

Why Finding Your Purpose Is the Wrong Goal, ft. Bill Burnett & Dave Evans | Office Hours

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SUMMARY

The discussion centers on how to build a meaningful life amidst the distractions of modern technology and the attention economy. Bill Burnett and Dave Evans, educators and authors, emphasize the importance of replacing unproductive habits like doomscrolling with more fulfilling activities that provide genuine dopamine hits, such as engaging with nature, relationships, and creative pursuits.

- The attention economy is designed to keep users engaged, making it difficult to resist distractions like doomscrolling.*
- Building a "better dopamine diet" involves seeking experiences of wonder, awe, and flow to replace unproductive habits.*
- The theory of replacement suggests that it's more effective to cultivate attractive alternatives rather than simply trying to stop bad habits.*
- Productivity should focus on managing energy rather than time, identifying energy-draining and energy-sustaining activities.*
- Habits take an average of 66 days to form, and success comes from small, iterative changes rather than aiming for perfection.*
- Finding meaning doesn't require a complete life overhaul; it can be achieved by appreciating and enhancing current experiences.*
- Purpose is derived from investing in things without expecting a return, such as relationships and community service.*
- Mindset plays a crucial role in how we perceive and respond to our circumstances, emphasizing radical acceptance and presence over mere productivity.*

was keep in mind, you know, there're 10,000 really sharp, incredibly [music] well-paid people working for multi-billion dollar companies spending you know, 60 hours a week thinking about how they can pound your amygdala more effectively. So, you you've got a fairly [music] substantial resource coming at you wanting to keep your attention. And people keep talking about how do I stop doomscrolling. >> [music] >> You know, oh god, there it was, my phone again, and I couldn't get off. So, what you have to do is build things that are more attractive than the doomscrolling over time.

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and Dave Evans, Stanford educators and best-selling authors of *Designing Your Life* and most recently *How to Live a Meaningful Life*.

Uh gentlemen, welcome and thanks for doing this. Yeah, thanks for having us. Thanks for having us. We went to our listeners with one question, what's the biggest thing holding your life back right now? Today, we try to help. We talk about burnout, distraction, purpose, and building a life that feels more intentional. All right, let's get into it. Our first question is, how do you build a meaningful, intentional [music] life when your attention is constantly being pulled apart by phones, doomscrolling, and the attention economy. So, just some data here to set the table. In 2025, Americans reported spending an average of 5 hours and 16 minutes per day on their phones, a 14% increase uh since 2024. A study by Vision Direct projects that the average American adult will spend 44 years of their life looking at screens.

In 2025, researchers found that randomly moving internet access from smartphones produced a range of benefits, including improved mental health, subjective well-being, and the ability to sustain attention. So, Bill, you go first, and then I'll ask for Dave to build on it. Yeah, you know, this attention economy and and it's and it's horrible. I mean, I'm teaching at Stanford and the undergrads can't get off their phone, the grad students can't get off their phone. Um we uh we're we're we're really focused on trying to figure out how to how to how to help them with that. So, one of the things is this this whole doomscrolling thing, it's a dopamine hit. Every time you get a new page, it's a dopamine hit. So, my my advice is let's let's get on a better dopamine diet because we know we're talking in our new book about flow, about wonder and awe. If you can get into a flow state, that's a dopamine hit. If you can have an experience of wonder and wonder is literally all around, you just got to look for it a different way, that's another way of of rerouting this need to have this dopamine hit. It's a it's just a better dopamine diet to be on wonder, awe, and flow. And and to try to and and that expands your access to things like nature, things like relationships, things like other people in the room. I think we we should design a little app that just gives you that sort of a sense of of flow because then you'll get off the phone, walk outside and notice how beautiful, you know, the sunset is.

Touch grass, so to speak, Dave. Well, you know, I think let's keep in mind, you know, there are 10,000 really sharp who critically well-paid people working for multi-billion dollar companies spending you know, 60 hours a week thinking about how they can pound your amygdala more effectively. Um so, you've got you've got a fairly substantial resource coming at you wanting to keep your attention. And people keep talking about how do I stop doomscrolling? You know, oh god, there I was my phone again and I couldn't get off. And so, if you start there, you're you're you're you're doomed because it's too late.

