

# “Deep Work” Review & Summary | Author: Cal Newport

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Welcome to my review and summary of *Deep Work: Rules For Focused Success In A Distracted World* by Cal Newport. On publication, this book became an instant *Wall Street Journal* bestseller, and received praise in the [New York Times Book Review](#), [The Wall Street Journal](#), [The Economist](#), and [The Guardian](#).

This book, unlike most success books that focus on mindset, argues that focus is the new IQ. In fact, in order to produce work at our peak level, we have to work for extended periods with full concentration, intensity and no distractions. He calls this Deep Work. Deep Work is a rare trait, especially in today's world full of digital distractions including texting, social media as well as infotainment sites like BuzzFeed and Reddit. We know that if we don't produce, we won't thrive – no matter how skilled or talented we are. Hence the ability to focus and perform Deep Work is one of the most valued traits in today's world.

Newport starts off the book with many case studies of successful people who all applied this concept to become successful. One example is Carl Jung who worked in an isolated tower with no electricity and no distraction to produce his greatest work. He went on to become one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. You see, Newport had a hypothesis that Deep Work is the answer that separates mediocrity and someone who thrives to success. He then proceeds to give us strategies to conquer distractions such as avoiding 'attention residual', having a shutdown ritual and even practicing being bored. (I'll cover these in more depth in the summary below)

## My opinion of the book

Overall, I enjoyed this book and I'd recommend it to anyone who is looking to increase their focus so that they can produce more and better work in less time. However there is one thing to note about the examples and case studies used in the book. Newport uses extreme case studies to convince us of Deep Work but at the same time, these examples aren't practical for every-day people. Case studies included authors who had all the time in the world to write, programmers, researchers and other professions who don't require reporting to a boss or discussions with a team. Because of this, readers may get the wrong idea that the only way to do Deep Work is to work 4-6 hours straight in an isolated area.

Yet this is not entirely true because we can still perform Deep Work on a daily basis. The trick is to use 'Time Chunking'. This is my own method of Deep Work that allowed me to do twice the amount of work in half the time on a daily basis. I'll share more about this method in my in-depth summary below.

Now, if you would like to read and enjoy the book with no spoilers, feel free to stop reading this post and grab a copy of the book [here](#). On the other hand, if you would like to study the book, continue reading below, as I will share my study notes designed to help you feel like you've read the entire book and understand the top key concepts without even actually reading the book. Below I've chosen my top 9 Big Ideas to break down for you.

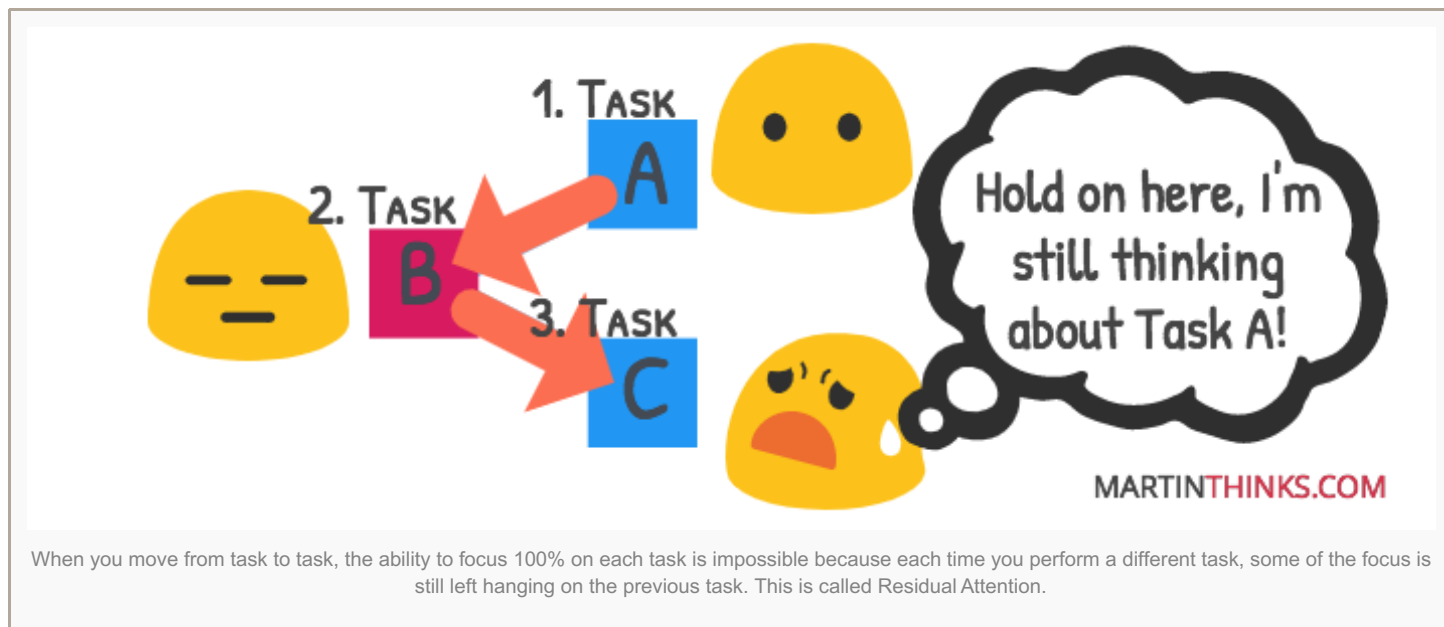
## Deep Work In-Depth Summary & Study Notes

