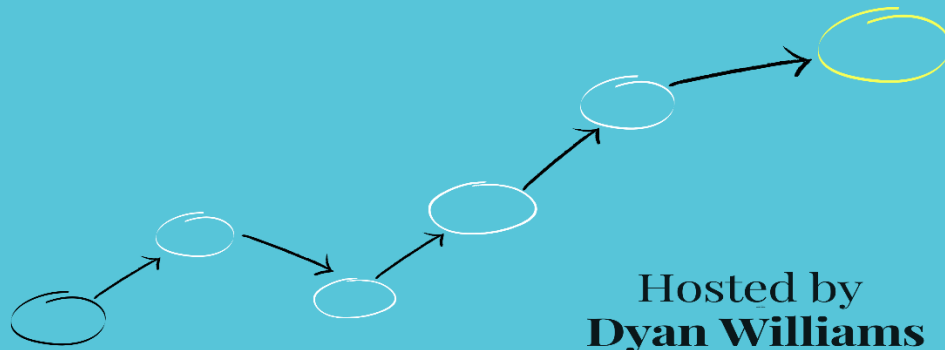


# THE INCREMENTALIST

A **PRODUCTIVITY PODCAST** ON  
MAKING BIG CHANGES IN SMALL STEPS



## EPISODE 18

# Make Time for Daily Highlights

<http://www.dyanwilliams.com/make-time-for-daily-highlights-the-incrementalist-episode-18/>

*Do your big goals take the joy out of your daily life?*

*Do you feel like you're wasting time if you're not powering through your to-do list?*

*Are you distracted by streaming media, like Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter?*

*Are you postponing when to start because you don't know where you'll end up?*

## **This is Episode 18: Make Time for Daily Highlights**

Hello and welcome to the Incrementalist, a productivity podcast. My name is Dyan Williams and I'm your productivity coach and host for this show.

The space between the small tasks and the big goals is the middle ground. The sweet spot between the two extremes. It's where you savor the moment, the now, while you are saying no to things that don't matter and yes to the things that do.

For many years, Jake Knapp and John Zerastky worked for Google and Google Ventures. At Google, Jake created a workflow process called the design sprint – a five-day workweek to focus on a single problem. On Monday, the team maps out and defines the problem. On Tuesday, they sketch the solutions. On Wednesday, they decide on the best solution to use. On Thursday, they build prototype. On Friday, they test the solution.

At Google Ventures, they helped start-up companies like Uber and Slack launch products and market them. With the design sprint approach, they learned to focus on one high priority per day, ban digital distractions, eat, sleep and move well, and review what worked and what didn't.

In their book, Make Time, John and JZ draw from their design sprints and experiments to outline a four-step framework to be creative and productive each day. You repeat the steps daily to get off the Busyness Bandwagon, stay out of Infinity Pools, and make time for what matters.

The Busyness bandwagon is the culture of constant busyness, like being always on and working long hours. In the high tech, modern world, busyness is a status symbol – the busier you are, the more in demand you are, and the more successful you become. That's the common belief.

If we can do more and be more efficient, we can make time for more things that matter, right? If we plan and set goals better, we can fit more stuff into our life, right? Isn't being busy the way to fit those important moments into our life?

And we have Infinity Pools – which are apps, services and products that are have an infinite content and are always on. There's social media like Facebook, Instagram,

Twitter; video streaming like YouTube, Netflix and Amazon Prime, and web browsers like Safari, Google Chrome, Bing, which give you 24-7 access to information around the world. You can dip back into Infinity Pools at any time to find fresh content. There's always more water in the pool.

To reclaim your time, focus and energy, you have to reset the default behavior. Do you really need a 1-hour meeting or will 20 minutes do? Do you have to respond to an email as soon as you get it in your inbox? Do you have to keep the social media apps on your phone? Notice your default actions and how they keep you in the Infinity Pool.

Let's go over the four-steps that you repeat daily to Make Time. They are highlight, laser, energize and reflect.

**The first step in making time is to choose your daily highlight:** what will be your highlight of the day? It could be finishing an important client project with a deadline. An inconvenient task you must do. Or a fun activity you really want to do.