And so, what you really need to do there's a concept in psychology the theory of replacement. You can't stop anything. Like, don't think of a blue horse right now. Whatever you do, do not think of a blue horse. Certainly not a blue horse with a pink mane. No one no blue horses with pink manes. Not now at all. You're screwed. So, what you have to do is build things that are more attractive than the doom scrolling over time. And it's not going to happen right away cuz again that dopamine hit is there.

So this is where the whole design thinking model of prototype iteration. We say set the bar low and clear it.

Iterate, iterate, iterate. So if you start having these habits and practices or second what we talk about less about life as a project and more as life as a practice. So I find these little experiences and it's a lighter lift than you think. You know, to drop into what we call the flow world which is the present moment and find ways to experience your humanity whether it's in nature or whether it's in music, whether it's you know, just enjoying what you're actually doing rather than being worried about what the screen has to say to you. You start doing that more often then what you actually start building is a different neural pathway that's attracted to this other behavior and you can start having the good stuff crowd the bad stuff out. The bottom line is the good stuff has to crowd the bad stuff out. If you're all leveraged on stopping bad stuff, you're doomed. Yeah, just uh add to that. Um it's not just young people. I'm addicted to my phone.

Uh it's difficult for me not to pick it up and check my text messages right now. Uh so I I empathize with I think Big Tech is essentially evolving a new species of a social and asexual males who who opt for relationships that are frictionless and the hacks I've tried somewhat unsuccessful- well, sort of. It sounds lame. I'm trying to watch more TV. I'm just put put my phone away. There's so much amazing streaming media content. I'm trying to get more into um '80s music again. I love '80s music.

I'm trying to listen more music and whenever I do these things, I try and put my phone away. And I have decided, and this is hard for me, I no longer sleep with my phone next to me and I used to do that. And then when I go to dinner, uh the other thing I would say just more manage 20 to 30 are spending less time outdoors than prison inmates. And I realize there's some money involved in here, but I'm trying to say yes to more.

I'm going out for tonight for dinner and drinks with two guys who are in town who I don't especially know. I quite frankly I'm not sure I especially want to know them, but they invited me out, so I said yes. And I'm going to turn my phone off and I'm just going to go out and, you know, uh probably, you know, drink and eat and not be on my phone. Um anyways, Support for the show comes from Canva.

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Canva, the thing that makes anything a thing. Learn more at canva.com. Let's move to question number two. Our next question is about productivity and discipline. [music] Why is it so hard to stick to things that we know are good for us? There's a popular stat that says habits take 21 days to stick, but according to newer research from UCL, habits actually take 66 days on average to form. That 21 days figure is a myth traced back to a plastic surgeon observing post-op patients adjusting to their new appearance. Bill, thoughts on thoughts on productivity and discipline? We we do a reframe in the class and that that's going from trying trying to do time management cuz I can't make more time. That's just not possible. To managing your energy because really what your experience is what you pay attention to. What you pay attention to is what your neurons are firing on, so that's the energy you put into something. And if you can map and we do an energy map, what do we do on

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday? We look at all the events that that occur regularly. We look at whether they're energy, you know, sustaining or giving, or whether they're energy draining. Like my budget meeting is an energy draining meeting. My office hours with students, positive energy every time. So, once you know what where where you're actually spending your energy, which is your attention, then you can start moving things around. You know, if you could do There's a thing in psychology called the best last effect.

The only thing you will remember in the week is the the peak thing that happened and the last thing that happened. So, I manage those things in my week to make sure I have a peak experience somewhere around Wednesday or Thursday, and my Friday experience is always a positive exit. So, when I come to the end of week, I go, "How was the week?" I go, "Hey, it was pretty good." I really managed my attention and my energy, and I got a lot of stuff done because I was paying attention to the things that give me a positive boost. So, that's how we reframe it. It's energy, not time management. Dave.