### Big Idea #1: Avoid Residual Attention

Many studies have proven that multi-tasking is actually ineffective and even impossible. Doing many things at once is actually considered multi-switching. This is where we switch our focus from one task to the other very quickly. For example you cannot cognitively read an email and listen to a phone call at the same time. What you're actually doing is you're switching from reading to listening very quickly. You're never doing both at the same time. Not only does multi-tasking cost us more time but the quality of work is also affected.

But here's the thing, even if you didn't multi-task and only focused on one task at a time, you still won't produce work at your peak level because of something Newport calls 'Residual Attention'.

In a nutshell, when you perform task A then move on to task B then onto task C, the ability to focus 100% on each task is impossible. Each time you perform a different task, some of the focus is still left hanging on the previous task. For example, when you're on break and someone tells you a riddle that you don't know the answer to. When you get back to work, even if you try to focus 100% on the work at hand, some of your focus is still with the riddle. This can also be applied to a sales call, then a meeting conference, then data entry then back to the sales call. Deep Work counteracts and minimises Residual Attention as we're spending a long period of time on just one task.



I've personally minimised Residual Attention myself by applying what I call "Single Task Completion". For example, I used to write drafts of 3 different blog posts before I would go back to finalise all 3 in one go. I thought if I was in the zone while writing, I should just continue writing all the drafts. But what I found was that, while I was writing the next blog post, my brain would think of new ideas specifically for the previous blog post. So I would have to switch back and forth to capture my ideas. I actually had Residual Attention on all 3 posts which didn't allow me to focus on any one post 100%. After discovering Newport's concept, I now just write and finalise one blog post at a time, increasing my time spent on one task, minimising Residual Attention.

## Big Idea #2: Different Philosophies of Deep Work

As I mentioned earlier, Deep Work may be confused for being too extreme because the only way to do it is to lock yourself out from society and work for extended periods of time. However, Deep Work is actually just a concept to produce high quality work. The formula is: High Quality Work = Time Spent On Work x The Intensity Of Focus. What this basically means is that Deep Work is performed best when you can spend long hours working on a single task with maximum intensity of focus. Since Newport understands that this is not realistic when it comes to the everyday Joe who needs to report to his boss every so often, he emphasises that you need to find your own philosophy of Deep Work.

High Quality Work = Time Spent On Work x The Intensity Of Focus



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The Deep Work formula is: High Quality Work = Time Spent On Work x The Intensity of Focus. As these variables are different for everyone dependant on their type of work, we need to come up with our own philosophy of Deep Work that suits our daily needs.

