

ep 13 alarms and notifications

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SPEAKERS

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It's the Task Management and Time Blocking Podcast, episode 13. You use lots of apps on a range of devices. Many of them have built in notifications which are jostling for your attention. But if you leave them all on, you end up with a mess, a cacophony of alerts, which do more bad than good. What do you really want? To orchestrate them somehow into a perfect symphony that interrupts you at just the right moment with the right degree of force? Is that too much to ask for? In this solo episode, we'll go past the work we did on Episode 11, which focused on the principles of successful and skillful Interrupting. And today, we look at the practical actions we must take to retain our sanity via the use of alarms. Welcome to the Task management and Time Blocking Podcast.

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And welcome back. If this is the first time you're tuning into the Task management and Time Blocking podcast, let me explain a few things so you understand exactly what you're listening to because it's not like other podcasts. So this is a solo episode, but we're going to be following the usual three act structure. And the first we'll look at the problem, basically do a deep dive slash diagnosis. And the second we'll talk about solutions. And then the third, we'll look at implementation, how to make the ideas real in your world. And usually, we have a bell and a buzzer, Bell comes up with four ideas that are brand new buzzer is we'd actually don't come up with any brand new ideas. But in this solo episode, we don't use the bell or the buzzer. But we do start with a story.

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So let me tell you about Irene. She's like most people, she has a tough time remembering to do everything she needs to do just the right moment. As a result, she tries to set up her phone, tablet and laptop to give her reminders. But a recent incident showed her just how hard this is. A key

meeting with a client at 4pm one day needed at least a half hour preparation to be effective. She honestly did her best and time blocked both the actual meeting and the time needed before to get herself ready. So she had two time blocks. Unfortunately, her 3pm Zoom call ran over. And even though she has notifications on all her devices, they were all dismissed in the heat of the moment. In fact, she doesn't even remember clicking or swiping them away. With five minutes to prepare,, she had no way to be ready and it showed. The client became annoyed muttering something about "I need a coach that will focus on me? Not everything else." This is not a good thing, as a client has the power to assign Irene to 20 people in a department that she heads up, all of whom have requested a coach. So this mistake had consequences. What solution does Irene need? Hiring an administrative assistant is not a possibility.

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So many of you can relate to what Irene is going through, you find yourself in a similar dilemma. You're smart, you're creative, and you're committed. So you work really hard. As a result, you come up with lots and lots of commitments, lots and lots of demands on your time. And as they compete for all the discretionary space in your calendar, you end up with a problem. So you tried to use apps, as I've mentioned before, or devices, or both, and both to solve this problem that Irene had of sending yourself an interruption at just the right moment using an alarm or notification that comes with a device or an app.

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Unfortunately, the app designers didn't get that memo, did they? In their world, they're just designing an app for you to use. And as long as you use it, and it kind of works, then they're happy. It's not their problem that you have 100 other apps, and four other devices, which are also generating notifications in a haphazard way. That's your problem. So if there's a villain and all this, you might say, it's designers, developers, people who put together these apps and devices, but none of them is individually culpable. It's the collection of what they're doing. That is really the villain here. It's the cumulative effect of all of these bits of technology, that are all trying to interrupt your attention. And fail to do so because they're not doing it in a coordinated way.

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So the problem, just like Irene had is that notifications don't come up at the right time. They lead to you to miss opportunities, like she did. They make you late, or you miss appointments altogether. And people looking on start to think that you have a problem. So that internal standard that you want to operate at the fact that you have these notifications, and they're not working in sync, that you're not being notified in the right way in order to change your behavior at the point that which you need to do so that annoys you. It's frustrating. It could even be upsetting or angering.

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It may even cause you to look at yourself and think that you're the one who's not doing something right that you're the one who doesn't get it, that it's somehow your fault. That may even be a result of this. Because this is happening, you know, the most the most critical appointments in your calendar,

the most critical tasks in your calendar, the ones that have the highest stakes, they are usually are the ones that involve other people, such as meetings, like the Zoom call that Irene had.

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So as a result, others are looking on, they're making judgments about you, your lack of coordination. Unfortunately, they won't say that you are lacking coordination, they will put it like that, they'll say that you forgot, they put it down to memory. So they are (at the same time) they're drawing a conclusion about you, they're drawing the wrong conclusion, because what they're seeing has something to do with the way there are mis-diagnosing the situation and assigning it to your poor memory. Some may even say that you're just in over your head again, or you're just not able to manage all your commitments. So that last promotion that you got, you really didn't deserve it because obviously here you are, you're trying to function and you're not functioning. You know, maybe you should have, you know, maybe declined the promotion because you're not dealing with it effectively. So there's a thing, you might say there's unfulfilled expectation that happens in the world of other people with respect to your professional ability to get the job done.