I think the whole issue, you know, repetition. When you try to build a habit, you know, you have this goal in mind. We're very called goal driven. It's all about outcomes. It's all about impact. And you drop the ball or it doesn't work and you go, "Oh, crap." You know, and then I did it again. And then you're depressed. What do you do? What do you do? You want to go look for another dopamine hit. Now, I feel even worse.

So, one of the things we really emphasize on this prototyping mindset. Is you can prototype anything. And so, you know, we'll we'll actually have a thing on a life balance dashboard. We have an exercise to rebalance your life. You know, we kind of go to what's one little thing you could do a little different for 2 weeks and then decide did that work for you? You know, and so you you create a low bar and clear it. Everybody's trying to get inspired to become their Olympic self. We were talking in Chicago Chicago Ideas Week years ago and I'm talking to, you know, Amy, the the captain of the US soccer team and two-time gold medal winner. I said, "Can you be your Olympic best all the time?" She goes, "Oh God, are you kidding? You just hope to You just hope to peak the right week of the year." You know, so we're we're all shooting for things that are kind of unattainable. So, if you say, "Okay, I'm going to try this one little thing, see how it works. At the end, re-evaluate. I'll try it again."

I had a small group, young professionals group working on these kind of things, said, "Okay, I think we can handle getting together for 6 weeks." So, we got together for 6 weeks. Conversation wasn't done. I said, "Do you guys want to keep going?" They kind of go, "Well, yeah." I said, "Should we just keep meeting on Tuesday?" And they said, "Can we go?" "Oh, no, no, I can't do that." I go, "Okay, well, how long do you want to another 6 weeks?" We did a 6-week renewal 50 times. We were together like 4 years.

And 35 6-week renewals in, I said, "Can we just commit to this?" They kind of go, "No, I can't handle it." So, that fine, whatever it takes. So, you really do need to kind of game yourself and recognize don't set yourself up for failure. Take the time and make the process of acquiring the habit as successful as having the habit itself. If you declare yourself a loser too soon, you'll quit. Yeah, it's interesting. I I feel like I lack the discipline for habits. What I try to do is um I find deadlines are great for lazy people. I'm fundamentally a lazy person.

And so, I I like deadlines, hard deadlines that I commit to, whether it's my publisher giving me a deadline or they'll take back their advance. One of the things I really enjoy about teaching, you really can't be late for your class. I mean, if you do, there's 180 people who spent \$7,000 to take that class who do not That's good for me. Uh so, I I like that. I And this again is a story of privilege. I have a trainer cuz when he shows up at 8:00, I got to go outside and train.

So, I like self-imposed uh deadlines. The other thing I find is is really powerful is a cohort. And that is if you decide you want to run, try and find someone else to run with. All right, we're meeting at 9:00 a.m. tomorrow. You know, if I'm hungover and I'm just me running, I'm not running. But you know, my buddy Dave's out there in Regent's Park at 8:55 stretching. So, challenges with each other. I I find that the peer pressure also works pretty well.

Any follow-up thoughts on that, guys? >> structurally, I um I learned that I'm both undisciplined and a workaholic and I finally came to the conclusion, maybe alcoholics shouldn't work in liquor stores. Um and I was a startup guy and I worked infinite hours and my father died when I was a child. I wanted to have be a good dad cuz I didn't have one, and I'm working 90 hours a week, and I can't stop. So, I actually finally found my way to begin I went into gig work, you know, in my late 30s, and I outsourced responsibility to my client, which was I had very tight scopes of work. I concocted lots of deliverables with deadlines, just like you're describing, 100%.

>> that when I was done, the client would say, "Stop. Go home and have dinner with your kids. We're not paying you anymore." And I didn't have the capacity to stop myself, so I delegated it to my customers. And that is what I call, "Don't try to work through it, work around it." When you're failing at something over and over again, if you accepted your foible and designed around it, I have to run to friends cuz I can't get my own ass out of bed. Um then you start designing a life where you the the game of life is learn how to play you to win.