For example, I apply Deep Work in 'chunks'. I divide my day into 3 sections, each involving 3 hours chunk time of Deep Work. This means that when I begin my 3 hours of intense focus, I literally turn everything off, listen to soft music with no lyrics and continue working non-stop until my alarm goes off. No emails, no social media, no phone (I turn my phone on aeroplane mode). Nothing. I must admit at first, I couldn't stop thinking things like "Man, is the time up yet? How much longer do I have?" But once you get used to it, you'd be surprised by how much actual work you get done in 3 hours of full concentration. The alarm rings and you realise you've done twice the work in half the time.

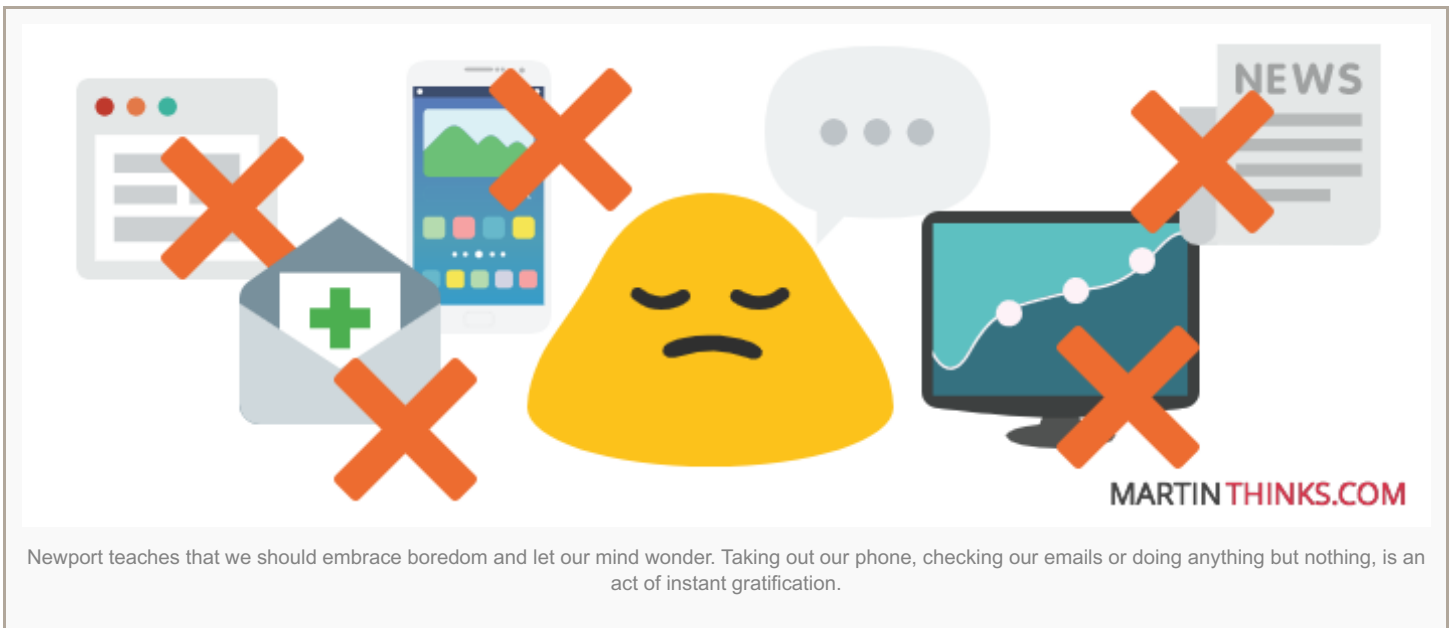
The feeling of having absolutely nothing to worry about except for the one task at hand, is actually quite rare for most of us. Even having only one session of 3-hour deep work each day is enough to beat the guy who does work for 6 hours straight but with distractions and breaks.

My advice is to find time in your day that you can actually control i.e. you can tell everyone that you'll be unavailable so that you can work with 100% intensity and focus. Whether it's 3 hours, 2 hours or even 1 hour. Experiment to see which Deep Work time chunk suits your daily routines the most.

### **Big Idea #3: Learn To Embrace Boredom**

Every time I'm stuck in traffic, am waiting in line or sometimes when I have nothing to talk about, I'd immediately find something to do including taking out my phone, listening to the radio or just browse my social media feed. And here's the thing, even if I was completely done browsing my social media feed for the day, I'd even "re-browse" my feed rather than do nothing. And this doesn't just apply to me. You see, the scary thing is that we live in a world where "boredom" pretty much doesn't exist anymore. There is always something to do. I'm sure you can relate.

