

Thriving on Information Overload with Ross Dawson

[00:00:00] **Ross Dawson:**

we need to become more discriminating, more discerning.

To be able to be conscious in a way. Simply just to think every time we encounter something, is this going to improve my life or not? Is it worth the time which we pay? So in fact, most information for any individual has negative value because the value of our attention, the value of our time in paying attention to it is simply not as much as what we get from it.

So we get depleted by giving attention to things which are not actually serving us. So need to become more discerning over time. And the way in which we do that is partly building a portfolio of the right information sources.

[00:00:45] **Jill Stoddard:** That was Ross Dawson on psychologists off the clock.

We are four experts in psychology here to bring you cutting edge and science based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work, and health.

[00:01:08] **Debbie Sorensen:** I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, a clinical psychologist practicing in Mile High, Denver, Colorado, and author of Act for Burnout, Act Daily Journal, and the Act Daily Card Deck.

[00:01:18] **Emily Edlynn:** From America's Heartland, I'm Dr. Emily Edlynn a clinical psychologist based in Chicago, Illinois, and author of Autonomy Supportive Parenting.

[00:01:26] **Michael Herold:** Calling in from Vienna, Austria. I'm Michael Herold, ACT coach, confidence trainer, and author of an upcoming book on being a better conversationalist and making friends.

[00:01:34] **Jill Stoddard:** And from coastal New England, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, The Big Book of Act Metaphors, and Impostor No More.

[00:01:41] **Emily Edlynn:** We hope you take what you learned here to build a rich and meaningful life.

[00:01:45] **Michael Herold:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off The Clock. I'm here with Michael to introduce today's episode with Ross Dawson, who wrote a book called Thriving on Overload, The Five Powers for Success in a World of Exponential Information. And Michael, I'm wondering what your thoughts about this world of exponential information are.

Well, the first thing I had to think about as I was going through the interview was my first exposure to the internet when I was a teenager and the electronic stores would have a computer there that was connected to the internet and you could go there and use it just like they have video game consoles there now to try out and there was a computer connected to the internet.

And so while I was waiting for my bus to go back home after school, I would be in line to use that computer and there would be other teenagers being on the internet. And that was my turn. And I didn't know what to click. I didn't know what to read. It was like, okay, I'm going to go here. I'm going to read some jokes.

And then it felt like five minutes later, I had finished the internet. Okay, I'm bored now. I'm going to go home. It's time to

[00:02:52] **Jill Stoddard:** read everything there is to read.

[00:02:54] **Michael Herold:** That's it.

[00:02:56] **Jill Stoddard:** And so what I'm guessing you're saying is that maybe that experience has changed slightly

[00:03:00] **Michael Herold:** this has, as has changed a lot. Yes. And not necessarily to the better, even though I will say that there is a lot of good on the internet, of course. But the way that my internet use starts during the day is that there are these moments of brief boredom. I'm waiting for my coffee. and the phone comes out and I'm thumping through the internet, the social media and particular social media.

And my social media is very well curated. As I think you said, uh, yours is too in the interview. So I really only get stuff that actually interests me and. So I'm thumping through that stuff more or less mindlessly, and then I come across this post or that post that's really interesting, that's related to my work, that's related

to something I'm interested in, I click on it, and I realize, uh oh, this website has more than 50 words, and there are barely any pictures in it, and then I get overwhelmed, I was like, okay, I'm going to bookmark this, I'm going to read it later, and I keep thumbing. And so my bookmarks folder with articles that I need to read at one point gets so large that I just need to go in and Maria Kondo the entire thing and, you know, take everything out again. And then the entire process starts over, which I find so weird that the superficial stuff soaks me in and takes my time and energy and attention.

But the really good stuff that kind of falls through the cracks and I know that you discussed that with him as well in the interview.

[00:04:24] **Jill Stoddard:** yeah, and I think that, you know, what was really useful about this interview is he gives you a process for making decisions about that information. What to read, whether to read it. And so, do you feel like after this interview, you have kind of like a better plan for how to do this more efficiently or more effectively instead of just saving it all and then ditching it all and then saving it all and then ditching it all?

[00:04:48] **Michael Herold:** I definitely feel like he gives a really good framework on how to approach that thing. Um, that is a really good balance between time and what you get out of it. I have to say that for me, this is still in the testing phase because my willpower is going to get in the way. Having the system that will definitely work.

As very well laid out and Michael in the morning, uh, taking the phone out and scrolling. So I'll report back in on how that has developed for me. And as a, side note one thing you talk about in that system as well as having like playing to the algorithm. So you only see things that are relevant to you and I had to chuckle, just this morning because I'm now, since we had an episode on menopause on psychologist off the clock, I'm now getting posts about menopause, which just speaks to the fact that Instagram doesn't know me that well,

[00:05:43] **Jill Stoddard:** Well, I actually love that you're getting those posts because even though menopause isn't going to happen to you, it's going to happen to a lot of the people around you. So it's not a bad thing for you to be learning

[00:05:54] **Michael Herold:** I can, I can share those posts. Yeah, I will, I will copiously share those posts.

[00:05:58] **Jill Stoddard:** That's hysterical. Well, what you say about this being kind of a work in progress. That is very relatable. You know, I'm the one that did the interview and it's been a little time. You just listened to it recently. I did it a little while ago and it was just this morning that I was realizing, I'm not a great sleeper and I wake up very early most mornings and, you know, it's dark and I don't feel like getting up and I'm still tired, even though I'm awake.

And so I do the mindless scrolling. And, you know, I realized that we really need to have a social media presence. When you're a book author, you know, many different kinds of professions kind of require you to have a platform and a presence. And it was really just this morning that I thought, you know, I'm wide awake.

I could be using this time much more effectively that instead of just mindlessly scrolling for two hours, when I'm then ready to like get up and start my day, I could actually use this time. In an efficient way so that I don't have to spend time doing this later when I'd rather be doing other things and then maybe it wouldn't feel like such a burden.

So it occurred to me as we were preparing for this intro, I thought, you know what, I need to go back to this interview with Ross and think about like, what can his five powers teach me about shifting my relationship to this particular aspect of social media so that I can do this in a more helpful way?

[00:07:11] **Michael Herold:** So at the end of the episode, you actually share a quote from the book that was so eye opening to me that I immediately thought this was something that I should have learned from Kermit the Frog 30 years ago. It was a single quote that was more useful to me than reading 10 books on the matter. So I hope everyone here is listening to the end and getting to that gold nugget.

