

# IN DEFENSE OF IDLENESS

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We speak with “Do Nothing” author Celeste Headlee about the cult of productivity, the realities of technological innovation, and avoiding burnout – one idle hour at a time.



When journalist, national bestselling author, and PBS host Celeste Headlee found herself utterly burnt-out in 2015, she knew a lifestyle change was in order. Headlee was tired all the time, and, to add insult to injury, she was getting sick much more often than she was used to. In an effort to reduce stress and fatigue, she quit her full-time job and became her own boss. After about six months, though, she realized that she was working more and longer hours than before, resulting in even deeper exhaustion. Determined to find the root cause of her overwhelming anxiety, Headlee dove into what she knew best: research. She wondered: Where did toxic hustle culture originate? And why did it still reign supreme, despite its obvious detriment to our well-being?

These were the beginnings of Headlee's latest book of nonfiction, the meticulously researched, bracingly honest, and deeply important "Do Nothing: How to Break Away from Overworking, Overdoing, and Underliving."

"It didn't start as a book," Headlee admits. "It started as a way for me to solve my own problem." Unsurprisingly, her problem was – and is – shared by countless others. "This book could save lives," gushes Elizabeth Gilbert in a blurb. It's also strangely kismet that "Do Nothing" was published in early March of 2020, at the beginning of lockdown, when we were suddenly required by law to stay home – and when our collective relationship to work changed drastically.

In conjunction with the paperback release of "Do Nothing," I spoke to Headlee over email about our unhealthy fetishization of productivity, the dangers of multitasking, and some simple steps we can take to slow down and enjoy our lives more fully.



**Annabel Graham:** In your opinion, how did we end up here — hyper-focused on work and addicted to productivity?

**Celeste Headlee:** We didn't get here just within the last few years. We didn't even get here just within one generation. We have been arriving at where we are right now for somewhere between 200 and 300 years, ever since the Industrial Revolution, when, for the first time, time became money. That's when it was no longer about what you made — that's not what was of value anymore. It was how much time you spent working. That had never really been true at any other time in human history.

I was actually very surprised that I ended up having to talk about the Industrial Revolution [in this book]. I initially thought this was a modern problem, and it's not. I honestly thought I would discover that technology was my problem, or that we were simply working too many hours. That's partly true, but we're not working more hours than they were about 20–30 years ago. In many cases we're working fewer hours. It turns out that our time perception — the accuracy with which we know where our time goes — is quite low. Time perception was something I had never heard of before [beginning my research for this project]. So it's been a long road for a few centuries, but here we are at this place where we can't go further this way. It's just not healthy anymore.

**AG:** You state in the opening pages of “Do Nothing” that the “cult of efficiency” has been around since long before the age of technology — that technology did not create the problem but serves to exacerbate it. What role *does* technology play, and how does it contribute to burnout? How can we use technology wisely?

**CH:** A lot of us believe that technology is the source of our problems. Most adults at this point — at least in the United States and Canada and the U.K. — admit that they are addicted to their cell phones. A lot of us believe, at least on some level, that if we could break away from our cell phones and from our social media and from our tech that we would feel better — that we would feel less stressed, less anxious. I tried that. I tried not using electronics, staying away from social media for an extended period of time — and it helped a little bit. But it's not the source of the problem, and so therefore getting rid of it didn't solve anything or cure my toxic productivity. Technology doesn't cause the problem — it just makes it easier for us to indulge our addiction to productivity. It makes it easy for us to stay connected and working all the time.

**AG:** You've spoken about having "multiple epiphany moments" while writing this book. Can you share some of those epiphanies?

**CH:** One of the first epiphanies for me was that I had more time than I thought. I came home one day very tired after work and flopped down on the couch and immediately thought, "There's no way I can cook dinner tonight. I'm way too tired and have to order takeout again." And I enjoy cooking; it has nothing to do with trying to avoid cooking. I looked into my kitchen and started to notice all the things that make life easier for me, that save time — my toaster oven and my microwave and my Instant Pot and my robot vacuum. I started adding up the time I have that my grandmother didn't have because she had to do all these things by hand, and I discovered that I had at least a part-time job's worth of extra time. That's when I realized that I needed to track my time — that I needed to really figure out where it was going.

Another big realization was just how thoroughly we have all been brainwashed by this idea that "our work is what gives us worth." You can follow the history of this brainwashing by looking at the propaganda of Edward Bernays [the "father of public relations" who pioneered the PR industry's use of mass psychology to mold opinions] during World War I. His mental manipulation techniques can be used in regular business. You begin to see workplaces and executives putting up posters that apply emotional pressure on workers — not to take vacation time, not to take sick days or that working longer hours is the equivalent of loyalty to one's country.

**AG:** Why shouldn't we multitask?

**CH:** It's not even so much that we shouldn't multitask; it's that we cannot multitask, and those who think that they are multitasking are deluding themselves. Sadly, they're doing more than deluding themselves. It's this illusion of efficiency — in other words, people often multitask because they think it helps them get more things done more quickly. That is not true. Research absolutely does not bear that out. In fact, some research shows that we lose up to 40 percent of our productive time to switch costs — those tiny little fractions of seconds that it takes us to switch from one tab in our browser to another, or to look at our email really quickly and then go back to the memo that we're writing, or to check our phone really fast because we got a text. We lose up to 40 percent of our productive time to those little spaces when our brains have to refocus.

Also, while you are trying to multitask, the quality of both tasks you're doing goes down by double digits, and your IQ drops by 11 to 12 points. It's extremely stressful for your brain to try to force it to do something that it cannot do for hours at a time. We know that it's going to make you feel more exhausted and more stressed, but new research also shows that it may actually be doing lasting damage to your brain. People who are heavy multitaskers actually see a decrease in brain density, especially in the hippocampus. So, we can't multitask, and we shouldn't try.





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**AG:** What are some steps we can take to slow down and streamline our daily work habits? How can we do the work we need to, while also leaving time for enjoying life and connecting with others?

**CH:** I want people to stop evaluating everything they do according to how productive they are. I want people to stop separating every part of their life into checklists and accomplishments, and I want people to set time aside to do nothing. The title of the book is quite literal. I want people to find time during the day to do nothing. That doesn't mean you're not actively doing something. You could be walking around a park, but you're not doing anything productive. You're not doing something that can be shared on social media. You're not doing anything that's going to increase your brand or develop your skills or add to your CV — nothing that will make you a better worker or more successful. You're just doing things that you enjoy doing, for no other reason.

If you think you don't have time, I have a couple responses to that. First, a lot of people are in the same boat that I am in — they actually have more free time than they realize. So it's very important that you track your time and figure out where all your time is going, just as I did. The other thing I'd say is that even if you're the kind of person who's working multiple jobs in order to make ends meet — I used to be one of those people — you have ten minutes here and there. Everybody has five or ten minutes, and you can use that time. Instead of staring at your cell phone, which just exhausts you further and makes your brain and body think you're still working, set that phone down and walk around the block.