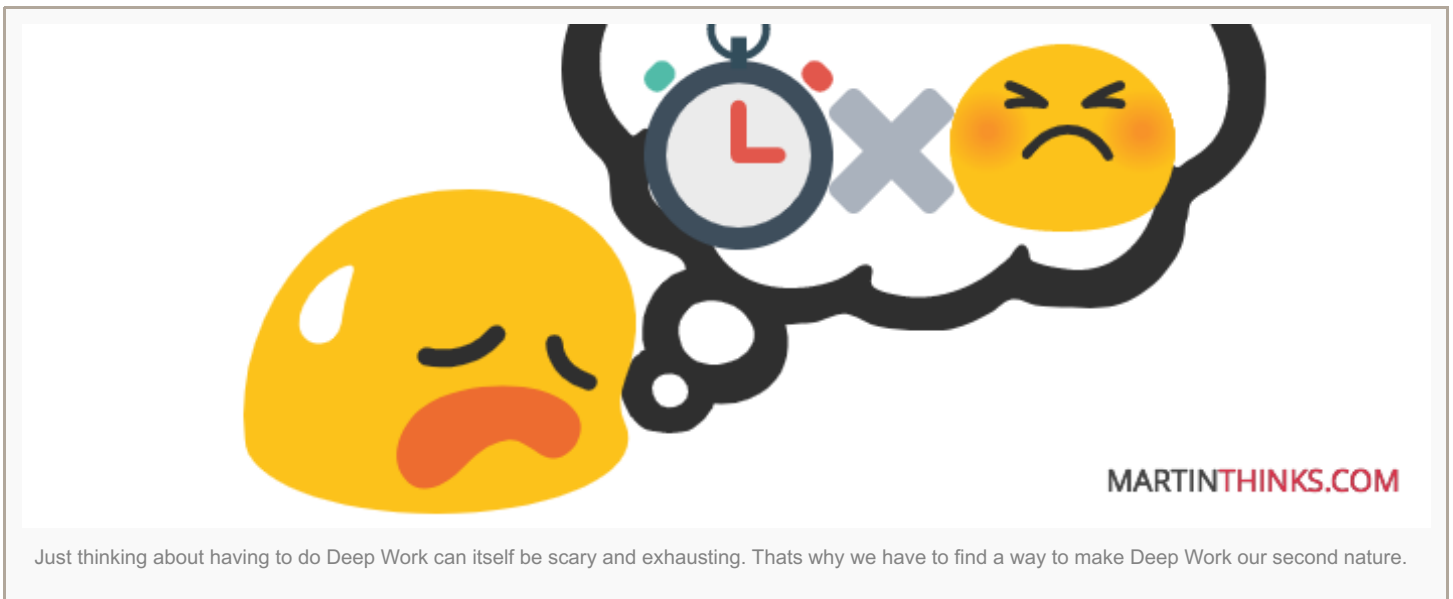
However, Newport teaches that we should embrace boredom and let our mind wonder. Taking out our phone, checking our emails or doing anything but nothing, is an act of instant gratification. It's like when you're on a diet but you feel the need to eat a piece of chocolate. Eating the chocolate, is a form of instant gratification just like taking out your phone is, when you're bored.



Instead, we should embrace the boredom and let the mind do whatever it wants. By doing this, we're teaching our mind to learn *not* to choose distraction whenever it's bored. Because chances are when we start our work and try to kick ourselves into working mode, we'll feel bored (or at least, more bored than if we were to go on our phones). So by embracing boredom, we're teaching our mind be okay with it so it doesn't need to choose distraction out of impulse. Minimising our impulse to choose distraction will build on our overall ability to focus.

#### **Big Idea #4: The Power Of Routine & Rituals**

As I mentioned in Big Idea 2 where we have to come up with our own method of Deep Work, routines and rituals could very well be the answer. Newport explains that the thought of having to do Deep Work can itself be very scary and exhausting especially how we live in a world full of distraction.