So, accept your limitations and design for them. Don't keep trying to overcome them. Wait. And we love deadlines. We just set a deadline We In fact, we just launched a new training program and our new book, and we didn't have a single slide done, and we said, "We got We got to have this thing ready by May cuz a bunch of people are coming." And uh and I'm hustling to get the last slides done. So, yeah, set a deadline.

Force yourself You know, the the exposure of social embarrassment, I guess, to to get stuff done. Works great. >> Also, something it sounds really lame, but the just do it thing, whenever it's exercise, I now have a practice. If I think about exercise, I just grab my shoes and go down to my gym. I just I don't think about it. I'm just like, "Oh, okay." Just just literally is like go grab your shoes and go. Just like don't don't think about it. Just do it, so to speak.

Uh so, with that, uh we'll be right back after a quick break. Support for the show comes from Canva. >> [music] >> An idea is just an idea, but actually transforming that idea into a thing, that's where the real work lives. It can be a journey full of pitfalls and banging head against the wall, or it could be a lot easier than that with Canva. Canva is packed with templates and design tools to turn your idea into something real. From presentations powered by AI to social media posts, logos, and websites, whatever your idea is, you can make anything in

Canva.

Canva, [music] the thing that makes anything a thing. Learn more at canva.com. Welcome back onto our last question. How can you build a more meaningful life without getting a whole different job or reinventing your life? This is obviously uh ground zero for your question. Uh Dave, I'll ask you to go first. Well, it's really it really you know, we didn't intend to write this last book, um which is a pretty different animal, but you know, we help people, you know, redesign their lives and then redesign their careers, wrote two books, and we get a lot of feedback that it worked really great. And then, right after the you know, the pandemic and the great resignation, 52 million people walk off the job cuz it's not good enough. Um what we kept hearing is, "I'm doing all the stuff, and I'm still not fulfilled.

Or it's as meaningful as I want." And we looked into that, and we [snorts] found two things. What people were looking for to make life meaningful is they had an impact, they changed the world, I did something important, I mattered, I created a legacy, a lot of language around that, or I feel fulfilled. And we think both of those actually all by themselves, if you got all your meaning eggs in those baskets, impact or fulfillment, you're screwed. Um that's a dysfunctional belief cuz impact is a thing and you're not. And even when impact works, and most of the time even if you do everything right, it doesn't work cuz the other 8 billion people might go off script when you're not looking.

Um and if you're lucky enough to have an impact at all, the glow doesn't last very long. So, that's not a sustainable, that's a hedonic treadmill problem. And fulfillment, we know that all of us contain more aliveness than your life permits you to express. You can't be fulfilled as in expressing your entire self, which is what Maslow told you in 1943 you should do by being self-actualized, and you can't get there from here. So, that's why we came up with, oh, that's all about the transactional world. You got to expand into the present moment in the flow world to add other forms of meaning.

Otherwise, if you're trapped in transactions all the time, you can't get there from here. And Bill can talk about you know, where in the flow world you can get your hands on that stuff. The trick is um, you know, if you're looking for more meaning, um, then look right where you are. Now, you you don't have to cram more into your life. Our book is all not about like there's five new things you got to learn. You got to have mindfulness practice and you got to and you got to work out and do all sorts of stuff. Do that if you want to, that's great. Mindfulness is a good thing. But, there's a lot of meaning just lying around right away. And so, the whole idea is to become a meaning-making designer, a designer of moments that are meaningful. And it's about getting more out of what's right in front of you, not trying to cram more in because we're all too busy.