[00:07:36] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, I totally agree. It's why of the whole entire book that quote felt like it needed to be picked out and shared. And I think it's even in the intro to the book, but I think I waited till the end because it felt like that really important monumental way to wrap up all of what he was talking about.

That's a real mindset shift.

[00:07:54] **Michael Herold:** yeah, it is.

[00:07:55] **Jill Stoddard:** Well, we hope you enjoy this episode with Ross Dawson.

hey everybody, it's Jill here, and I'm so excited to introduce my guest today, Ross Dawson. Ross Dawson is globally recognized as a leading futurist, entrepreneur, keynote speaker, and strategy advisor. Ross is founding chairman of the Advanced Human Technologies Group of Companies and Bondi Innovation Alliance.

He travels the world helping business and government leaders think about the future, having delivered keynotes and strategy workshops in over 30 countries across six continents. He's the bestselling author of five books, including *Thriving On Overload*, *the Five Powers for Success in a World of Exponential Information*.

Which is what we will be talking about with him today. Ross frequently appears in the media, including on C N N, Bloomberg tv, sky News, A B C, TV, U S A today, the Today and Sunrise shows and many other programs. Ross, thank you so much for joining us on psychologists off the clock from around the world in Australia, where it's very late for you.

So I really appreciate you being here with me today.

[00:09:04] **Ross Dawson:** Delight to be talking with you.

[00:09:05] **Jill Stoddard:** Well, so the way that I found out about your book is I had Kelly Leonard on the podcast, and you've been on his podcast getting to Yes. And, um, and I loved my conversation with Kelly and I asked him, who are some of your, he and I have shared a lot of guests, so I know we have similar interests.

I said, who is one of your favorite guests, favorite interviews? And he brought up, so that's the connection. If you were wondering how a psychology podcast found you, it was, through Kelly,

[00:09:33] **Ross Dawson:** Well, that's a, it's a wonderful connection actually because I I was delighted, uh, that I spoke with him on the podcast because I, me actually mentioned *Second City*, uh, which is the, uh, you know, improvisational, improvisational theater trip, which, uh, is in my book, Uh, as this idea of improvisation, this ability to connect directly to us and how we communicate is, really fundamental.

It's a, it's a fundamental capability and skill in this world. So, I was, yeah, absolutely delighted to be invited on and have that conversation around this idea of how do we improvise our way through life.

[00:10:09] **Jill Stoddard:** Right. Well, it was funny when I was listening to your interview with him, I thought, oh. There's the proof that Kelly actually read the book because, you know, sometimes when someone interviews you, they haven't actually read the book that you've written. And he says something like, right there on page 167, you mentioned, you know, get his book.

Yes. And, and Second City and I, just thought that was so great. That must've made you feel good. Go. Oh, he actually read the book. He was paying attention to the details.

[00:10:33] **Ross Dawson:** that's a.

[00:10:34] **Jill Stoddard:** Right, so you start this book citing some absolutely staggering numbers regarding the exponentially increasing amount of information.

That's become available to us humans over recent years. And you talk about our natural tendency to wanna seek novelty, you know, the information gives us those, like dopamine surges our, brains are so fond of but of course, an overload of information can, be damaging. And so your book is basically a roadmap for navigating this, for thriving on overload as the title so aptly suggests using five different powers. And so I wanna talk about the powers in a second. But can you talk a little bit, just kind of big picture, why this is important? Like what is at risk if we don't harness these powers in this age of information overload?

[00:11:21] **Ross Dawson:** Well, we have created this problem for ourselves and humans are inventors and we've created all sorts of things. We've created all sorts of information. We've, uh, green knowledge on all fronts and to the point where our brains are in fact not very well suited to the environment we've created. So, As you suggest, you know, we are always seeking novelty.

Our brains were evolved in an environment where if things were the same, they weren't as interesting. If there was a, rustling in the brush or could be food or it could be, uh, something hunting us and we needed to pay attention to that. So that served us well in that environment.

But now the way in which our brain has essentially looks for, this information does not function well at all when we, uh, have a wealth of information on all

fronts wherever we go. And we can see this when people are scanning through their, their phones, when they're just even waiting for the, you know, to cross a pedestrian traffic.

They're just not able to not have information. They've got it for the first time ever. So we need to train our brains, train ourselves to gain the habits, the approaches, the behaviors, which serve us well. And I think we can shift from this world of being overloaded and overwhelmed and essentially if we, let ourselves, we will drown in the amount of information that we have, but we can change our mindset and our approach to saying instead of being overwhelmed, that in fact we can live in a world of abundance. Because if we know what we want to achieve, then we say, well, we've got all the information we can ever want. And you know, we have these resources, this incredible resources of the knowledge and information which is available.

And if we can find what it is that is useful and pertinent to what it is we wanna achieve, we have that so we can shift and it becomes a superpower. And indeed, those people that are successful today are those that have worked out for themselves how to thrive in this world where there is unlimited information, but ones which if we let it will absolutely drown us.

[00:13:39] **Jill Stoddard:** Crush us. Right? Yeah. It's, it's really interesting to think about. It's, it's about the process, not the collection of, facts, but about the process of how we go about it. And it just made me think of, you actually, on Kelly's podcast, you point out that information is really, Anything that comes at us.

So it's not just the data on our screens, which honestly I think is how I was thinking about it when I was reading your book, but I think you give the example of, you know, a baby crying is information. And so when you think about it that way, we're just bombarded every single second, even when we're not on our phones and our brains were designed.

You know, in some ways autopilot is a good thing because if we paid attention to every sensory input every second of every day. We would be overloaded and, being on autopilot allows us to sort of not have to do that. But autopilot can be problematic when we're on autopilot and we're on our phones, social media, whatever else.

And what you're suggesting is, and correct me if this is wrong, is that we need to get more mindful, we need to get more thoughtful about what we're consuming and more importantly, how we're consuming it.

[00:14:45] **Ross Dawson:** Absolutely. And one of the significant roles of the prefrontal cortex is filtering information. Because, we have a constant barrage of information. And if we always paid attention to everything, our brains would be overwhelmed. And, some types of mental disorders are in fact essentially, uh, breakdown of our filtering functions.