That's why we need to make Deep Work our second nature by making it a habit. For example, instead of deciding which day or what time to do Deep Work, make it a habit to do Deep Work every single day from 6AM to 7AM before going to work. Not only will this take away the stress of deciding a time, it's also effortless once it becomes a ritual.

This is also what I do with my 'time chunking'. I have specific times every day where I immerse myself into Deep Work. My advice is to start small. I started with 30 minutes every day. Because once we build the habit of just

“showing up” to do the 30 min each day, it’s much easier to optimise the habit and increase the time later once it’s formed. When I first started, I only increased it from 30 min to 1 hour after I successfully did 30 min specifically at 6AM every day, for 7 consecutive days. I continued this process until I could eventually do 3 hours straight in one go.

## **Big Idea #5: Deep Work reviews the Attention Restoration Theory**

As you probably already know, our will power or our ability to focus is actually limited. The more we use it the harder it is to perform Deep Work. This is where Newport brings up studies and research on what to do to restore our ability to focus. One specific method that works very well is spending time in nature.

Mar Berman, who co-authored the finding of the study, says that when walking in nature, we allow our mind to wander to the extreme because we don’t require our mind to focus or give attention to even looking out for directions or traffic lights. This is the complete opposite to Deep Work, where we ask our mind to focus intensely on one task. Spending time in nature allows our mind to be completely free.



Being in the state of not having to actively use our attention will help restore concentration which of course will allow us to do more Deep Work. Having said that, I don’t know how effective this is as I personally just do a short meditation and stretch to restore my focus. Sometimes I take a quick nap. However, if your work environment allows you to go for short walks at a park or spend time in nature where you do not need to actively focus on anything specific, I recommend you give it a try.

## **Big Idea #6: Take Breaks From Focus *not* Distraction**

I love this big idea. I remember when I used to hop from one task to another and took breaks whenever I “felt” like it. Whenever I felt distracted, I’d take a break and rationalised that being distracted meant that I needed a break. The only problem was that this happened way too often. For example, I’d finish half a video script then I’d read an email to take a “break” even though I could’ve kept going with the script to keep myself in the zone.

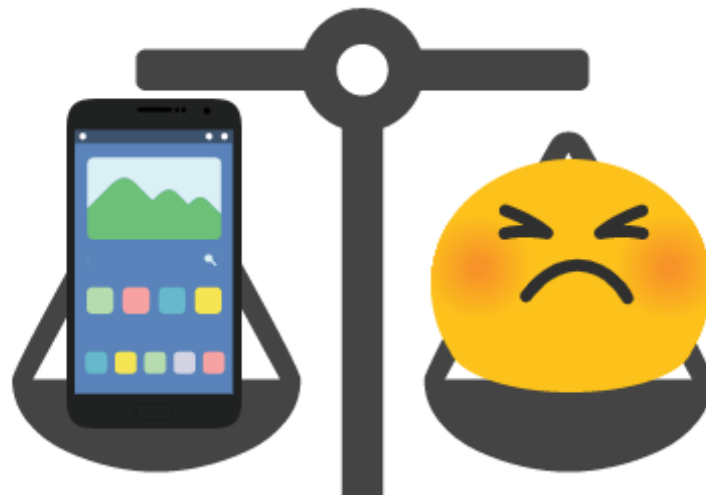
Not only did this affect my productivity but it also affected my ability to focus and re-focus when I got back into it. Newport recommends only taking a break from focus and not from distraction. This will also teach our mind that the only way it’ll get a break is if it really can’t focus anymore, instead of being tempted by distraction. So what this means is that if you can continue to focus on the task at hand, keep going. Keep working, keep avoiding distraction and only take breaks when you need to restore your focus and when you feel you can no longer concentrate.



Only take breaks from focus, not distraction. This will teach our mind that the only way it'll get a break is if it really can't focus anymore. Otherwise our mind will continue to be tempted by distraction.