So, you don't need a new job. Um, you can find, you know, some some satisfaction in the job you've got. You can always make it better. Better is about the future. The experience of meaning is right now. It's in what you're doing right now. It's putting on your shoes and going out to the gym. You know, and then and then and then walking away feeling a little bit of a glow from the workout. It's about, you know, waking up in the morning and looking outside and, you know, taking a few a few deep breaths and noticing that it's another beautiful sunny day here in California. So, it it's about getting more out of and we have tons of techniques for doing this. And by

the way, the whole idea that flow is this kind of peak experience we know now from neuroscience there's 20 at least 22 trigger neuroscience triggers to flow and flow is the experience of being right here right now and that's where you experience the more meaning that you're looking for. Yeah, I struggle with this cuz I struggle with anger and depression and I'm constantly for a long time was thinking about how do I, you know, find meaning and is I mean happiness reward and everyone has to figure out the discipline and the skills and the market dynamics such that they can take care of themselves and then you know, operate in what is a fairly sometimes unfair capitalist society. And I you know, that that's just the reality. And there's so many books and and graduate programs on how to how to refine those skills so that you can be viable in a capitalist society. What I found is that even after I'd find I've been working so hard to get to some sense of relevance or economic security that once I got there I'm like am I really that happy or do I really feel I have meaning in where I have found it is in what I call uh purpose and perspective. And purpose is different than I think what I think I thought when I was younger some bolt of lightning would hit me and I'd just be so good at something I'd find purpose.

What I found is that purpose comes from you invest so much in something you'll never get an ROI on it. And what do I mean by that? Veterans are never going to I don't think most veterans are ever going to get a real ROI on their service. Leaving their family um putting their person in physical danger, but that's what they get is something greater. They get purpose. They've served their country. Like no one can match that sacrifice.

What I have found is that I will I have two boys 15 and 18. I will never get ROI on them. They will never be up at 2:00 a.m. worried about me. No matter if I decide to go back to graduate school at Stanford, they're just not going to pay for it. I'm never going to get the return in terms of time, love, anxiety, money that I have put into them. And what I realized is then okay, that's my purpose.

My my you you find something whether it's a nonprofit, your country, other people that you invest so deeply in it, you're never going to get what we think of as a traditional return. And that's your purpose. That's why you're here. >> do that ask that question all the time. You know, and we we're not trying to assist you in finding the meaning of life or figure out how to design what is the purpose of my life cuz those are outcomes. Those are its and you're not in it. Our definition of the human person is you are a becoming.

Yeah. If you're a becoming, there is your future self may be differently oriented, but purpose is an aspirational valence. It's a trajectory. It's not an outcome. And in this technologically enabled, capitalistically optimized world, everything's about optimizing for outcome. So, did I accomplish it? Did I find it? Did I get it done? Did I have I reached? Have I achieved it? And there is no it. There's no right, there's no done, and there's no it. There's just getting on with it. So, we encourage people to look purposefully and experience their days meaningfully.

Those are descriptions of the manner in which you're walking this thing out. And your definition of a purpose is it's a direction we're going toward. And going toward again, and going toward again, and going toward again. Not because eventually I'm going to get there, but because going somewhere meaningfully, even productively, is worthwhile. And you know, so we have a compass tool to make sure we don't know where you're supposed to go, but you can figure out whether or not you're on the right direction. Are you going north?

We can go north. Let's keep going. I I want to get your response to I have something called a People talk about a gratitude practice, and I never I never really I didn't have the discipline to keep up with that. What I have though is a perspective practice, and I want you guys to respond to this. I I think it's I think a lot of us lack uh quite frankly perspective or appreciation or you know, framing things to realize most of us don't have problems, we have inconveniences.

And I don't own art, but I I bet I spent a ton of money for me on a photograph. And it's a photograph of Otto Frank, who's the father of Anne Frank, and it's a picture of him when he returned to the attic that his family hid in in Amsterdam and was eventually betrayed. Uh all of his family was murdered. And I have a picture of him after he returned to the attic after he survived um Auschwitz.

And I have it outside my bedroom. And every morning I when I leave my bedroom, I stop and I look at it for 10 seconds. And it's this very contemplative intense photograph of him just sitting there you could tell thinking or staring and I try to imagine what's running through his mind and then I start my day. And then the last thing I do when I'm going to bed is I again stare at this photo for 10 seconds.

And the same thought just comes up. I have no problems. I have inconveniences, but I have no problems. That is my perspective practice and it's helped me a lot. It helps me get me out of my own and my own anxiety and realize and and I just feel stupid and it's a good kind of stupid for the for the that I'm worried about or I occasionally let ruin my day. That's not a perspective practice. I love that.