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But, you know, if there's a sort of an epic challenge here, it's that, you know, sort of the law of unintended consequences. That technology is supposed to make things better. But this is one of those cases where it actually makes things worse. Because the reminders and the notifications that come baked in or built into your favorite apps and the devices that you use.... Because they're not coordinated, they create this problem that you can't solve easily. You don't have the wherewithal to write your own software.

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So you're at the effect of technology that is actually making things worse. Each piece of technology may make things better on a micro-mini level, but you put them together, and you get a mess. Together, they're making things worse. So we're here today to advocate, let someone take up the mantle, and look at our productivity as regular people who are balancing and using all of these apps, not just consumers of single apps, and single devices, we're consumers of all of them...all of us are. And we all have this problem. And it's one that no one seems to be interested in solving (that I'm aware of). But you should let me know if there's any companies or any other authors, or writers or bloggers or podcasters, who are talking about this in the way that I am today, because I really want to know who else is in the space, or at least seeing the problem the same way. Because it has real world consequences.

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You know, we, as we ramp up the number of tasks and projects and commitments, either at home, or in the office, or for personal, or with our friends, or in all parts of our life...As the number increases, this cacophony, this mess of notifications, basically creates a ceiling for us for what we can accomplish, we can't go any further...or as far as we want to. Because

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we don't trust that if I add on that extra commitment, that it's going to be the one that throws the whole thing off. You know, when you don't trust or can't use your automatic notifications, what you fall back to is memory. And I don't need to tell you that (if you're a listener of this podcast), that memory is what we're trying not to use. So the cacophony forces us to use memory, even though we know not to trust our memory. And it makes us therefore not trust ourselves to take on further commitments.

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So that we start saying no...some people just say, "No, they can't take on any more." They admit, that's a wise thing to do. They can't effectively manage more commitments, without using a lot more memory. At that point, they decline. Some probably just try to harder to use memory, because some of the things that you're committed to, they're already they're already in train. You can't say no to the things you've already said Yes to like having kids, for example.

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And if you find yourself trying harder to use memory and failing, you may then turn to try delegating, you know, ask your kids to remind you, or, or a spouse or a friend or a colleague or someone who works for you, and it's not their job. But you what else can you do? You're you're in a really difficult spot.

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Another solution. Another thing people tried to do to rid themselves of this is to turn off all their notifications. So they they basically just say, You know what? I give up! I'm not going to use them at all. No, most of us actually have already done this. Except that we've not been explicit about that. We haven't turned off the notifications. We've just turned our attention away from our notifications because they're crap. They're like the sound of a siren in the background. It's not a concern of ours. We have just trained ourselves to keep going in spite of the noise that they're making, and the fact that they're not telling you the right things at the right times.

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A few of us, however, can afford to hire someone. And you may have heard me talk about Jed Bartlet, the fictional president from the West Wing, the TV show, and his secretary, Mrs. Landingham. So Mrs. Landingham, was the perfect secretary, she gave him just the right alarms at just the right moment, she was like a human alarm clock who gave him just the right interruptions. And because she did, he could stay on track. So he wasn't late, he would always leave for the next appointment on time, he would never run over or if he did, she would be in the office telling him it's time "It's time, It's time".

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But if you can't afford an administrative assistant, which is the case for most of us, then none of the solutions that we're talking about work. Say that to say that an admin does work, it's just that most of us can't afford to have someone be with us 12+, how many hours a day, that we need them to be our living alarm clock.

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So these solutions don't work. Summary: As you probably already know that memory doesn't work. If you don't try to use notifications at all, and you do rely on memory, the likely of feeling is one of overwhelm, as you try to hold on to not just the tasks, but you try to hold on to the activity of reminding yourself to do the tasks. The every time you commit to a task that has a deadline on it, if you're not using notifications, then you're using memory that adds up because every time you make a commitment, it adds another commitment to the Zeigarnik Effect. So the Zeigarnik Effect is that feeling that your subconscious has. And it needs to remind you to do so because your conscious mind won't remember. So every commitment adds to the Zeigarnik Effect, this guy, makes it worse. And eventually you start to feel overwhelmed. But it's not by the volume of tasks you've committed.

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It's the system that's letting you down, because there are other people who have way more reliable systems than you do. And here I'll describe one that I've discovered for myself, since actually doing the episode 11 on Interruptions. I actually implemented a solution via an alarm that I'm going to share today.

