

# OPEN

LIVING WITH AN  
EXPANSIVE MIND IN  
A DISTRACTED WORLD

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# INTRODUCTION

It's 5:55 am on an ordinary day. My alarm rings, breaking me out of a deep sleep. I'm slow to get up, groggy even. But eventually, I rise out of bed. I brush my teeth and get a drink of warm water. And that's when it happens.

I feel my mind pulled toward something. I walk trance-like to the kitchen. In the darkness of the early morning, I find the object of my deepest, waking desire. It's not a bowl of cereal or a cup of coffee. It's not a hot shower or a brisk morning walk.

It's my phone.

I touch it gently with my index finger, like stirring a baby from a nap. Its lock screen glows. I'm mesmerized.

I use the radiant hues of my home screen to guide me through the darkness to the toilet in an adjacent room. I lower myself onto the cold porcelain seat. Suddenly, I'm wide awake, ready for my virtual journey to begin.

*Weather App:* I like to start here. I'm not sure why. I guess there's just something comforting about knowing if it's going to be sunny, cloudy, or snowy. Current temp outside: -2°F. *Damn that's cold.*

*ESPN App:* Today's big story? An eccentric NFL quarterback just divulged the lurid details of his twelve-day panchakarma Ayurvedic cleanse on Instagram. "It's disgusting," writes an outraged NFL commentator.

*Email App:* This might just be the most perplexing stop on the journey. I tap in, knowing that most of what I see will cause me great stress and anxiety—that well over 90 percent of my inbox will consist of random work requests or marketing emails. And yet, somehow,

I'm surprised when I scan through my emails only to find that today, like every day, there's no life-changing news waiting for me. Just a bunch of stuff I now have to do.

*News App:* Before I even press my finger on the icon, I feel a preemptive hit of energy surging. It's a strange cocktail of excitement, outrage, disgust, and despair. Today's headlines deliver. Two countries on the other side of the world are on the verge of war. The markets are roiled. Politicians clash over what to do. This is outrage porn at its finest. Skimming just a few articles lights up my emotions like a dumpster fire. It's exciting, except that it's not because it's horrifying, and yet it's also interesting, but at the same time totally depressing. After just a few minutes of this, I feel like the entire human race might be going down in the heat of these flames. And I can't seem to stop watching.

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Eventually, the time-pressure of this weekday morning kicks in. I walk quickly to the kitchen and fix breakfast for my daughter while she practices the violin. I feel a shift from the swirl of colorful lights and controversy to the experience of standing in front of my kitchen counter on a Tuesday. But now, I'm lost in a new, more internal, source of distraction: the random wandering thoughts of my own mind.

In one moment, I'm cutting the strawberries, watching the serrated knife glide through the fleshy red-white texture of each fruit. In the next, I'm thinking. *My throat. It's raw, dry. Strep throat? Maybe. It's probably fine. Or maybe . . . it's cancer. Throat cancer. I think that's a thing. Definitely a thing. Not cancer. Stop thinking everything is cancer.*

I grab the Rice Krispies out of the pantry and watch as they tumble into the white ceramic bowl. *School drop-off after breakfast. Team meeting at noon. What about lunch? During the meeting? Should I? Maybe. No one else is eating. But they're in different time zones. They don't need to eat. Oh, but the way they look at me when I'm eating on Zoom.*

Now I'm arranging my daughter's edible kids' vitamins in a perfect cluster at the edge of her plate. *Lunch though. You know what, screw it, I'm doing it. I'm eating during the meeting. Is that really so bad? Noon is lunchtime. Lunch is when people eat. Everyone knows that. Wait, is it at noon?*

I pull out my phone and check my calendar app. *Yep, starts at noon.*

Face down in my screen, I somehow miss that my daughter has started breakfast. I slide the phone back into my front pocket and sit down. For fifteen minutes or so, we eat, talk, and laugh. If I'm being generous, I'd call myself 75 percent present. I'm listening, and I'm here. But I'm still processing the news of the world and can't stop thinking about the menu for my 12 pm Zoom meal.

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I'm ninety minutes into this average, ordinary day. Nothing bad has happened to me. No one close to me is dying or in great pain. But I'm already living between so many worlds that I'm not sure where I am. Yes, I'm here in my kitchen. But I'm also at the border of a looming land war, inside my jammed inbox, and mentally rehearsing the sequence of neon-colored calendar invites that will soon shape my day.

In a word, I'm closed. I'm feeling the subtle urge to withdraw from my wife and daughter, to withdraw from the discomfort I feel in such uncertain times, and to withdraw from the life that's happening before me.

It's subconscious and subtle. But today, like every day, I've arranged my life around a Faustian bargain: I'm willing to scale down the range of experiences available to me—the peaks and valleys of my inner life—so long as I don't have to come into direct contact with the frustration, the discomfort, the boredom, and the anxiety that comes with living in this crazy world.

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How about you? Do you ever find yourself seeking refuge in a screen or a social media feed or news about the world that makes your blood boil?