And some people who experience this overwhelm, are, you know, essentially there's a dysfunction where they're not able to filter effectively. We, do need to filter the world. There is a very big danger in that where we essentially filter out almost everything and we, we are not paying attention to the world.

There is no mindfulness to that. We essentially go into our shells and I think there's a lot of people that live very hollow lives essentially because they filter out everything. They watch their streaming shows but they're not actually paying attention and seeing the richness of the world, which for its beauty and for its functionality and it's utility of learning about the world and how it is, we can respond to that.

[00:15:50] **Jill Stoddard:** that is the purpose of information, right? So that we can learn, so that we can make choices that make our life better. So let's talk about how to do that. So why don't we start with the power of purpose, which, my co-host and I, we say this on, the podcast all the time, but my co-hosts and I we all practice a psychotherapy called acceptance and commitment therapy, and a hugely important.

Part of that is paying attention to your values. who and how you wanna be in the world, and your first power in thriving on overload is the power of purpose. And so that reminded me a lot of values. And you say, quote, understanding your purpose for engaging with information is a prerequisite for thriving amid excess.

So tell us a little bit about what you mean by this, and maybe even what you don't mean by this. Because that word purpose has come to mean, you know, maybe lots of different things.

[00:16:40] **Ross Dawson:** Yes. Yeah. And that, and I think that there is, uh, almost, you know, purpose porn in the sense that, you know, people just purpose, purpose, purpose, and it's the mantle around us is lost value in the, the

word in many ways, yes.

[00:16:54] **Jill Stoddard:** right? Yeah.

[00:16:55] **Ross Dawson:** But it is wanted what it is that guides our lives. On a big scale and on a smaller scale.

And when we have unlimited information, we need to have something that guides us as to what it is that serves us, what information serves us and what information doesn't serve us. And the only way to know is to, understand what it is we wanna achieve. We can think about, you know, this is the purpose of my life.

This is what the positive impact I want to have. It could be, uh, on a smaller level, you know, these are the the next step I want to have in my career. It could be in terms of this is what I want for my health, or those my loved ones, or other things which are important. So once you understand the things that are important, you can quite simply sort out.

This is useful to me. This actually adds value to my life, and it starts to become pretty evident that there's plenty of things that come at us in the information environment, which do not serve us.. They're not helping us be who we want to be, have the impact we want to have to achieve our objectives to help our family or community or whatever it may be.

And so this has to be the starting point simply to know what IT information is, serves us, gives value to us, assists us in achieving our purpose, and, and that doesn't.

[00:18:23] **Jill Stoddard:** so, it's really about your why, like your why for engaging with information. And there can be lots of different whys, and those whys can change over time, but it's not your big global purpose. Like, this was what I was put on this planet to do. It could just be a more specific why, like, if you are looking for a new job, then that might be part of a purpose for seeking information.

[00:18:49] **Ross Dawson:** or a great restaurant to go to.

[00:18:51] **Jill Stoddard:** Right. Yeah. So you talk about six different domains that can reflect different whys for engaging with information. So these are things like, identity, expertise ventures, society, wellbeing and passions. And so the book goes into lots of helpful detail about what all of those different domains are.

And you even say there might be other domains that you haven't specifically identified, and there are a lot of really great exercises. so if, you know, folks can

read the book if they want more detail on that, but do you wanna give us like at least a, tip or two for how we might get more clear on like, which sphere best reflects our purpose?

Or, how we might just get more clear on what our purpose might be when we're making these choices around engaging with information?

[00:19:38] **Ross Dawson:** Certainly. Well, I think one of the most important ones and the most relevant for, many people is our area of expertise. And we do need to have depth. We do need to know more. In order to be a generalist, we first, need to be a specialist in something or at least one thing. So what enter in a complex world, We need to have a depth of expertise of understanding in one or more domains. And that's, that's a really primary choice to make, which guides our careers. Or even if we are on a career saying, well, what am I going to specialize in? What am I gonna know more than my peers on what is it that fascinates me the most?

So in the short term and just in, currently, or this month or the next months, as well as in the, the next years or through your life scene. What is it that I want to be an expert in,

[00:20:27] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

[00:20:28] **Ross Dawson:** To where I, that I will be distinctive And we all have to be distinctive in a very busy world with 8 billion people all, uh, following their own course.

So that's, uh, one of the first things is simply putting some thought, alright, and just writing that down as a sentence or two. Alright. I will be, or I will focus on this particular area of expertise and that immediately gives clarity.

[00:20:52] **Jill Stoddard:** I just had a thought that was sort of a funny example, is that in general, I don't need to know about what Kim Kardashian is, doing with her life. I don't need to know who she's dating. I don't need to know how many children she has but recently she was on the cover of

I think it was either time or Forbes. I forget which one. But you know, a big magazine because her company, I can't even remember what it's called because it doesn't, doesn't really matter. But her company was very successful and she was on the cover of this magazine. And a part of the article was that she was talking about how despite her success, she really suffered from a lot of imposter thoughts and feelings.

And I have a book on impostor, quote unquote syndrome coming out in a few weeks. And so that was an example where I need to essentially filter out all things Kim Kardashian, except when she's on the cover of a business magazine talking about her experience of the imposter phenomenon, which is something that I am, you know, trying to become more expert in as I get ready to launch this book.

[00:21:50] **Ross Dawson:** And, have some great case studies to talk about.

[00:21:53] **Jill Stoddard:** Right. Yeah, exactly. And maybe that's more reflective of the power of filtering, which maybe we could just talk about that now. So some of these may be overlap because the purpose is related to expertise, but then there's this filtering of what I do and don't need to know when it comes to information about Kim Kardashian.

So do you want, since that's sort of a natural segue, do you wanna talk a little bit about filtering.

[00:22:18] **Ross Dawson:** Indeed. Well, I think there's a few layers to it. I mean, one of them is being able to you know, distinguish between the information that serves us. That gives value to us and that which doesn't, and this is something where we sensitize it, we need to become more discriminating, more discerning.

To be able to be conscious in a way. Simply just to think every time we encounter something, is this going to improve my life or not? Is it worth the time which we pay? So in fact, most information for any individual has negative value because the value of our attention, the value of our time in paying attention to it is simply not as much as what we get from it.