The highlight of your day is what you aim to do and accomplish. At the end of your day, what is a meaningful thing you could do so that you will feel good about how you spent your time.

Jake and JZ write, "Plenty of self-help gurus have offered suggestions for setting goals, and plenty of productivity experts have created systems for getting things done. But the space between has been neglected. We call the missing piece a Highlight."

A highlight is just right for doing meaningful, creative and productive work. – it's a medium sized task to do today. Small tasks – like checking emails – are too minor. Goals are too big and far away.

The Make Time authors recommend you choose a highlight that takes 60 to 90 minutes. Protect the time for it. A 60 to 90-minute time block is enough to do a meaningful task and not too much time to protect on your schedule or calendar. With less than 60 minutes it's harder to get in the flow and in the zone. And more than 90 minutes of deep focus, you will likely need a break. 90 minutes of focused work in the quiet hours is a lot better than 4 hours later in the day when there are more interruptions.

The Make Time authors suggest 3 strategies to choose your highlight:

**First is Urgency:** Ask yourself, What's the most pressing thing I have to do today?

Instead of spending hours on emails and meetings, you protect your time for the one thing that must be done and accomplished today. Look at your to-do lists, task management system, or calendar to pick an important and urgent project to do

today. If a project will take more than a day, break it down into a subproject that becomes your daily highlight.

You're thinking about deadlines and priorities. What do you need to get done?

For me, an example would be finishing a legal memorandum for a client, meeting a filing deadline, or preparing notes for a course. A daily highlight could be the same for several days in a row if it takes more than one day to complete a specific project. This helps reduce the cost of context switching and builds momentum toward completion.

**Second is Satisfaction:** At the end of the day, which Highlight will bring me the most satisfaction? These could be side projects that you keep putting off but really want to do, or building a particular skill that has little to do with your core work.

You're thinking about the sense of accomplishment. What do you want to get done?

For me, an example would be recording this podcast episode, being a sounding board for a friend in need, and mastering a new song on the piano.

**Third is Joy:** When I reflect on today, what will bring me the most joy?

If your life is just about optimizing, efficiency and productivity, you will neglect having moments of pure joy.

You're thinking about what lights you up, what you want really enjoy doing.

For me, an example is reading a great book, taking a nature walk, or playing with my kids/ If you're intentional about the activity, you're not wasting time.

Trust yourself in deciding on whether to go with an urgent, satisfying or joyful highlight. This is a daily system you can experiment with and tweak as you go along. You can't go wrong with choosing a highlight.

Identifying a highlight allows you to be more intentional. Your default is focusing your time, attention and energy of the one big thing that matters, not on distractions and demands that are outside your priorities.

Among the tactics that Jake and JZ describe is the might-do list. When you have a highlight, the rest of the items on your to-do list are things you might do. Completing one big thing is more satisfying than checking off many minor tasks.

The Might-Do List is almost like the Someday/Maybe List from Getting Things Done. The items on your Might-Do List become a priority once you decide to block time on your calendar to do them.

Your highlight is the planning tool to move a Might-Do List item on to your calendar. Your Might do list is what you could do, your one big this is what's most important today) and the calendar is how you actually use your time. You narrow down the possibilities of what to do and take action on one specific thing.

### **The second step in making time is to get into laser mode.**

To make time, you avoid distractions including email, social media and news feeds. When it comes to your attention, the solution is not in the to-do or task management apps. If hyperresponsiveness is expected in your workplace, the apps won't make things easier. It could even make it worse. So if you can't openly set office hours or boundaries, maybe you just unilaterally decide to batch process your emails at strategic times, without telling anyone. And do really great work so people are more forgiving of delayed replies. Failing to respond to a message right away if you're designing and delivering solutions that take care of real problems. The performative aspects of looking productive is not as essential as getting real, important work done.

You stay away from Infinity pools that dilutes your focus on the most important task. One tactic is to clean up your smartphone. Zeratsky keeps a distraction free iphone. He has no Infinity Pool apps for Social Media, emails or video streaming on his phone.