Do you ever feel closed, like you're subtly pulling away from the everyday moments of life?

This habit feels unique to our modern age. And yet it's so ordinary, so invisible, that we're usually not even aware it's happening and that it's happening on so many levels, all at once.

When it comes to the causes of closure, two things stand out. The first is screen addiction. In each moment, we're bombarded with texts, emails, breaking news alerts, and social media updates. But this isn't the real problem. The real problem isn't that we're interrupted by these distractions. It's that we crave them. We long for these seductive mind snacks the way a gambling addict longs for a place at the rail of the craps table.

The second is political polarization. Our neighbors who held different beliefs about politics or religion or guns used to "have a different perspective." Now they're "deluded," "insane," and sometimes even "the enemy." Fueled by conspiracy theories, siloed media, and outrage, we've closed down to each other.

Screen addiction closes us off to our inner world. Polarization closes us off to our outer world. And it's no coincidence that these two forces have captured the modern mind at the very same time.

There's a feedback loop happening here. Our craving for distraction draws us into digital worlds where machine learning algorithms serve up the most outrageous, most inflammatory content. This stokes the rage we feel toward all those "morons" out there who just don't seem to get it, which amplifies our desire to stay here in screenland, searching for new ways to take our mind off the horror of it all. And on and on it goes.

The habit of closing to life isn't new. In his account of nineteenth century America, for instance, the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville warned of this emerging urge to turn away from our own minds and from each other. In these conditions, he said, "Pleasures are more intense" but "hopes and desires are more often disappointed, souls are more disturbed and anxious."<sup>1</sup>

But nowadays, it feels like we're experiencing something more like closing on steroids. We're now living in a time when the high-tech

tools we use to order groceries or share our latest family photos have transformed this age-old tendency to turn away from life into a behavioral addiction.

If you don't believe me, just look around next time you leave your home. You'll see parents at the park with their kids, staring into their phones. You'll see couples on date night at an expensive restaurant, staring into their phones. You'll see the driver of an oncoming car, the one drifting dangerously across the double yellow lines, staring into their phone.

Most of us don't want to live like this, tethered to distraction and division. We have other, more meaningful values, plans, and projects. But none of that seems to matter. We just keep coming back to this world of virtual titillation.

We say, for example, that we want to feel more present and fully alive but end up on TikTok. We say we want connection but send surreptitious mealtime texts. We say we want focus but can't resist the Pavlovian urge to stay on top of the latest breaking news update.

This is our modern predicament. On a deep level, the freedom to direct our time and attention seems to be slipping away.

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I wrote this book because, with each passing year, I've felt this subtle urge to close growing inside me. It didn't happen suddenly. Nor did it ruin my marriage, destroy my career, or leave me battling a terminal illness.

No, it happened so slowly as to be imperceptible from one day to the next. It felt like living in a house where the ceilings gradually descend at a rate of several inches per year. At this pace, nothing changes from one moment to the next. But over time, you can't help but notice, something is different. There's less space in here. The whole backdrop of life is somehow getting smaller.

This is what closure feels like. It's this strange experience of witnessing the inner space of our mind begin to shrink. And along with this contraction comes something else: the sobering realization that we're

missing out on some of life's most meaningful experiences—the joy, the heartbreak, and the connection—all because we're just too busy gorging on quick hits of digital pleasure and outrage.

Witnessing myself close down to life like this was unnerving. But here's what was even more disturbing. This wasn't supposed to happen to someone like me. I had spent the previous twenty-five years training my mind, all so I could avoid this kind of trap. I studied philosophy at Stanford, got a PhD at Princeton, and taught as a professor for four years. I then spent the next fifteen years devoted to the disciplined daily practice of meditation and yoga. I went on long silent retreats in the woods. I did yoga teacher trainings. I wrote books about mindfulness. And I spent my days coaching busy professionals on how to resist this urge to close by managing their attention more skillfully.

I was supposed to be the expert here, the one who knew exactly how to see through this fog of closure. But here I was, carving out time each day to meditate, still caught in the grip of an increasingly closed mind.

So I started to wonder: is there some other way to interrupt this irresistible urge to close?

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The search for answers led me on the journey of a lifetime. Yes, it resulted in this book. But it also led me down paths I never thought I would explore.

After years of failed efforts to limit my own screen time, I spent several days bingeing on email, news, social media, and conspiracy theories all day, every day, to see what happens when we stop trying to resist the seductive glow of our screens and dive headfirst into the rabbit hole of digital distraction instead.

Despite my lifelong fear of drugs and losing control, I ended up opening to many of my deepest emotional scars and darkest traumas during two years of psychedelic-assisted therapy with one of the nation's leading experts on these compounds.



Despite my fear of guns and contempt for the National Rifle Association, I ended up opening to the other side, attending an NRA training where I earned my concealed carry permit and encountered fervent gun rights supporters who became friends rather than enemies.