So we get depleted by giving attention to things which are not actually serving us. So need to become more discerning over time. And the way in which we do that is partly building a portfolio of the right information sources. And so just as we manage an investment portfolio, when we need to be diverse and have different types of assets and so on, we also need to have a portfolio of information sources that are diverse. It's not just one source or one particular approach or one topic. Uh, you know, just only going to mainstream media or only going through social media, whatever it may be, to have this diversity. And when we build this portfolio of information sources means that we can then start to spend time to be a scan.

What the, what the, through these different sources and to very quickly discern this is something which is worth spending more time on or is not worth

spending more time on. And it's in basically a faculty that we can refine and hone by doing that consciously as much as we can over time.

[00:24:11] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. I love in the book you say, the art of seeing has to be learned.

[00:24:16] **Ross Dawson:** Yes, Margarite

[00:24:17] **Jill Stoddard:** we're not very good at it when we're mindless and some of the things you point out, so like how do we make this decision about how to filter? And, some of what you say is we wanna filter in information if it helps us understand the world, if it helps us make better decisions, if it helps us feel fulfilled.

Whereas we may wanna filter out information that is misleading or reinforces biases or even just makes us unhappy, you know, if it wastes time or attention, or if it's irrelevant to our purpose. And so, one thing I thought of that I wanted to run by you, if this is an example of filtering is, I've really noticed that when I'm mindlessly scrolling social media, it doesn't make me feel good.

Like I physically don't feel good. Right. It feels like an information hangover, if that's, if that's a thing. And so I sort of curated. Instagram, you know, I've limited how much I'm on it, but I've also curated it so that it shows me accounts like French Bulldogs because I love French bulldogs or Upworthy.

it's things that are feel good for me. And so even though it doesn't serve much purpose, maybe other than entertainment. and it might waste a little time, but it also does bring me joy. So I was just curious what your thoughts are in terms of that sort of like purpose and filtering that we've been talking about so far.

[00:25:39] **Ross Dawson:** Well, it comes back to what I said. Does the information serve you? And if it makes you feel good, then it's. It is good. So, you know, you can of course, spend your entire day looking at cat videos and that, that, that may be a little imbalanced life, but if you know, you get some laughs or some joy around seeing that, then that's, absolutely a good, you know, balanced part of your information diet. Though I also think one of the most valuable things is inspiration. So we can get sort of, you know, happiness and joy and laughter, and that that's fine. Or just sort of feels good. It looks good, but I think that part of the, very positive information we can find is saying, I'm inspired.

That makes me want to act. I can see the potential of humanity. I can. 'cause we get so much in the media, you know, there's negative aspects of humanity. We're all reported on these atrocities, on these people doing bad things. That's what makes news. Of course. You know, people being nice to each other is not very newsworthy.

but when we can see people who are doing extraordinary things on a small scale or on a global scale, whatever. This is something which not only makes us feel good, but actually shapes our actions, the way we behave, who we are as a person. And this comes back to purpose. And I think there is this positive cycle in a way, in a way where we, if we start to expose ourselves to information that gives us a, clue to our identity, then we actually start to say, ah, that inspires me.

So that gives me a better idea of who I am and what I want to be and who I aspire to be. And so that is really useful information. And you know, it may just be in the general flow of, of things. But we, do need to make sure we do not expose ourselves to too much of the negative because that is the nature of the news.

That is the nature of so much that we see are things which makes us despair for humanity. And I think that, you know, that's a very common response today. You know, just saying there's so much atrocity, everyone sees this all the time and that is part of what the world is. But there is so much which comes less through those filters, which is very positive and inspiring around us.

Seeing the, positive aspects of humanity and who we can be and who even can become. And that is, needs to be really big part of our information diets.

[00:28:04] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, and this also makes me think, and this could be a whole other conversation for a whole entire day, but it makes me think of algorithms and that, the more you consume of those atrocities and negativity, the more that's what's shown to you. And so then you end up in an even more dire situation and, and really speaks to how important it really is to do this consciously, to make these choices, use these five powers like you

[00:28:29] **Ross Dawson:** Yeah, well doom, doom scrolling has many negative feedback loops. One of them is that it makes you feel bad and so that's, you just sort of continue scrolling and others that as, as you were saying, you are training the algorithms to show you more of that. So there's so many ways in which as you begin to engage in these negative.

It's, you get negative, uh, cycles in your psychology and you get negative cycles in the algorithms, and you probably get negative cycles in the way the whole world works because we're all getting stuck in those cycles. And so once we can, you know, and it's, I've just created a little Twitter list of positive news and to be frank, it's very hard to find positive news channels.

But, you know, that's just sort of one thing. All right, well I'm gonna find what positive news I can find out there, and that can be just one of my, uh, ways to start the day.

[00:29:16] **Jill Stoddard:** There is actually an app that's called The Good News Network

[00:29:20] **Ross Dawson:** yeah, there's there's a few out there. Yeah.

[00:29:22] **Jill Stoddard:** yeah, there's a few out there and that's something that you can, create for yourself, but okay. Let's talk a little bit about the power of framing. so one of the things you say in this chapter is that information and knowledge are not the same thing.

That information informs you of facts, but it doesn't tell you what you need to do to act effectively. And our task is to, develop useful knowledge. And to do this we must form and recognize patterns. So talk to us a little bit about like what you mean by this and what is framing and how does that help us to, thrive when in information overload.

[00:29:59] **Ross Dawson:** So information is just information, and you know, you can maybe get good at trivia if you've got lots of information, but that doesn't give you knowledge about the world. And so knowledge is building the connection. So our brains are semantic networks, where we are reconnecting the meaning of things and what we see and how they're connected.

So these form. You know, what are commonly call our mental models, our models of how the world works. And if we have a good, you know, accurate mental model of the world, it means that we know, we're more and more able to say that this action will lead to this result. And so we can see that there are some people that have very effective mental models and that they know what action to take to achieve the outcomes they want.

There's other people that have very ineffective mental models where they keep on doing behaviors that, you know, don't give them what they want. And so this is our knowledge and so we need to form the connections. You know, when we

see information, we need to say, well, how is this connected? How does this form a whole, how do I see the entire system and.

One of the best ways to do this is visually where we can capture information, sort of see connections, put that out and you know, and I describe in my book a number of different approaches for how we can capture ideas, the connections between them and the patterns of form out of that. And this is something which we are doing in our minds all the time, whether we are conscious of it or not, but the more explicit we make that and being able to capture the information that is relevant to us or useful to us, and, and see how that is connected and to form it into a whole of understanding of our domain, of developing our expertise. That's really the task. So this framing is literally building frameworks of all of the information we come across to create the knowledge that enables us to act effectively.