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Why isn't this problem sort of being solved the way it should be? So I kind of started out by blaming the developers for not doing what we want them to do. But the deeper reason is that we don't quite understand the underlying principle of interrupting that I covered in Episode 11. Designers don't understand it either. They may get feedback that things aren't working. And they're not working either at the level of the individual app, and they're not working at the level of the the entire ecosystem of notifications. And, but as you tell them this, they kind of shrug their shoulders and say, Well, what do you what do you want me to do? "Because that's not really my problem" - this what I imagine most designers would say.

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Unfortunately, it then leads us to a kind of stalemate where designers don't do anything, we can't do anything about it. So no one does anything about it, and everybody just suffers. And, eventually, because we don't really understand the principles, we don't have anyone who is designing solutions from first principles. So the first principle that I mentioned in Episode 11, is that we get into the (for example), we get into the flow state. The idea is to devote all your time to engaging in a task, because that's where you do your best work, and to spend no time trying to watch the clock, because there's a slew of research that says, when you're doing your best work, if you try to watch the clock at

the same time, you stop doing your best work. It goes from 100% attention to 80- 70 - 60 and it gets worse and worse. And then that phenomenon gets worse, the closer you get to the time that you're trying to remind yourself to remember to stop by.

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Okay, that's so weird, but that's exactly how it is. And, you know, over time, what we really want to do is to have the freedom, right, to keep adding more tasks, and to have a system that would grow and evolve with the volume of tasks, and therefore the volume of notifications that we need to manage effectively.

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Because the fact is, and here's the sort of the raw truth, we cannot do without notifications, after/above a certain volume of tasks. Once we commit past a certain number, that number consumes the 168 hours you have per week. That number takes away or, it uses up all the discretionary time, and mental space that you have. Like the President of the United States from the TV show, you move from one commitment to the next. You don't have time to kick back and wonder what you should work on next. Now most of us do.

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But here I'm speaking to the people who are really accomplished and really committed to high accomplishment and high achievement. If you're someone who's a little bit type A, this may resonate because you are constantly assigning yourself more tasks. And once you go above a certain level, a certain number...Once you've consumed all that discretionary time in your calendar, you must have notifications. Now ultimately, in the beginning, you will be the one who tries to notify or alarm yourself, using self alarms i.e. using memory. But that's just the worst kind. Now it will work for a while once the task volume remains low enough. But eventually, you'll outgrow once you keep adding tasks. So the first bump will happen. Once you get over a certain level that you must have notifications and you start notifying yourself,

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then the second will happen when you're notifying notifications that you're sending yourself. The Zeigarnik Effect, stop working and you start being overwhelmed. Or you need to have another kind of alarm in place to stop you and to start you right on time.

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So there is no real easy answer to this as as.... inevitable as I'm making it sound. I use the word stalemate to describe the situation most find themselves in. But I'm going to tell you how I crafted a solution recently, a personal solution that worked and how you can use that to make progress in your notifications, the quality of your notifications and the skill with which you use them.

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So my problem came when I realized that meetings on weekends were the absolute worst to show up for. So these weekend meetings were like, for example, a four o'clock meeting on a Saturday or two o'clock meeting on a Sunday. I could never remember to do them. So you know, as I reflected on it, I realized that when I'm at my desk from Monday to Friday, and I'm kind of continuously polling my calendar and I'm looking at email and looking at my commitments, I mean, I'm in the mode of what's next, what's next. How much time do I have for the rest of the day? I'm constantly measuring what I'm doing versus what's in my calendar, what appointments or how it's I'm in the in and out of my calendar often enough that it's difficult to be surprised. Okay.

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Saturday and Sunday, however, I'm in a very different mode. Today (on Sunday) at this moment, I'm in front of my computer, but if I'm if I spend half of the weekend in front of my computer, that's unusual. Most times I spend maybe less time than that. And as I move around and do different things, whether it's errands or exercise or just chilling out, watching TV, watching some Netflix, calling friends visiting my Mom, whatever it is I might be doing.

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As I'm doing those things, I'm not in and out of my calendar. So a four o'clock meeting on a Sunday, what would happen is that I would totally forget. So, again, forget, because what I was what I would try to do is try to say, Okay, I have to remember that there's a four o'clock meeting on on Sunday. Okay, good. "Won't forget that now."