Actually, I think I think I think it's fantastic and it it does and again, it puts in perspective that most of our lives have a lot of little annoyances in them, but nobody's shooting at us. We got food, we got shelter, right? We got all these things. And Maslow talked about self-actualization, but later in his in his before he died in his diary, he said, "No, that's not it's actually self-transcendence. It's going beyond the self. It's purpose is going beyond myself, not for an ROI, but for the goal that I believe is is either valid or noble." I like that because I have a thing on my on my door.

This is my studio back studio. It's from a quote from a guy named Robert Henry. He said, "The goal isn't to make art. The goal is to be in that wonderful state of mind that makes art inevitable." And so I read that as I walk in to them in the morning and read that as I walk out. Am I in that state of mind that makes art, joy, beauty inevitable? Or am I just pissed off about some little thing that you know, that's that that happened you know, cuz somebody at Stanford some I'm bureaucrat at Stanford didn't, you know, get something done. So, I think I think I like your idea of a prac- of that kind of a practice and I like the idea of something that forces you into a perspective larger than yourself. And what you're hitting at, Sky, you know, we um we talk about mindset a lot in design and we have we talk about mindsets in all of our books. Um and the mindset around the meaning-making approach that we're talking about now, there's five of them and one of them the the power two-fer in the mindset is the combination of what we call radical acceptance and availability. And radical acceptance is reality is the only place anything is going to happen, certainly the most generative or interesting things are going to happen. So, I have to be here.

Like on my plane is like, "Oh, well, you know, wah wah wah wah wah." You're living in a fantasy called your head. No, the plane's late. Now what? And there's neutral acceptance that, "Well, oh, okay." And then there's acceptance with availability like uh "Oh, this is what's happening and what's here for me? What what what what invitation do I discern that allows me to live generously into this?" So, that orientation you know, that I get to choose how to respond. Right? Victor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning, you know, also a whole another Holocaust survivor, the one choice you always have is how to react to your circumstances. That humanity is always always always available to you.

And so, choosing what is the stance I'm coming from. We That's our fourth mindset, which is create your world. Life is a story we tell ourselves. Pick your story very carefully. It has to be reality-based, so it's not magical thinking. But it has to be reality-based with a generative invitation for you to be the kind of person you want to be in the world. So, right now in my 52-year small group, my formative community we call them, I just turned 73. Two years ago we started talking about what it means to become 70.

And the question was what does it mean to be an elder? And I said it and I came back with oh, I'm moving from production to presence as my primary ministry or gift of life. I'm not here to produce, I'm here to be present. And if I'm doing present well, what does that mean? Oh, people being in proximity to me should be experiencing their belovedness. I want people to go away knowing that knowing they've been loved.

Generally. That's kind of the fundamental task I'm on now. So, when I walk into a room, I walk into a room last night with a bunch of CEOs who are the third of accelerator I'm part of. You know, I got there late, nobody knows me, and the little brain kind of goes, "Oh, will anybody talk to me? Is this >> [music] >> I'm making it is going to make a difference? Why the did I come? I shouldn't have been here." And then I was like, "Stop it." And you go, "Can you Is there anybody here you could love?" Changes [music] everything. Mindset matters. And what you're doing with Auto >> [music] >> is you're setting your mind on a broader point of view.

That's beautiful. Yeah, I want people to walk away knowing that they've been loved. Let's leave it there. That's all for this episode. Bill Burnett and Dave Evans are Stanford educators and best-selling authors of Designing Your Life and most recently How to Live a Meaningful Life. >> [music] >> Uh Bill, Dave, really enjoyed this. Thanks so much for your time today and your good work. Thank you. Thank you. Thanks to Canva for their support. With incredible tools to boost your design and productivity, Canva can help turn that idea into an actual thing. [music] From presentations powered by AI to social media posts and logos to websites, it's time to turn that idea into something real. Canva, it's the thing that makes anything a thing. Learn more [music] at canva.com.

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