[00:31:55] **Jill Stoddard:** Sort of seeing the big picture and then also seeing the ways in which the pieces sort of beneath the big picture interconnect and relate.

[00:32:04] **Ross Dawson:** Absolutely.

[00:32:05] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

One of the examples you give is chunking for memory. And it immediately made me remember a demonstration I used to do when I taught Psych 101 and we would use chunking to memorize like 21 digits or 16 digits of the natural log of E. And this was in the late nineties, and I still remember that number and could recite it right now to you, but that's just completely useless information that I don't actually need to have in my head. There's no big picture, there's no interconnectedness, but it did make me remember that I had that odd fact stuck in my head. So let's talk about the power of attention. You talk in the book about six different modes of attention, and if people wanna learn more about that, they can, they can read that in the book, but essentially it's, you know, you talk about multitasking doesn't work. It's problematic. The more we allow our attention to skip around, the less effective will be.

And you actually cite, some of the work of Near Ayal who wrote the book in Distractible. And he was actually my very first guest on this podcast when I started. Um, Co-hosting. He's wonderful. And he and I talked in depth about, time boxing, and he actually very generously wrote a, blurb for my book too.

So he holds a special place in my heart. and there's so much rich information and advice in this particular chapter that readers can benefit from. But I'm

wondering if you might be willing to share a couple of your personal favorite ways to harness your own attention.

[00:33:36] **Ross Dawson:** The what I say is, you know, it's just one of the, I suppose, distill out of the book something to a recommendation for people is that at least once a week everyone should have for at least 90 minutes do one thing only and turn every notification off, that they can find so that they truly are doing one thing.

And that's kind of approach is what enabled me to write my book amongst other things.

And so I take a little while to get going in the morning and then through the morning I can get pretty focused into the, early to mid-afternoon. And after that I sort of, my brain kinds of fades.

So I, basically try to have no meetings between 10 and one. Generally, and so I've, you know, because I, I have various calls with different parts of the planet, so I'm sometimes up early and sometimes up late. Uh, but after I've, uh, you know, had anything in the morning, I have a coffee and do some email. So I've got, okay.

I feel I've got that out of the way and then I say, okay, I'm gonna do one thing, uh, or, you know, these are two or three things. I'll just say, okay, I'm, I'm just gonna get into the zone and I'll just power on on that. And that's becomes, you know, so it's a capacity I've developed through practice. I. And part of it is that for me is that particular time of the day suits my cycle.

And, and a very important part of this is your own cycle where some people are great in the morning. I interviewed somebody from my podcast, uh, a venture capitalist who found that the secret to his successes, he gets up at four in the morning and is able to work before his phone starts going. And well, that wouldn't work for me, but, and there's other people that, work really well in the evenings and that's the time where they sort of power in, they, get a lot of stuff done.

So it's part of, it's understanding your own cycle and then

[00:35:30] **Jill Stoddard:** pay attention to your own strengths and weaknesses when it comes to attention. And that's something I imagine can even change over time. You know, there was a time in my life where I was a night owl and now I am absolutely more of a morning person. And at this stage of my life, I,

you know, I used to have boundless energy and now I'm noticing, oh my goodness, four o'clock rolls around pm you know, late afternoon and I'm done.

And I'm not used to that. Normally I can, go, go, go. and so being sensitive to those things and being able to shift as needed too, I imagine is, is

[00:36:01] **Ross Dawson:** Absolutely right. And, but one of the key points from that is that, you know, I've, found a time of the day when I can say, all right, I'm gonna make that time open so that I can just dive into things. And get into the zone and to just, have my focus and get going and, and we all need to find that, that's absolutely critical.

We talked about time boxing as this idea of, you know, you have various periods within those periods, you're focusing on one thing only. So of those modes of attention, one of them is scanning. So scanning is, for example, you know, often in the morning people.

In the past I might have read the newspaper, or now you might go through a few websites or so on as your news check, and that should be for a period of time that starts and then stops. And the same thing as well, scanning can also be, checking your Instagram or other social media, whatever, if that's part of what you want to do, and it has value to it.

But again, that is a time box as in you start it and then you end it so it doesn't go on and on and on forever. So there's the start and stop for the scanning information and that, that's one of the, the biggest dysfunctions, the biggest, the biggest mistakes as it were, as people do. Is that, okay, I'm, I'm a world of vast information.

How do I keep on top of everything I'm gonna continually scan? Well, no, that's not the best approach. You've gotta scan in order to find the things where you actually spend some time on. Alright. I've scanned and I've found three things which I really need to spend some time on and assimilate to bring into my mental models to take into my frameworks.

And so this breaking up these periods of time. And so there's a period of time where you can say, okay, this, I'm gonna read a book, or I'm going to, you know, read one or two of these articles that I've put aside. And so these are all things which, you know, I, I still.

Struggle with and work on and try to improve. and I'm not saying that I'm, uh, you know, a paragon of, of, uh, excellence at all these things, but I mean, I have built out this sort of a structure to do this as well as I can.

[00:38:07] **Jill Stoddard:** It's, about being deliberate and, you know, we do the best we can in a world that is designed to distract us, right? I mean, as you and I are sitting here on Zoom, my um, instant messenger icon thing has that little notification that says three messages have come in since we've been talking, and that little red circle is designed to prop my attention.

From you, right? And my phone is sitting on a charger over to my right and when messages come in, it's lighting up. And so one of the ways we can harness attention is to turn all of that off

to to make those notifications go away. And of course, you know, we're capable of doing it right. When I go to my Pilates classes, I'm not interrupting my workout to go check my phone.

I'm perfectly capable of doing that one thing mindfully for an hour. And so to take that same. Approach, even when we're sitting at our computers, you know, when we're writing or reading or doing any of the number of things that we do in our personal and professional lives is to be more deliberate about, how we spend that time on one thing, truly, one thing at a time.

[00:39:12] **Ross Dawson:** Absolutely. And you know, there's a number of, little, I suppose, techniques or approaches or tips or whatever you might call them. And one of them is a turn off all notifications on your phone, which are not essential. And so yeah, you'll see them if you check it. You don't need to have them flashing up on your screen.

