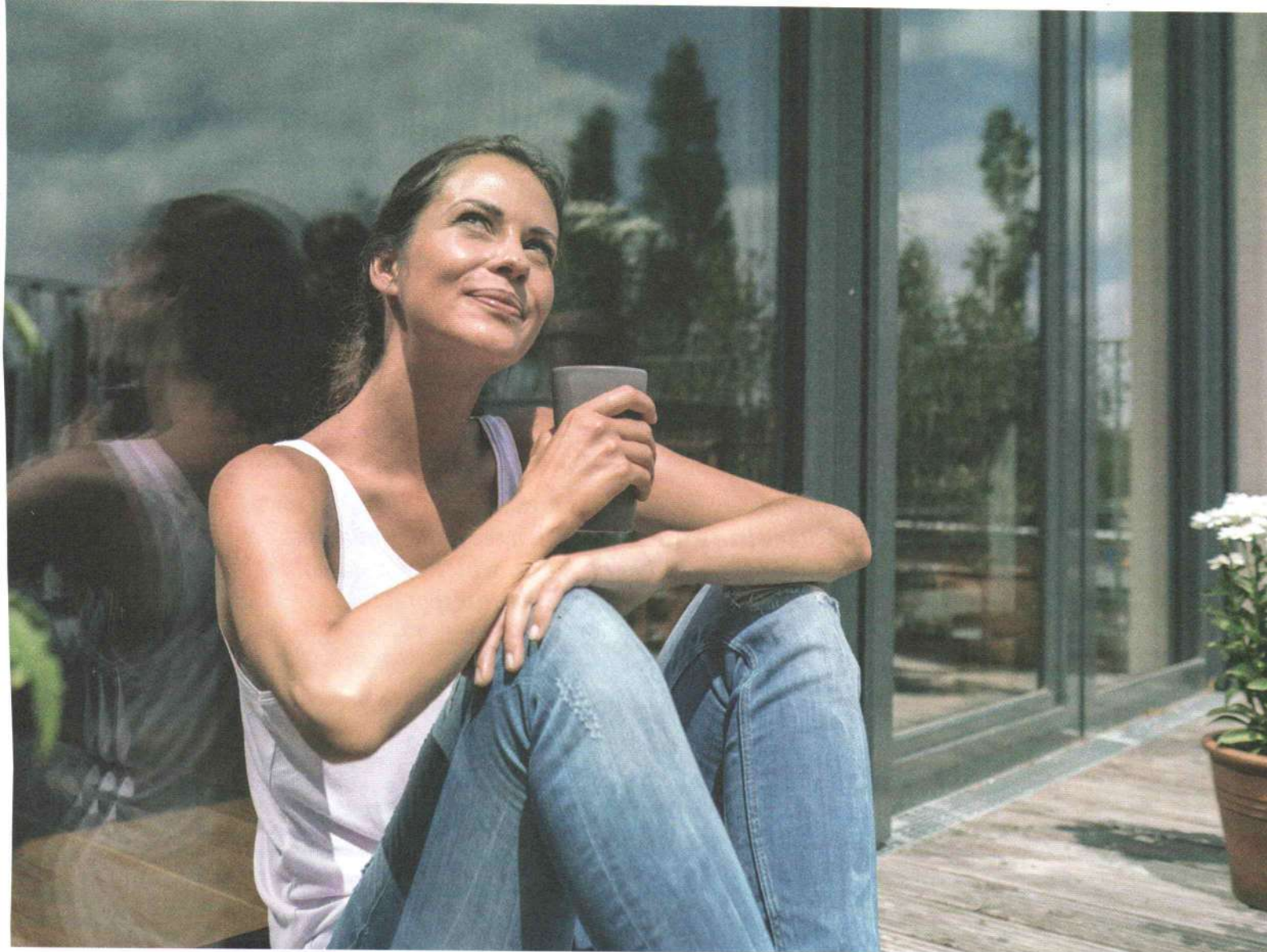
Daydream believer

Borrowing again from the 1960s iconic bands theme, some of you may remember the song "Daydream Believer" by the Monkees. This fun, catchy tune had a more sinister undertone. The songwriter John Stewart wrote it thinking about the boredom of life in the suburbs. He is quoted as saying, "I remember going to bed thinking 'What a wasted day — all I've done is daydream.' And from there I wrote the song."

Well, the ironic thing here is that because of his daydreaming it eventuated in his writing a pop song that has outlasted him and just about all the members of this American pop band that was manufactured for 60s television. His daydreaming has given so many people over six decades so much joy and possibly made him a fortune as well as affording him a legacy. As is evident in this case and despite what he claimed, daydreaming was not a waste of time at all, and science backs this up.

Daydreaming, fantasising, musing or imagining are not distractive time-wasting pursuits because you are with your thoughts. You are not avoiding them. You are immersed

You run to distraction only to find yourself becoming enslaved by it.



in your own ponderings and your brain, using its cognitive functions, is working hard.

It is your imagination that is doing the heavy lifting, and research now shows that daydreaming is actually the birthplace of ideas. Dr Erin Westgate from the University of Florida states in an article published by *Forbes* magazine that daydreaming "is part of our cognitive toolkit that's underdeveloped." As we have become more subsumed in the digital world we are prone to using even less of this part of our minds, reverting to becoming passive cognitive bystanders. When you daydream, you are the author of the story, not Netflix. Daydreaming is not a frivolous or a useless pastime. Many of the great inventions we have come to know or use have had their inception from this place of cognitive imaginings.

Mind-wandering or daydreaming is quite distinct from ruminating or worrying, which has its roots in anxiety. Westgate says that daydreaming is "thinking for pleasure". Daydreaming is also all about pushing mental boundaries and daring to defy your own limitations. Daydreaming can actually lead to finding creative and innovative approaches. Often, as in the case of the songwriter above, sleeping or napping after allowing your mind to meander can

also be super-productive. If you have been daydreaming or pondering something, you can awake with a solution to a problem, a brilliant idea or, like him, a beautiful melody that becomes a worldwide hit. Make no mistake, daydreaming is a skill, an art form even. Westgate claims that daydreaming is "something that sets us apart. It defines our humanity. It allows us to imagine new realities." She adds that it actually makes us happier, even more resilient.

Children are often scolded by schoolteachers or parents for drifting off, and while of course that might be necessary if you're learning algebra or playing the violin, daydreaming should not be discouraged. Allowing kids to mentally free-fall with no distractions prompts them to think in an open-minded way. It is so important to resist the urge to use free time to jump onto devices where it is easy to form the habit of mindless distraction. Digital hygiene for kids where they are left to their own cognitive devices means that they can take their mind out for a walk, play or just wander. It is a pastime that can lead to great ideas but, if not, it is a joyful, active and deliberate experience that is self-generated.

Distraction is quite distinct from absorption as you are not seeking

escapism but rather immersion. As such you are involved in the outcome. Absorption is a form of mindfulness which is an active rather than a passive activity. You are a stakeholder in that pursuit. Conversely, distraction is you dipping into someone else's life or being a passive observer to something that has no meaningful connection for you.

On the clock

Oscar Wilde famously said that youth is wasted on the young. He is referring to the fact that by the time we are blessed with wisdom it is too late to do the things we should have done or explored in our youth. This doesn't need to be the case. At any time in your life, you can come to the realisation that life is not a dress rehearsal but the main act. Distraction has you waiting in the wings, not being on the stage to perform your life to the full. So get out there and be the actor, author and activator of your life story.

Time is ticking. Don't waste a minute! 🕒

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