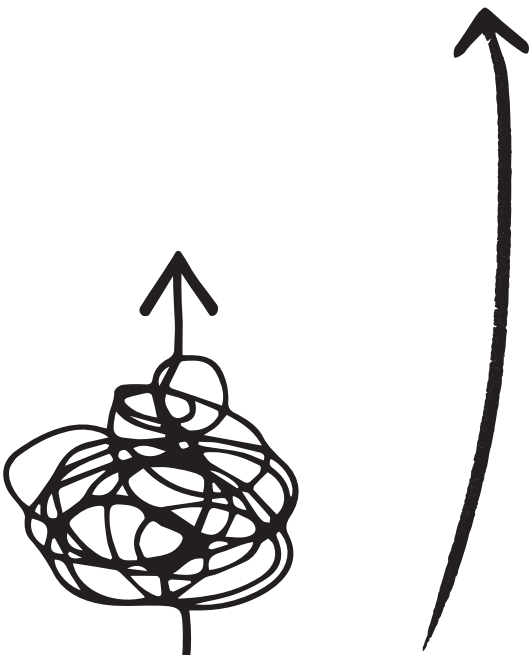
From the author of *Essentialism*, the million-copy bestseller that started a global movement

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Make It Easier to Do What Matters Most

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MAKE IT EASIER TO DO WHAT MATTERS MOST

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For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

—Matt. 11:30

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Introduction

NOT EVERYTHING HAS TO BE SO HARD

Let me tell you the story of Patrick McGinnis.

He had done all the things he was supposed to do. He had checked all the boxes. He'd graduated from Georgetown University. Then from Harvard Business School. He'd joined the ranks of a top finance and insurance company.

He put in the long workdays he felt were expected of him: to the tune of eighty hours per week, even on vacations and holidays. He never left the office before his boss; sometimes it felt as though he never left the office at all.

He traveled so much for work that he earned the highest frequent flier status on Delta, a level so high it didn't even have a name. Meanwhile, he was on the boards of four companies on three continents. Once, when he refused to stay home sick, he had to leave a board meeting three times to throw up in the bathroom. When he returned, a colleague said he looked green. But, still, he powered through.

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He had been taught that hard work is the key to everything you want in life. It was a part of the New England mindset: your work ethic was evidence of your character. And, ever the overachiever, he'd taken this to the next level. He didn't just think that working endless hours would lead to success; he thought it *was* success. If you didn't stay late at work, you must not have a very important job.

He assumed that in the end, his long hours would pay off. Then one day he woke up to find himself working for a bankrupt company. That company was AIG and the year was 2008. His stock had fallen 97 percent. All the late nights at the office, all the countless red-eye flights to Europe, South America, and China, all the missed birthdays and celebrations, had been for naught.

In the months after the financial crisis hit, McGinnis couldn't get out of bed. He started having night sweats. His vision blurred, both literally and figuratively. He couldn't see clearly for months. He was floundering. Lost.

He was sick with stress. His doctor ran some tests. He felt like the tragic character Boxer the Horse in George Orwell's *Animal Farm,* described as the farm's most dedicated laborer whose answer to every problem, every setback, was "I will work harder"—that is, until he collapsed from overwork and was sent to the knackers' yard.

So on the cab ride back from the doctor's office McGinnis made what he called "a bargain with God." He promised, "If I survive this, then I will really make some changes."

"Working longer and harder had been the solution to every problem," McGinnis said. But all of a sudden, he realized, "The marginal return of working harder was, in fact, negative."

So what could he do? He had three options. He could carry on and likely work himself to death. He could aim lower and give up on his goals. Or he could find an easier way to achieve the success he wanted.

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He chose the third option.

He stepped down from his role at AIG but stayed on as a consultant. He stopped working eighty hours a week. He started going home at five. He no longer emailed on the weekends.

He also stopped treating sleep like a necessary evil. He started walking, running, and eating better. He lost twenty-five pounds. He started enjoying his life, and his work, again.

Around this time, he was inspired by a friend who was investing in start-ups—not a lot of money, just small checks here and there. It piqued Patrick's interest.

He invested in a couple of companies. He has a twenty-five-fold return on his portfolio of investments. Even during tough economic times he's felt sanguine about his finances because he isn't dependent on a single source of income.