The quick checks can keep going down a rabbit hole. Make it harder to get distracted by removing the temptations on the phone. You can use Google Maps to navigate your way through a new place, uber to get the ride, and Apple Podcasts to listen to podcasts. And if you're on the go and really need to use an app, you can upload it at that time Be very intentional about how use the technology.

Close out of the app so you have to sign in with a password that is hard to recall. Use a password manager app like Keeper or 1Password, or go analog with Internet password logbook. If you have to make this extra effort to log in, you will create a deliberate pause to determine whether this is how you really want to spend your time. You can also use apps like Freedom to block access to websites especially in your peak hours for focused work or around bedtime.

The Make Time authors writes that everyone has a "distraction kryptonite." This is hard to resist and pulls you away from the things that really matter to you. For you, it could be Twitter or Instagram. For me, it's YouTube.

On YouTube, there's an endless supply of content on topics of interest. Is it more effective to watch videos on how to be more productive and how to set up the perfect office space, instead of just get to work in your existing workspace?

The email inbox is very tricky because it's the main way I communicate with clients and prospects. And I get tons of email daily.

It helps that I don't have an email app on my smartphone. When I used to check emails on my phone, I'd always wait to get back to my desk to type an answer on my keyboard. Writing on a phone takes extra time. And sometimes I also need access to files. In between, there was an attention residue. I might be thinking about the question, but not taking action on it. Plus, it's a distraction from the thing I'm actually doing. When you're on the go, you might think you need to have email on your phone to be responsive and responsible. But for the most part, you just need to process your emails once or twice a day at your computer to handle even the most urgent or important messages.

Avoid the morning check-ins on email, social media, and other Infinity Tools. If you have peak energy and focus in the morning, focus on your priority work then, instead of what's going on in the world. I normally do quick reviews of my emails at 10 am or later, and respond to the ones that take a couple minutes. For ones that require more thought, I have a longer session in the afternoon, after lunch.

**The third step to making time is to energize.** Your body and brain are connected, they are part of one system. If you're not eating well, getting enough high-quality sleep or exercising, your brain will not function properly. The answer is not in the productivity apps, but in your health and wellness. Turn off the digital devices at least 30 minutes to 1 hour before bedtime. Optimize your caffeine intake. Avoid caffeine 1 hour after you wake up because your natural cortisol rises around that time. While you might call yourself a night owl, sometimes this more from bad habits and the lack of a winddown routine, and not from your natural circadian rhythm.

Build movement into your day. It doesn't have to be a full workout in the gym, a fitness class, or a yoga workshop. A few small changes make a huge difference. Instead of eating lunch at your desk, get up, go outside, and get vitamin D from sunshine. Do outdoor dining if the weather's good. Take a walk around the block instead of mindlessly watch YouTube videos or scroll social media.

### **The fourth to making time is to reflect:**

Before you go to sleep, spend a couple minutes taking reflect notes on your day.

The questions to ask are:

What was your highlight?

Did you make time for it? D

What were your focus and energy levels (on a scale of 10)?

What tactics did you try today and how did they go?

What will you keep doing, stop doing or tweak?

Even if you have a distraction-free phone, you might still spend a lot of time on your computer scrolling social media. Maybe you need to try something else like put a timer on the Internet or schedule a time block at end of the day for media consumption.

Write down what you're grateful, - it could be your highlight or something else. What made it special? Your evening routine doesn't have to include journaling. Just a few reflect notes on you highlight and the tactics you used will do.

The four-step framework in Make Time is flexible and simple. It focuses on how you can make your existing life more meaningful and enjoyable, without advising you to forget about big goals. You can experiment with any of the tactics to see what works for you. Highlight, laser, energize and reflect are for everyday day people who want to make big changes in small steps.

If you have feedback or topic ideas for the show, contact me through my website at [dyanwilliams.com](http://dyanwilliams.com). And sign up for my e-newsletter and subscribe to my podcast to get updates on making time for what matters. And if you enjoy the show, give it a five-star rating and review and share it with a friend. Thank you tuning in and join me again on the next episode.



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