Second is turn your phone face down at all times when it's not absolutely critical. Or even better not have it in the same room. And, there's, many people have quoted the study, which shows that having your phone in the same room as opposed to in a different room, you know, decreases your IQ by however many points because you, you, you know that it's there and you know that if you turn it over, you'll see all these messages.

So this is our brain. Let's understand how our brain works and let's, transcend that by saying, okay, I'm gonna take that away. And, you know, there may be times where you just scroll through your phone and that's, that's fine. But as long as that's not through the day, as long as you've given yourself your brain, the, capacity to build its strength.

And, uh, again, it's this idea that attention is a muscle that we can exercise and we must exercise. 'cause otherwise it goes flabby and we, our attention is wandering all over all of the time. So whatever it may be, whether it's meditating or just awareness techniques or simply just spending a time when we have at least 30 minutes when everything is turned off except for the one thing we're doing. that should be too hard, surely. but it is hard. So, uh, we, let's, let's practice that and once we've practice that we can sort of get better at it and it just becomes incredibly valuable capability in the world in which we live today.

[00:40:56] **Jill Stoddard:** I love that comparison of, it's like building a muscle and if you don't work it out, you get flabby and it reminded me of a day where I noticed I was sitting at a red light. And how long is it the longest red light? 20 seconds maybe. I mean, a red light is not a very long period of time. And I noticed this strong, almost physical urge.

I noticed it was like I was bored and had nothing to do and I had an urge to check my phone and I don't check my phone, you know, when I'm in the car and when I'm driving. But it was this moment of, oh my gosh, what have we done to ourselves and to our brains that we are now? In an age where you can't sit at a red light without feeling like you need some sort of stimulation of, information and, how, I mean, again, just like fighting an uphill battle, how problematic that's become right.

[00:41:46] **Ross Dawson:** Ab, uh, it's, it is becoming more of a problem. I mean, that it's the nature of where our brains being trained to be always distracted. So this comes back to, I mentioned this idea of awareness techniques and, and one of them Simply is that if we are at a red light or if we're at a pedestrian crossing is to, for example, pay attention to our breathing or to go into peripheral vision, where we open our, perception to what is, you know, to the extremes of our vision, rather than right in front of us, or to just notice something about the people around us to look.

To actually spend the time to look at, say, see what we see. So to just say, while I'm waiting for this light to turn I can, there's so much interesting around us. There's so much just interesting in our own breath to pay attention to our body, to stretch our muscles a little bit, to just be aware. And these are in fact, extraordinary opportunities.

These little breaks when we're waiting for a coffee or in a queue. These are times when I. there are alternatives. We don't need to pick up our phone. And in fact, we can find not only joy, but richness of experience. And we might even learn things or notice things that can serve us in all sorts of ways.

[00:43:07] **Jill Stoddard:** Absolutely. I think it's so important that we, try to retrain our brains to get off that autopilot where we just react to the urge to make it go away and do that more deliberate choosing of really using our senses to tune in and pay attention to the world around us. Those, those small moments really, they matter a lot.

So. Okay, let's talk about the power of synthesis. You say quote, if you want to run the world, be a synthesizer end quote. So the power of synthesis, they're all important, but the power of synthesis seemed like something that you were particularly, Invested in would that be fair to say?

Like, tell us what you think about synthesis, what this means, and maybe some tips for how we can become better synthesizers?

[00:43:52] **Ross Dawson:** I think it's the ultimate human capability. I think it defines us as humans is the ability to. You know, just experience the world and to pull that all together to make sense of that and, you know, so that we can see opportunities, make better decisions to understand the world in some form, and every invention, every creation, every everything which has moved us forward in any way as a synthesis, as a bringing together in novel ways of what you know is.

Our experience or what others have created before us, that all progress comes from the synthesis

of this Yes. Of the connections. And so indeed, you know, the, essentially those jobs, which are the most highly paid, In the world are all jobs of synthesis, of pulling together disparate perspectives and informations and insights and ideas and perspectives and experience into something which is new and novel and insightful.

So in a world of AI where we are, I mean, I often say, you know, we're not in competition with the machines. You know, we, we need to have the AI to design it and use it to compliment our capabilities. But what allows us to transcend the AI is this capacity for synthesis. And so that's something which we need to nurture in ourselves.

And part of the ways in which we nurture our ability for Synthes is to be open. To experience to ideas because the faster the world moves, the more being closed to ideas doesn't work. the world's different. And so there was yesterday. And so we need to be open to seeing that and understanding that.

And that's part, a key part of this ability to synthesize is actually to be open to the signals which we can pull together. And another critical part of it is to be open to changing our minds. So again, as the world is evolving, we need to evolve the ways in which we think, and that is an, you know, synthesis, not a end state.

It is a process of perceiving, of seeing, of connecting, of understanding, of making sense of the world. That is not just joyful, it is incredibly practical. And as a, you know, I said the wealthiest people in the world or all people excel at this, and this is something which we can nurture and understand.

That's what I've tried to lay out in that chapter, is the techniques and approaches and, foundations so that we can improve our capacity for synthesis.

[00:46:43] **Jill Stoddard:** and we do do this naturally and automatically. Our brains like to make meaning of things

[00:46:48] **Ross Dawson:** That's what, that's what the brains do. Yes.

[00:46:50] **Jill Stoddard:** It's what brains do. Right? I do an exercise with my clients sometimes where in fact, I'll do it with you. I'll just hold up these two things, like what does this paperweight and this pen, what do these two things have in common?

[00:47:05] **Ross Dawson:** They're sitting on your desk.

[00:47:08] **Jill Stoddard:** Okay, so there, so there's no right answer. I just literally picked up two completely arbitrary objects from my desk, and what I like to point out is like, but just notice what your brain does. The answers are relevant. It's that process of noticing how if your brain goes, uh, I don't know, nothing. It won't stop there.

It will chug and chug and chug until it's able to come up with an answer. And that can be a problematic thing when we're trying to solve problems that are unsolvable. And this is particularly relevant for, you know, sometimes people who have anxiety and think about all the potential eventualities, you know, all the catastrophes that could occur.

But I think it also speaks to what we're talking about is that brains are designed to try to solve problems, to try to make sense of things, and we can harness that power in useful ways.