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So my solution to that was, I need a strong alarm. So what's a strong alarm? So a soft alarm in my ecosystem, is one that is popped up by, something like a Google Calendar. So it pops up on my screen, and it's pretty easy to dismiss, it also comes up on my phone. And it's pretty easy to dismiss, I don't use my tablet for that purpose. So to my phone, or my laptop, those are the two tools. So those are very easy to dismiss. And when I'm in the heat of the moment, the way Irene was, it's easy to dismiss a reminder like that just by swiping or by clicking into me. Soft alarm. Even worse, on a weekend, if I'm away from my laptop, or my phone is in a different room, I had no chance at all.

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So if it does its thing, so it'll be this little tip, little very, very soft alarm very weak alarm. It pips once it flashes up on the screen on my phone, and on my laptop, and if I'm not front of either one. Or if either one is not close, then...

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Plus if it nipping for all other kinds of things. Like telling me that it's time to have lunch and different

has it be pipping for all other kinds of things. Like telling me that it's time to have lunch and different kinds of things, then, or, you know, I just got a notification because a WhatsApp message just came in, or a direct message on LinkedIn or on Twitter or something. They're all making that same very weak alarm. So the alarm to attend that four o'clock meeting is the same alarm, that same notification, same sound as the one that tells me that I got an update to a tweet. So you can see the problem. On weekends. I'm not tuned into those notifications. So I said, "Okay, what I'm going to do from now on, is, turn on my alarm-alarm,

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my wake up alarm, whenever I have a meeting on weekends." So an alarm-alarm is the one that used to wake up in the morning, the one you set that at night. And that worked... until it stopped working. So the problem was that when I set the alarm for, for example, the following day at four o'clock, that I couldn't set an alarm to wake up at 6am. Because my software program didn't allow me to set two kinds of alarms. I only could set one alarm-alarm at a time.

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So this is annoying. No, I have to choose or I have to remember to reset the alarm. Now the reason that alarm works when it works is that strong alarm is one which is loud. You can hear it anywhere in my townhouse. It persists...in other words it keeps going and going and going and going and going. It doesn't stop until you actually go over to it and stop it. It's annoying as all heck, it's not playing a nice tune that you could easily just kind of sing along to and wait for it to end.

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So my wife can hear this, hear that alarm and say if your phone's going off, it's ringing. And I say "oh yeah, four o'clock call". So when it worked, it worked. But the tool I was using was clearly not made for that purpose. It was clearly made for something something else. So I found a different program. And I'll tell you the steps I went through. So I went searching for a program that gives me an alarm, that gives me a strong alarm.

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Now, of course. I'm just making these words up, right. There's no such thing as a strong alarm in the world. If you go on Google Play and ask for a "strong alarm" there isn't one. So there's not even a term for what I'm talking about that I could find. But anyway, I somehow came across an app called the Event Alarm Reminder. And it said it would do strong alarms except that I couldn't get this thing to work. Android app. And I could not get it to work on the phone that I had. It's supposed to work, but the only way I found was that I had to restart the program every day. And then it would work but then I had to restart and I had to run it in the background basically.

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Well, fortunately for me, I changed phones, bought a newer phone, and it started to work. And I'm surprised, I'm not sure why. But all of a sudden, I realized that... hold on, every time I place an alarm

in my calendar of appointments, then it would automatically attach a strong alarm, which means 10 minutes before the activity, the strong alarm will go off. And at the activity itself, at the moment, it will go off again, double annoying. You can't avoid an alarm like that. So this thing started to work.

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So I say, Oh, wait, hold on. So now I can use this. So I started to use it, I had to make a few tweaks to my setup. So the tweak I had to make was that I now have a calendar on Google Calendar, (which allows multiple calendars) which is only for appointments. And if I want to set a time block some time for myself, I need to use a different calendar in Google Calendar, or I use SkedPal to set the appointment or the task.

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And the bonus is that when someone creates an appointment with me, so I use OnceHub, but it's a little bit like Calendly, if you know what that is an automatic calendar link that you send to people that shows your available times. And it gives them some options to choose from, so they can set an appointment with you. When someone sets an appointment with me, it automatically sets up a strong alarm. And all of a sudden, it's impossible for me to miss an appointment with somebody else. So with those changes, problem solved.

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Now, as you can see, I went through a whole process. And I'm going to describe the steps that I went through to find this.

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It's as much a matter of luck. I don't see anybody talking about strong alarms and talking about having the kind of alarms that you need to have... talking about the first principles behind using these kinds of alarms, and why you need different levels of alarms. I don't I don't know where to have this conversation anywhere on the internet. I don't see anybody talking about it in that level of depth.