He has made more money in half the hours he used to work. And the type of work he is doing is more rewarding, less intrusive. He said, "It doesn't even feel like work anymore."

What he learned from this experience was this: When you simply can't try any harder, it's time to find a different path.

What about you? Do you ever feel as though

- you're running faster but not moving any closer to your goals?
- you want to make a higher contribution but lack the energy?
- you're teetering right on the edge of burnout?
- things are so much harder than they ought to be?

If you answered yes to any or all of these, this book is for you.

These people are disciplined and focused. They are engaged and motivated. And yet, they are utterly exhausted.

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The Effortless Way

There is an ebb and flow to life. Rhythms are in everything we do. There are times to push hard and times to rest and recuperate. But these days many of us are pushing harder and harder all the time. There is no cadence, only grinding effort.

We live in a time of great opportunity. But there is something about modern life that's like trying to hike at high altitude. Our brains are foggy. The ground beneath our feet seems unsteady. The air is thin and it can feel surprisingly exhausting to make even an inch of progress. Perhaps it's the endless fear and uncertainty about the future. Perhaps it's the loneliness and isolation. Perhaps it's financial worries or hardships. Perhaps it's all the responsibilities, all the pressures that can suffocate us on a daily basis. Whatever the cause, the result is that we're often working twice as hard only to achieve half as much.

Life is hard, really hard, in all sorts of ways, ranging from the complicated to the weighty, the sad to the exhausting. Disappointments are hard. Paying the bills is hard. Strained relationships are hard. Raising children is hard. Losing a loved one is hard. There are periods in our lives when every day can be hard.

To try to pretend that a book can eliminate these hardships would be fanciful. I didn't write this book to downplay these burdens; I wrote it to help you lighten them. This book may not make every hard thing easy to approach and carry, but I believe it can make many hard things easier.

It's normal to feel overwhelmed and exhausted by the big, weighty challenges. And it's equally normal to feel overwhelmed and exhausted by the everyday frustrations and annoyances. It happens to us all. And these days it seems like it's happening to more of us, more often than it used to.

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Strangely, some of us respond to feeling exhausted and overwhelmed by vowing to work even harder and longer. It doesn't help that our culture glorifies burnout as a measure of success and self-worth. The implicit message is that if we aren't perpetually exhausted, we must not be doing enough. That great things are reserved for those who bleed, for those who almost break. Crushing volume is somehow now the goal.

Burnout is not a badge of honor.

It is true that hard work can equal better results. But this is true only to a point. After all, there's an upper limit to how much time and effort we can invest. And the more depleted we get, the more our return on that effort dwindles. This cycle can continue until we are burned out and exhausted, and *still* haven't produced the results we really want. You probably know this. You may be experiencing it right now.

But what if, instead, we took the opposite approach? If instead of pushing ourselves to, and in some cases well past, our limit, we sought out an easier path?

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The Dilemma

After my first book, *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less,** was published, I hit the speaking circuit. I had the opportunity to travel the country giving keynotes, signing books, and sharing a message that was close to my heart. My wife, Anna, loved that I often took one of the children with me on these adventures, and so did I. On one such trip, I arrived at my book signing at the scheduled time to find that three hundred people had lined up around the corner and the store had run out of books—which had never happened before at an event. That year was a blur of airport lounges, Ubers, and hotel rooms, to which I would return in the evenings, exhilarated and exhausted, and call down for room service. The success of *Essentialism* had changed everything.

People who had read or listened to the book three, five, or seventeen times wrote to tell me about how the book had changed their life, or in some cases even saved it. Each of them wanted to share their stories with me—and I wanted to hear them.

I wanted to speak in front of rooms full of people who were eager to become Essentialists. I wanted to respond to every email I received from readers. I wanted to write personalized messages to everyone who asked me to sign copies of the book. I wanted to be present and gracious with every person who had a story to tell about their experience with *Essentialism*.

Even better than being the "Father of Essentialism," was being a father, now to four children. My family epitomizes everything that's essential to me, so I wanted to invest in it fully. I wanted to be a true partner to Anna and to make space for her to pursue her own goals and dreams. To really listen to the children whenever they

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wanted to talk, however inconvenient those times often seemed. I wanted to be there to celebrate their successes. I wanted to coach them and encourage them to achieve whatever goals felt most essential to them, whether that was to direct a movie or become an Eagle Scout. I wanted to play board games together, to wrestle, to swim together, to play tennis, to go to the beach, to do movie night with popcorn and treats.