[00:47:57] **Ross Dawson:** which actually does come back to our starting point in the improvisation. And that indeed is one of the techniques which, you know, in this case you've got two different things. Alright? What connects them. That's sort of just something where the, the brain spontaneously does whatever it does, as you say, no right or wrong answers, but it is connecting.

And so that's something which we can practice and we can develop is, you know, our brains as improvisation. Which means that you take what is there. And so the key part of improvisation is you accept whatever you are given and you do something with it. That's the yes and exactly, and so that's what we want to assist our brains to be good at and our educational system beat it out of us.

[00:48:43] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, it does.

[00:48:45] **Ross Dawson:** So that's one of the big problems is we've all been educated, we've all been spent years in these institutions, which are designed to essentially stop us. Yeah, exactly. And, and spontaneity and this ability to sort of go off on tangents and to, uh, connect in various ways.

So, you know, this, this linearity to our educational system,

[00:49:06] **Jill Stoddard:** and and not synthesizing. I mean, when I think about my kids, they're literally learning math facts, which of course you need to know in the world. You need to know how to multiply numbers. But so much of it is, it's not critical thinking. It's not really understanding the big picture. It's, Facts versus knowledge.

[00:49:25] **Ross Dawson:** Yes. And yeah, so there's the facts and there's the knowledge from the connection from that, and then there's the step beyond that, which is the process of the pulling together and creating new things from what it is we have seen and experienced.

[00:49:39] **Jill Stoddard:** So would you be willing to walk through an example to try to pull this all together? For our listeners, I had an idea that I thought would be appropriate for you. And it's funny 'cause you just mentioned ai and so the thought I had is, AI right now is, it's absolutely everywhere and you know, most of the media exposure around it has been kind of scary, And so let's say and this is actually true. I will say for me, like if I'm feeling a little overloaded by all of the information that's available around ai, I. I wanna dig into it because I don't wanna put my head in the sand and I wanna understand, I'm not sure which purpose that would be.

Expertise maybe. I mean, I don't really wanna be an expert, but I do wanna have some knowledge and understanding. So can you walk us through the five powers, like the process that we might go through if we're feeling like I'm overloaded by AI information and so I want to learn about this in a way that is adaptive.

[00:50:39] **Ross Dawson:** Okay. You know, that's a great, great example. Very, uh, very contemporary. So, so first thing, it is worth thinking, all right, why do I want to learn about AI? And simply asking that question.

[00:50:52] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

[00:50:52] **Ross Dawson:** Because it might impact my job because I want to understand how, society might be impacted or, you know, politics might be impacted.

You know, it's, important to the world I live in, it might be important to me, it might be important to my kids and their education or whatever it may be. Alright. So I thinking, alright, just, and it doesn't have to be, you know, you don't have to write a book or an essay. It's like just.

Think about why am I interested in ai? What is the things about AI that I'm most interested in? And there is also a scale where you can think of, you want for any particular topic. Do you want to be expert? Do you want to be knowledgeable or do you want to be informed?

[00:51:31] **Jill Stoddard:** Mm, I like that.

[00:51:32] **Ross Dawson:** And so,

[00:51:33] **Jill Stoddard:** tells you where you can stop so that you don't go down a never ending rabbit hole.

[00:51:38] **Ross Dawson:** Yeah. And so for most people, no, they're not going to aspire to or be able to become an expert in ai, you know, that that's a particular, you know, take a direction in your life, you know, but to be informed, for example.

Alright, I want to understand the basic issues around AI and how it affects the world. And so, the, one of the other key points I make is the distinction between, foundational knowledge. And ongoing knowledge. So the foundation knowledge is what are the key elements of this? So in order to understand what

is coming out every day in the world of ai, we need to just have some basic, so what are some good sources?

So the first thing to say, all right, what's a good starting point where I can just build. Whatever level of being informed, which you can say, okay, I understand the, the elements of that, And so part of that is then to build a framework and of the mapping techniques, mind maps are a good starting point and there's lots of other techniques as well.

But I think, you know, hopefully I don't need to explain the mind map. Most people have been exposed to that, and so you just get a piece of paper or software. The blame software does that. AI is in the center. Whenever you come across an idea associated with that, you put it in there and you find a place for it. And as you're finding new concepts related to that, you're just putting them together and by the nature of just saying, ah, I think it fits there, you are building your own knowledge. You are building your own framework for understanding what AI is and how it's, yeah. What the aspects of that which are relevant to you, you know, which might be, okay, these are some of the risks, or these are some of the opportunities, or these are some of the underlying technologies, or these are some of the major companies, whatever it may be. So in terms of the ongoing, you know, the portfolio of information, you know, there are many types of information sources and in fact, one of the, ones which is most useful for AI is newsletters where people do the filtering for you. And so rather than getting a stream of, alright, I'm gonna search for all the articles which, uh, have AI in their title would, not be very useful.

'cause you don't know whether they're important or not. And you get far too much and, not gonna subscribe to an, an ai, uh, research journal. But there are some very good newsletters which give, Weekly or whatever it is to say, okay, these are the most important things which have come out and this is why they're important.

know, so you do need to, you know, find what those are and it takes a little bit of searching. So that's one part of an information portfolio which is useful to you. And if it's something which you feel, okay, there's this, uh, I've identified some good reasons why I'm interested in ai, then you might say, alright, so during my scanning every day, I'll spend five minutes scan for that and I'll spend 10 minutes reading one article, which I think was interesting every day. Or might be say, okay, I'll spend half an hour a week, or whatever it is. So you're time boxing and then you're allocating that and then, you know, and part of a synthesis exercise around this might be to say, alright, I want to map out the intersection of AI in my area. So AI and psychology.

[00:54:57] **Jill Stoddard:** Mm.

[00:54:58] **Ross Dawson:** this is an area of synthesis where, alright. What are the connections between psychology and ai? Well, amongst other things, AI starts to reflect some of the models of human thinking. We can learn more a little bit more about how the human brain works by seeing some of the models of how AI works, we are seeing ai, uh, therapists start to emerge.

that's creating stress with people, whatever, whatever it may be. You know, and, and again, starting to draw a little diagram of that. So that's, you know, just a few. I spo you know, it's a great, I think it's a nice example, you know, able to sort of bring together some of those different themes, in a way which, this becomes part of our information habits and practices in a way that serves us.