## Big Idea #7: The Any Benefit Mindset

One of the biggest counters to the whole concept of Deep Work is that people argue that some distractions actually benefit them. Newport calls this the “Any Benefit Mindset”. Basically, if you have an “Any Benefit Mindset”, you could justify any distraction as being a benefit. For example, if I was working on an assignment and got distracted by Facebook, I could justify that because I went on Facebook, I’m now able to understand a concept better. But this is flawed because I could’ve spent focussed time researching the topic in detail or asking a specific friend to explain it to me without going on my social media feed. Basically, Newport argues that distractions are distractions, even though they carry “a” benefit, everything could carry a benefit. So distractions that come with a benefit is just a justification.



The “Any Benefit Mindset” justifies distractions as being beneficial. However everything could be beneficial. The question shouldn't be “Does this benefit me?”, the question should be “Is this worth stopping my Deep Work for right now?”

This often happens in office jobs or with entrepreneurs who work at home. I remember spending most of my time networking with others whether it was via email or social media while doing work at the same time. I'd justify that my time was spent wisely because working on professional relationships is a must. But the truth was I just had an “any benefit mindset” and chose distractions as an instant gratification. If I had just focussed on my work and set up specific time to network after I completed my work, I would have achieved so much more (both for work and for networking itself).

So my advice is that next time when you get distracted, ask yourself this one question, “Is the benefit of doing this more valuable than if I were to continue working on my task at hand?”. This will give you a good idea of whether you’re applying the any benefit mindset or whether the other task is actually important.

## Big Idea #8: Focus On The YES To Fight The NO

I’ve coached a few of my clients and had to use the concept of Deep Work to increase their productivity. I started off emphasizing the fact that they needed to focus on eliminating all distractions including social media, emails and mobile phones. The only issue with this was that their focus was still on the problem.

Newport’s method is a lot more effective as it focuses on the ‘yes’ instead of fighting the ‘no’. In a nutshell, instead of focusing on eliminating the distraction, we should focus on the many benefits of completing the task. For example, if we’re trying to lose weight, instead of focussing on losing the fat, we should focus on the image of having a great, healthy body, the thought of the many activities we’d be able to do with our friends and family, how our friends would see us, how we would feel about ourselves, how accomplished we’d feel etc. Focussing on the positive results, will make losing that extra fat seem like nothing compared to the possibility of becoming a totally different person. That is, focussing on the “yes” is the best method to eliminate the “no”.



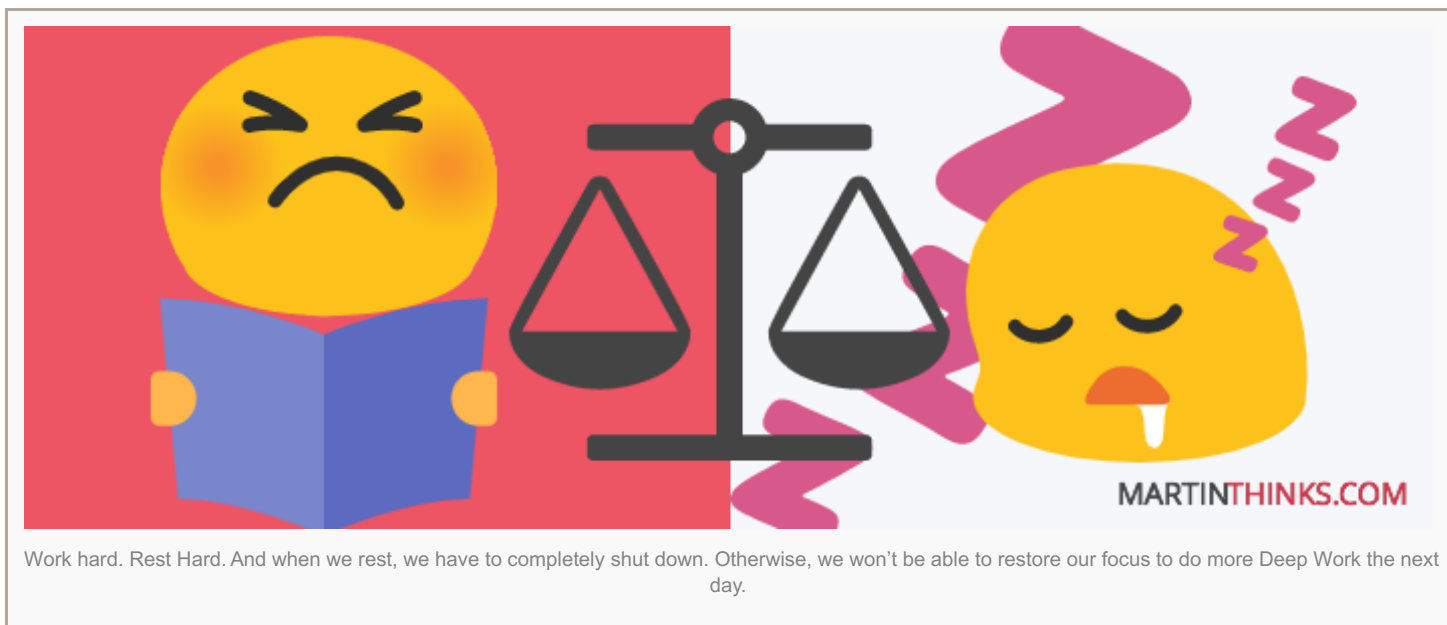
A simple way I personally use this concept is I set a reward for myself every time I finish my 3 hours of Deep Work. It could be something like getting to watch an episode of my favourite TV show or anime, play one game or even reward myself with a nice meal out.