To make time for such things, I had already stripped away many nonessentials: I'd resisted writing a new book even though I'd been told I was "supposed to" do so every eighteen months. I'd taken a break from teaching my class at Stanford. I'd set aside my plans to build a workshop business.

I'd never been more selective in my life. The problem was, it still felt like too much. And not only that: I felt a call to increase my contribution even while I had run out of space.

I was striving to model Essentialism. To live what I teach. But it wasn't enough. I could feel the cracks in an assumption I had always held to: that to achieve everything we want without becoming impossibly busy or overextended, we simply need to discipline ourselves to only say "yes" to essential activities and "no" to everything else. But now I found myself wondering: what does one do when they've stripped life down to the essentials and it's *still* too much?

Around that time, I was teaching a group of extremely thoughtful entrepreneurs when someone had referenced the "big rocks theory."

It's the well-known story of a teacher who picks up a large empty jar. She pours in some small pebbles at the bottom. Then she tries to place some larger rocks on top. The problem is that they don't fit.

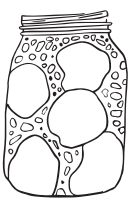
The teacher then gets a new empty container of the same size. This time she puts the large rocks in first. Then the small pebbles in second. This time they fit.

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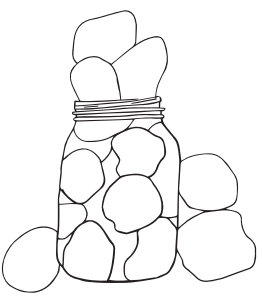
This is, of course, a metaphor. The big rocks represent the most essential responsibilities like health, family, and relationships. The small pebbles are less important things like work and career. The sand are things like social media and doom swiping.

The lesson is similar to the one I'd always ascribed to: if you prioritize the most important things first, then there will be room in your life not only for what matters most but also for other things too. But do the reverse, and you'll get the trivial things done but run out of space for the things that really matter.

But as I sat in my hotel room that night, I wondered: What do you do if there are too many big rocks? What if the absolutely essential work simply does not fit within the limits of the container?



How it's supposed to work



But what if there are too many big rocks?

As I pondered this, I got a video call. It was my son Jack calling from my wife's phone. That was unusual and immediately got my attention. I noticed that his face was drained of its color. His tone was urgent. He looked scared. I could hear my wife's voice in the background instructing Jack to "turn the phone around" so I could see what was going on.

He tried to explain: "Eve . . . something really wrong. . . . She

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was just eating and then her head started moving. . . . Mom . . . told me to call you."

Eve was having a massive tonic-clonic seizure.

The adrenaline got me through what I did next: hastily packing and taking the red-eye flight back to my family. But what would follow in the days and weeks ahead left me emotionally drained. There were the hospital visits. The consultations with medical experts. The endless phone calls from friends and family who wanted to know how we were holding up and how they could help. Meanwhile, I discovered that all my other responsibilities didn't miraculously disappear just because I was in the middle of a crisis. There were still keynotes to reschedule. Flights to cancel. Essential emails to answer.

The walls closed in around me. I was burdened beyond belief. It was suffocating at times. I wanted to collapse under it all. It was torture.

This went on for many weeks. Eventually, I recognized the situation for what it was: I was burned out. I had literally written the book on how to be an Essentialist, and here I was, overwhelmed and spread far too thin. I felt self-imposed pressure to be the perfect Essentialist, but there were no nonessentials left to eliminate. It all mattered. Finally I said to Anna: "I'm not well."

Here is what I learned: I was doing all the right things for the right reasons. But I was doing them in the wrong way.

I was like a weightlifter trying to lift using the muscles in my lower back. A swimmer who hadn't learned to breathe properly. A baker who was painstakingly kneading each loaf of bread by hand.

I suspect you know exactly what I'm talking about. I'm guessing you know what it's like to feel highly engaged by your work but on the edge of exhaustion. To be doing the best you can but still feel it isn't enough. To have more essentials than you can fit into your day. To want to do more but simply don't have the space. To be mak-

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ing progress on things that matter but too weary to derive any joy from your successes.