[00:55:47] **Jill Stoddard:** That's so great. That is so helpful because when I think about my own experience we have a, an Alexa show, and on the screen there's often like, create stories with your kids and, that's ai. And then, there's a lot of talk in the author's guild around AI and, and books and writing.

And then of course there's psychology and therapy and it feels so overwhelming and I get anxious and so then I just shut down. And some people probably do the opposite, where they overindulge in getting all the information to try to feel less anxious. And so this framework, these five powers really give you a way to take control of how you're going about mining and attending to that information.

And I think, talking about it in walking through that example, I could feel myself sort of relaxing, like, oh, okay, all right, I've got my tools now, but I can go and I can investigate this. It doesn't have to be scary. And it's, it's a way that I can really take charge of the way that I'm interacting with that information.

So thank you for doing that. I think that was a really helpful way to kind of wrap up all the things that we've been talking about. and actually , I wanna end with a quote. It's a little bit of a long quote, but I just loved this and I think it kind of brings us full circle because you were talking about abundance in the very beginning of the interview.

So here's a quote from the book, quote. Perhaps the most fundamental step to thriving is to reframe our perception of our experience from one of overload to that of abundance. With abundance, we have no obligations, only choices. Shifting your mindset can allow you to experience this platitude as joyful and

liberating treating the information landscapes we live in as places to play to taste and savor, to appreciate as a gift completely unparalleled in human history.

End quote. So I loved that. It kind of related to the example that to me it feels like it fits with the example that we just did. So maybe you can leave us with a few words of wisdom for reframing our perception from one of overload to abundance. 'cause I do think we often look at all of this information as overload.

And it wasn't till I read your book that I thought, oh yeah, that's quite a mindset shift there that I really like. So any, final parting words around abundance?

[00:58:00] **Ross Dawson:** I used to, you know, old enough to have, have to gone to libraries and fit through index cards to go, go to find a book on a shelf where it was put in the wrong place to, to find what I was trying to find. And I'm, I'm glad that I can find that information far more easily now, and we are information animals.

That is the nature of what it is to be human. You know, we, we seek information, we soak in information. We create information. Well, that's where the way we communicate. We are information animals, and I think, we need to acknowledge that and there are some pitfalls in that, but if we can learn to transcend them, and so I think this is a time when we have a choice.

I think the potential for our cognition to devolve, you know, we can, where we start to, think as, as some people have suggested, you know, we, we start to uh, think in more shallow ways and 'cause we're just getting caught in the, flow of information. But we can readily choose.

Somebody say, alright, well, I am going to choose to use this as a buzz. I'm going to take this as a source of being able to achieve what I want in my life. I'm going to refine my attention so that it's suited to this world. Humans are extraordinarily adaptable, amazingly adaptable, and. We've created an environment where we need to be cautious that we're not taking the path of, least resistance once we are choosing to become who we can be.

And I think this is a literally a time of human evolution and ones which we need to choose to take.

[00:59:42] **Jill Stoddard:** I love that. Well said. Well, thank you Ross so much. This was such an interesting conversation. I loved the book again, it's called *Thriving on Overload*. Ross Dawson, if people wanna find out more about you, do you have a website? Where can they go?

[00:59:56] **Ross Dawson:** So a lot of my work is as a professional speaker, and that's at ross dawson.com. But more generally, uh, the best place to go for my, just the work which I'm doing is amplifying cognition.com. So, in fact, after writing the book, thriving On Overload, I've. Focusing on the theme of humans plus ai, how humans and AI can work well together.

[01:00:22] **Jill Stoddard:** it really was an appropriate, appropriate example to use. Yeah.

[01:00:26] **Ross Dawson:** so this idea of amplifying cognition is saying this idea of, well, as in we improve our ways of thinking individually, but also we can amplify ourselves with, ai. And so this coming together with this idea of amplifying cognition, So that's now my current theme. And there's, you know, links to, learning communities and software and other resources that we have around that, uh,

[01:00:49] **Jill Stoddard:** can put it in our mind maps.

[01:00:52] **Ross Dawson:** uh, there's not much there at the moment, but, you know, but we are, but are trying to do visual.

So this idea of how do we visually assist our ability think and develop knowledge? And so yeah, there's a lot of resources there. And this, you know, I think so building on thriving, on overload. I think, you know, the next phase is this idea of how do we amplify our cognition ability to think and trying to share as as much useful resources as I can.

[01:01:19] **Jill Stoddard:** Very cool. Well, we will link to all of that in our show notes, so thanks again so much for being here.

[01:01:25] **Ross Dawson:** Great. Pleasure. Thanks.

[01:01:36] **Jill Stoddard:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock. If you enjoy our podcast, you can help us out by leaving a review or contributing on Patreon.

[01:01:43] **Emily Edlynn:** You can get more psychology tips by subscribing to our newsletter and connecting with us on social media.

[01:01:49] **Michael Herold:** We'd like to thank our podcast production manager, Jaidine Stoutt Williams.

[01:01:53] **Debbie Sorensen:** This podcast is for informational and entertainment purposes only and is not meant to be a substitute for mental health treatment. If you're looking for mental health treatment, please visit the resources page of our website, offtheclockpsych.com.

com. Uh, so Jill, you say in the interview that you still remember a huge chunk of the numbers of the Euler constant of $\log E$. So, um, why don't you surprise us?

[01:02:30] **Jill Stoddard:** Oh my gosh, you're testing me. Okay, are you ready for

[01:02:33] **Michael Herold:** Yes.

[01:02:35] **Jill Stoddard:** 2. 7, 1 8 2 45, 90, 45. And then we learned a couple more, but that's where my memory ends is there. So how many did I get? Let's see. 2. 7, 1 8 2 8, 1 8 2 8, 45, 90, 45. 16.

Oh, it might

[01:02:54] **Michael Herold:** it.

[01:02:54] **Jill Stoddard:** 2 3 7 might be the end. I don't know.

Somebody can check it, but I'm pretty sure up to there, I

[01:02:59] **Michael Herold:** we're going to, we're going to let our listeners check for, for the Euler constant. And, and then Google is going to be like, why are like 2 million people looking for the Euler constant on the same day? This is so weird.

[01:03:11] **Jill Stoddard:** And now you're going to start getting menopause content and stuff about the Euler concert

[01:03:17] **Michael Herold:** Excellent. This is how I want my life to look like. All right.