



Why An “Information Diet” is a Great Resolution for 2021.

Description

Every new year, like clockwork, we all start thinking about going on a diet. But what if instead of focusing on what we put into our bodies we got intentional about what we put into our minds? What if an information diet became our fitness goal for 2021?

Recently a friend sent me this excellent [article](#) by Anne-Laure Le Cunff in the Maker Mind Newsletter. In it she quoted Tim Ferriss on his use of the phrase “selective ignorance” to describe his approach to going on an information diet. This really resonated with me.

One of my favorite phrases is “garbage in, garbage out.” What we hear and read is what we think about and talk about. Often it drives what we end up doing. It really does shape our life. There may even be a link between too much smart phone use and too much exposure to “bad news” and the likelihood of anxiety and depression. So why are we not more careful about what we consume?

A lot of it comes down to how your smart phone is designed to work. It’s meant to be addictive and break your focus so that your mind skips from topic to topic like a rock across the surface of a pond. While I am not anti-technology, I do recognize the harm this causes. It keeps us from being able to do the deep work and make the smart decisions that lead to success.

Most of us instinctively know we take in too much information. A lot of it is mindless. If you’ve ever gone “down the rabbit hole” and binged on hours of celebrity gossip or social media surfing or one “bad news” article after another, you know it makes you feel slightly sick. It’s kind of like indulging in an all-you-can-eat buffet. We’ve all done this.

The good news is we don’t have to be held captive by the 24/7 flow of information. The first step is realizing you have a problem. Ironically, there are apps that can help. In the same way that apps like My Fitness Pal make you aware of how many calories you are taking in, there are mental fitness apps that can make you aware of how much mindless scrolling you are doing.

Selective ignorance isn’t just about cutting out mental “junk food.” There’s plenty of valuable information out there that you just don’t have time to spend your limited bandwidth on. This is especially true now that the pandemic is forcing so many speakers to be off the road. I have never seen so many free webinars in my life. While this can be a good thing it can also quickly fill up your day. The point is we need to be discerning.

On the other hand, this does not mean to cut out everything except what directly relates to your job. It is still important to be somewhat of a generalist. One way to think about it is to make sure the content you consume provides insights you can integrate into your work to make it richer and more meaningful. Here are just a few tips for your 2021 information diet:

First, realize the real problem isn’t what you’re doing, but what you’re *not* doing that you could be doing.

All that time you spend surfing the Internet or scrolling social media or watching TV is time you could be building your business or writing a book or spending quality time with kids and grandkids. When you think of all the missed opportunities lost to mindless consumption of useless information it may give you the motivation you need to make some real changes this year.

Prioritize what matters most to you and set goals around them. Then tune out information that distracts from those goals. This is a simple way to think about the problem. Rather than focusing so much on what you don't want (brain-draining media junk food), focus on what you *do* want to accomplish in 2021. Get intentional about reading and watching content that helps you achieve those goals.

Cut out 90 percent of your media "junk food." In your quest for selective ignorance think about what you *really* don't need to know. Do you really need to see what the social media over-sharers are posting five times a day? Does reading political rants add anything to your life? What about the onslaught of terrible, anxiety-producing news that's available anytime you want to see it? (I've seen this called "doom scrolling" and that is a very apt description.) We're probably not going to cut 100 percent of our consumption of media junk food, but I feel 90 percent is realistic.

Make a "read this instead" list. Do a little research on books you really do want to read this year and invest in a few of them. The next time you are tempted to log onto your social media account, pick one of them instead. Tell yourself you will read for 20 minutes. Once you get immersed in a good book the urge to consume empty brain calories will likely pass.

Set aside time for deep work. Make sure not to even glance at your phone during that window. I read it's a struggle for people to go even 10 minutes without unlocking their smart phone. Even if you only start with that amount of time devoted to intense concentration you can build up from there.

Establish "no electronics" hours after work. Sure, on occasion we need to do work-related things after the "official" workday is done. There are always exceptions. But for the most part we don't need to be on our smart phones, computers, and TVs all evening. Setting and enforcing some boundaries will free you up to do things like meditate, exercise, read a book, or just spend time with loved ones.

Get aware of how media addiction might be harming your relationships. This can be a sin of commission or of omission. We all know that person who multitasks while on a phone call or who looks at the phone during dinner or a meeting. But also, when we're constantly online or preoccupied with all the information that's flying at us, we can't be fully present with the people in our lives. And when we aren't present we miss the subtleties and cues that allow us to build relationships. We never take them to a deeper level.

These are only suggestions. I am a work in progress in this area, so I would love to hear your ideas on how to break the habits that lead to information overload and get more conscious and mindful about what you watch, read, and listen to. Thank you, and I wish you the best of luck on your 2021 information diet.

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