For you who gives so much, I say this: there is another way.

Not everything has to be so hard. Getting to the next level doesn't have to mean chronic exhaustion. Making a contribution doesn't have to come at the expense of your mental and physical health.

When the essentials become too hard to handle, you can either give up on them or you can find an easier way.

Essentialism was about doing the right things; *Effortless* is about doing them in the right way.

Since writing *Essentialism,* I have had a rare opportunity to talk with thousands of people, some in person, some via social media, and some of them on my podcast, about the challenges they face in trying to live a life that really matters. It has been a multiyear listening tour. Never in my life have I had an opportunity to listen to so many people sharing, so vulnerably, how they struggle to do what matters most.

What I learned is this: we all want to do what matters. We want to get in shape, save for a home or for retirement, be fulfilled in our careers, and build closer relationships with people we work and live with. The problem isn't a lack of motivation; if it were, we would all already be at our ideal weight, live within our means, have our dream job, and enjoy deep and meaningful relationships with all the people who matter most to us.

Motivation is not enough because it is a limited resource. To truly make progress on the things that matter, we need a whole new way to work and live.

Instead of trying to get better results by pushing ever harder, we can make the most essential activities the easiest ones.

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For some, the idea of working less hard feels uncomfortable. We feel lazy. We fear we'll fall behind. We feel guilty for not "going the extra mile" each time. This mindset, conscious or not, may have its roots in the Puritan idea that the act of doing hard things always has an inherent value. Puritanism went beyond embracing the hard; it extended to also distrusting the easy. But achieving our goals efficiently isn't unambitious. It's smart. It's a liberating alternative to both hard work and laziness: one that allows us to preserve our sanity while still accomplishing everything we want.

What could happen in your life if the easy but pointless things became harder and the essential things became easier?

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What could happen in your life if the easy but pointless things became harder and the essential things became easier? If the essential projects you've been putting off became enjoyable, while the pointless distractions lost their appeal completely? Such a shift would stack the deck in our favor. It would change everything. It *does* change everything.

That's the value proposition of *Effortless*. It's about a whole new way to work and live. A way to achieve more with ease—to achieve more *because* you are at ease. A way to lighten life's inevitable burdens, and get the right results without burning out.

Nothing but Net

This book is organized into three simple parts:

Part I reintroduces you to your Effortless State.
Part II shows how to take Effortless Action.
Part III is about achieving Effortless Results.

Each of these builds upon the last.

Think of an NBA player stepping up to take a free throw.

First, they get into "the zone." They find the "dot" on the free throw line, dribble the ball a few times: a ritual to help them get completely focused. You can almost see them clearing their heads—letting go of all emotions, blocking out the noise of the crowd. This is what I call the *Effortless State*.

Second, they bend their knees, bring their front elbow to the right angle, and then "lift, flick, and pop." They have practiced this precise, flowing movement until it has sunk deep into their muscle memory. They try without trying, fluid and smooth in their execution. This is *Effortless Action*.

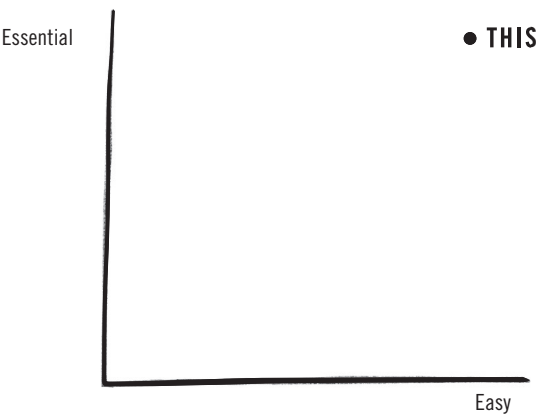
Third, the ball arcs through the air and goes into the basket. It

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makes that satisfying swish: the sound of a perfectly executed free throw. It's not a fluke. They can do it again and again. This is what it feels like to achieve *Effortless Results.*

Part I: Effortless State

When our brains are at full capacity, everything feels harder. Fatigue slows us down. Outdated assumptions and emotions make new information harder to process. The countless distractions of daily life make it difficult to see what matters clearly.