This also reminds me of Napoleon Hill’s concept of a big why or a “Burning Desire” in his book “ Think and Grow Rich” which makes saying “no” to distractions so much easier. For example, if you had a burning desire to become successful so that you can retire your parents who are working day and night, are getting old and becoming visibly weaker and weaker by the days (your why), a little Deep Work for 3 hours would seem like nothing to you.

## Big Idea #9: Shut Down Completely

I left the most important big idea to last because without this, Deep Work is very hard. I’m a believer that when you work, work hard. But when you’re done, be done. When you’re done, turn everything off, don’t think about work anymore and just enjoy the rest of the day. It’s a simple concept but I see a lot of people fall into the trap of having unfinished thoughts. This is why some people lie in bed at night thinking of strategies or writing emails over dinner or do anything work related even after work.





Newport says that Deep Work requires a lot of concentration and focus and so in order to be consistent and really master the skill of Deep Work, you must shut down completely. Even if you have to extend your work hour for a little longer to finish off certain things. You would rather work a little longer while you're still working so that when you call it a day, you're completely done. On the other hand, if you've finished earlier for a particular task, don't get into the trap of just continuing to work without rest time just because you can as this isn't sustainable.

In a nutshell, work hard then rest hard. If you don't allow yourself to rest hard, your performance the next day will be affected and overtime productivity as a whole will be affected. You'll also be turned off from Deep Work and slowly go back to your old ways of doing shallow work for twice the amount of hours as you would if you just Deep Worked.

## Conclusion

Deep Work by Cal Newport is not a philosophical book. Newport uses a lot of stories, case studies, research and examples to prove only one point, that Deep Work is the most important trait for success, especially in a world full of distractions. Deep Work reviews many different strategies on how to stay focussed which is pretty cool compared to some other books which may only give you a few strategies.

I guess the only con about this book is that readers may feel that the examples used are a bit extreme. It would be good to see examples of a telemarketer, a waiter or even a salesman applying Deep Work in their life to better their productivity and results.

Overall, Deep Work is definitely worth your time as long as you actually apply it. Remember, my advice is to start small and chunk your time. Start with 30 minutes of Deep Work per day to 1 hour then slowly increase it. Your productivity will increase and so will your quality of work.

If you enjoyed this review and summary and would like to grab a copy of Deep Work yourself, please support me by grabbing the book by clicking here. (This is an affiliate link in which I'll get paid a few bucks)

Your support means a lot and it will help me continue writing more reviews and summaries. Also, please leave an honest feedback below in the comment section sharing what you thought about the book and if you personally apply Deep Work in your life. It would be interesting to see what other strategies there are when it comes to working with 100% focus.

That's it from me and I'll talk to you soon.



P.S. If you haven't had the chance to check out my 30 Days Success Challenge where you'll learn how to be more, act more and have more,

You can check it out by clicking [here](#).