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But you absolutely need it. You must have it once you get to a particular level. So let's call it a solution. So let's come on to start talking about the problem. And I guess we're no into solutions. You need to carve out and cobble together solutions like the one that I came up with. And I have some steps for you to follow. And in a way, they're the steps that I followed. They're the ones described in a Medium article I wrote called "How to organize your notifications to accomplish the perfectly notified self" and I actually rewrote the article just today because I realized that some of the things were outdated, but it didn't include my latest thinking.

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So here are the steps for you to follow. If you find yourself starting from basically the basic bottom level of this, where most people are.

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1- So the first is to turn off all notifications. Oh, ah, the only one you live on is your phone. Because presumably, that's the one that you have to have. Now, this is a pain on some devices. But after you do that, I want you to just revel in the quiet because what you're trying to do is to restore your relationship to the notifications on your devices. Okay, you're trying to rebuild something and the best way to start rebuilding it is to go absolutely cold turkey.

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2 -The second step is to make a list of the ones/notifications that at that moment in time you must have. And here I want you to be conservative, if not a bit dramatic. And leave out all of the ones that are nice to have. You know like the one time that you got this Facebook update, and it popped on the screen and helped you to contact somebody just just before the day they went to the hospital and you can say goodbye to them. Leave out all of those exceptions and think from what does my regular routine look like? And as you look for the necessary ones, look for the ones that would give you the biggest bang for the buck, this shouldn't be more than two or three.

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3 - For those notifications, take another step and make a list of the situations where you would like to be interrupted. Like, for example, I'm at work. And I'm in the middle of a project. And my daughter needs to reach me, because she's fallen ill, and someone needs to take her to the emergency room. So if you have something like that, you're now looking for, what are the channels that you should use for notifications. So that her notification is one that you pay attention to. I'm going to suppose that that's a likely event. If it's absolutely unlikely, then scratch that example. But make a list of the situations, the ones that are likely to happen, where a notification needs to pierce your attention, pierce your awareness.

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4- Okay, as you look at the two lists, or the list of the necessary notifications, and the situations to turn them on, one notification at a time. So if you think I'm advocating the use of as few notifications as possible, then you're right, you want to be using the minimum number. And this process will allow you to introduce them one at a time. So that you actually can now pay attention to the absolute few that you need.

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5- And then finally, the last step is to give a job to your devices. So what do I mean by that, whether it's a little bit like giving them a role. So my my, my phone's job,

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is to interrupt me with meetings and tasks, and other notifications that I care about the most. And now I'm thinking about it, there's some notifications, I need to change on here, because I implemented a couple of new apps. And I realized that they have been notifying me, which means that they are crowding out the other notifications that I really need to pay attention to. So there's some changing I need to do.

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So you may need to do the same thing, also. Over time, these app developers... they find ways of getting past your defenses... you turned it off, and all them all of a sudden, it's turned it back on, you have no idea why is it the developers or the devices or the OS? Who knows. But the point is to give your devices a role with respect to letting you know about notifications.

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So, for example, I have a landline but really the only person who has my landline number is my mom. So that's like my hotline, the only time it rings, is when she's calling. And if she rings, we've told her, if she rings and we don't answer it...ring again, sometimes we can't get to it in time. If she calls twice, you better believe it's going to get our attention. Because the job of the phone is to receive incoming phone calls...from my mom, that's his number one job. Occasionally, we get a junk call here and there. But it's the that is its first and primary rule.

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So think of the job you want each of their devices and apps to play. And then experiment with these five steps. You're you're looking to preserve your attention. You're looking to limit the notifications and interruptions. You're looking to improve the quality of the interruptions and the notifications so that the few that exist, actually have some integrity and actually can make a difference in you changing your behavior.

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Just to reiterate what I said at the beginning, and in the middle, and stated again at the end. You cannot avoid the use of notifications...once you get past a certain level of task volume. It's a bad idea to try to say okay, well, I'll just limit the number of tasks because that does not work. If you're a creative, committed and hardworking person you will have one project in life, you will create more tasks inside of that one project, then you can get done in 168 hours per week. That's just the way we human beings are with respect to task creation.

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So trying to limit the number of tasks doesn't work. It's far better to kind of do what I'm suggesting.

which is create an ecosystem of personal alarms that works for you. It takes into account the latest latest technology, your choice of devices and apps. And that actually works for you, gives you the kind of peace of mind that you can rely on.

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So that's it for this episode. Stay tuned. I'm gonna let you know about the next episode and also drop a couple of messages for you, at the end of this episode. Stay tuned.