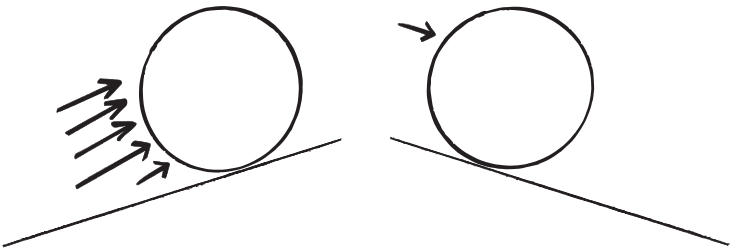
So the first step toward making things more effortless is to clear the clutter in our heads and our hearts.

You have likely experienced this before. It's when you feel rested, at peace, and focused. You're fully present in the moment. You have a heightened awareness of what matters here and now. You feel capable of taking the right action.

This part of the book provides actionable ways to return to the Effortless State.

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The Model



	Exhausting	Effortless
Think	Anything worth doing takes tremendous effort	The most essential things can be the easiest ones
Do	Try too hard: overcomplicate, overengineer, overthink, and overdo	Find the easier path
Get	Burnout and none of the results you want	The right results without burning out

Part II: Effortless Action

Once we are in the Effortless State, it becomes easier to take Effortless Action. But we may still encounter complexity that makes it hard to start or advance an essential project. Perfectionism makes essential projects hard to start, self-doubt makes them hard to fin-

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ish, and trying to do too much, too fast, makes it hard to sustain momentum.

This part of the book is all about simplifying the process to make the work itself easier to do.

Part III: Effortless Results

When we take Effortless Action, we make it easier to get the results we want.

There are two types of results: linear and residual.

Whenever your efforts yield a one-time benefit, you are getting a *linear result*. Every day you start from zero; if you don't put in the effort today then you don't get the result today. It's a one-to-one ratio; the amount of effort you put in equals the results received. But what if those results could flow to us repeatedly, without further effort on our part?

With *residual results* you put in the effort once and reap the benefits again and again. Results flow to you while you are sleeping. Results flow to you when you are taking the day off. Residual results can be virtually infinite.

Effortless Action alone produces linear results. But when we apply Effortless Action to high-leverage activities, the return on our effort compounds, like interest on a savings account. This is how we produce residual results.

Producing a great result is good. Producing a great result with ease is better. Producing a great result with ease again and again is best. That is what part III of the book shows how to do.

Anything Can Be Made Effortless, but Not Everything

Discovering the effortless way of living is like using special polarized sunglasses while fly-fishing. Without them, the glare on the water makes it difficult to see anything swimming below the sur-

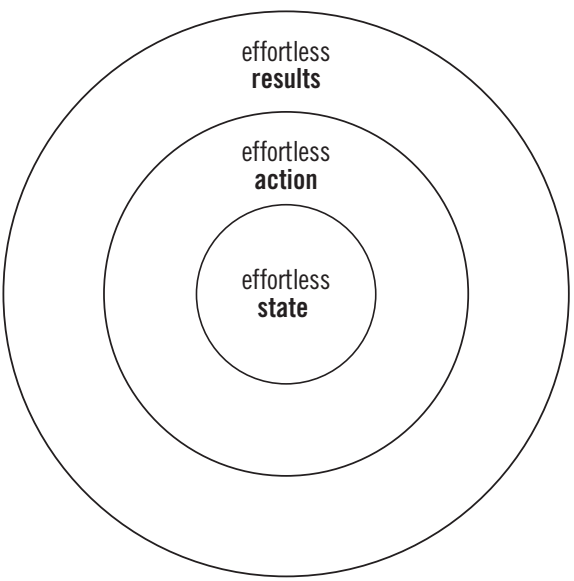
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face. But as soon as you put them on, their angled surface filters out the horizontal light waves coming off the water, blocking the glare. Suddenly, you can see all the fish underneath.

When we're accustomed to doing things the hard way, it's like being blinded by the glare coming off the water. But once you start putting these ideas into practice you will start to see that the easier way was there all along, just hidden from your view.

We've all experienced how the effortless way can feel. For example, have you ever

- been in a relaxed state and found it easier to get in "the zone"?
- stopped trying so hard and actually got better results?
- done something once that has benefited you multiple times?



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