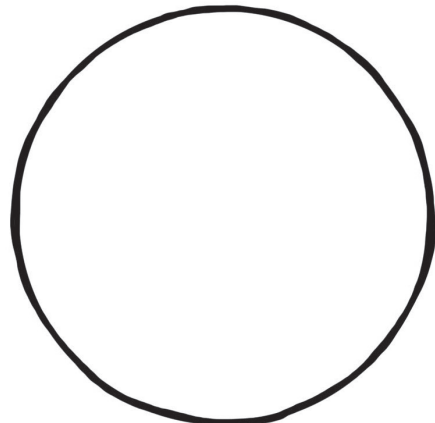
Despite my anxieties around a major gum surgery, I turned down the sedation cocktail and opened by meditating through a grueling three-hour procedure, a decision that taught me a painful lesson about the limits of opening.

And while sitting at the hospital with my grandma Hilda (to whom I've dedicated this book), watching her open to the mystery of death, I learned a spiritual secret for what might just be the ultimate practice of opening.

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These experiences and the many others you will read about in this book helped me understand that we *can* interrupt the momentum of a closed mind and that, when we do, something amazing happens: our mind gets bigger.

  
CLOSED MIND

  
OPEN MIND

Why does the size of our mind matter? And what does that even mean?

It *matters* because creating space in the mind is no small thing. This mental space is the space of possibility, curiosity, and, ultimately, the space of freedom.

Answering the question of *what it means* to open is more difficult. This expansion, after all, doesn't occur in physical space. Our brain doesn't get bigger when the mind opens. Instead, it's an expansion that occurs in the more mysterious realm of consciousness.

This is why it's so difficult to capture in words on a page. Opening to life like this isn't an idea. It's an experience. It's something we feel, an atmosphere of awareness that shapes how we see everything.

So an analogy might be useful. Some think the open mind is vast and spacious like the sky, while the closed mind feels more like living in a small prison cell, an austere enclosure so tiny that we forget we're locked inside. Your mind here is the vast sky or the small jail cell. The open space surrounding you represents its size.

This analogy gets close, but it doesn't fully capture the complexities of closure. When we lose ourselves in screens, social media feeds, and outrageous commentary about our political foes, we're not experiencing the torture of solitary confinement. If anything, we're experiencing the opposite: a continuous social string of dopamine-induced pleasure hits.

So what does it actually feel like to inhabit a small and closed mind? I think it's more like living in a plush Four Seasons Hotel suite, with one slight catch: the door out happens to be sealed shut.

This analogy illuminates the real, more complicated trade-offs between living open and closed because, in one sense, it's paradise on earth in here. Why would you ever want to leave? Unlimited room service arrives whenever you want through a small slot in the wall. You've got free Wi-Fi, thousands of cable channels, a jetted tub with lavender bath salts, a soft terry cloth robe with matching slippers, and a stocked mini bar. You have everything you need here to feel amazing.

But there is one thing you don't have: the ability to leave. You're stuck here in this cozy cage of pleasure. You can't explore the vast world

beyond these walls. Nor do you even want to because it's so scary out there and so wonderfully pleasant in here.

Our modern experience of closing to distraction and outrage is eerily similar. When we close and the mind gets small, our access to pleasure doesn't go away. If anything, it expands. We can post, play, comment, like, and surf all day (and it's free!). We can even order, on-demand, the bath salts, the terry cloth robe with matching slippers, and all the rest of the Four Seasons amenities to our doorstep with the tap of a button. We can plumb these bottomless depths of comfort for the rest of our lives. But the deeper we dive, the smaller the emotional range of life gets, the more freedom slips away. At some point, we may even forget that there's a whole life waiting for us beyond these walls.

This is the closed, small-mind experience of life.

What happens when we open and the mind gets bigger? We get freedom. We can now unseal the door to that luxurious but small suite of the mind and venture outside. In this more expansive space, there's still pleasure but also pain, joy, sadness, fear, boredom, and all sorts of other raw feelings waiting to be experienced.

It may seem insane to want to feel these things because, well, they don't feel "good." But something life-changing happens when we do. We no longer have to recoil and close down the moment we meet these internal barriers. We're now free to approach and even explore what lies beyond them.

In practical terms, this may give you the freedom to take that risk in your career, send that letter, have that hard conversation, change that relationship, or travel to that place you've always dreamed of going. It may give you the freedom to expand your social circle beyond a bunch of people who look and think just like you. Or it may simply give you the freedom to feel a little bit more available and present in life's ordinary moments: walking the dog, waiting for your inbox to refresh, or saying goodbye to your child in the hug-and-go line.

Of course, in an uncertain world like ours, this idea of intentionally opening the mind to such a wide range of experiences may sound radical, dangerous even. But it doesn't mean living a life without

boundaries. It doesn't mean that you give away all your money, keep your doors unlocked at night, and allow the world to walk all over you. The goal isn't to get rid of these limits in the outer world that keep you safe. The goal is to expand beyond the limits in your inner world that make life feel small.

With an open mind, in other words, you can still say "no" to the endless requests, invitations, and demands that the world throws your way. But you now have the power to say "yes" to the full spectrum of experiences happening on the inside. And that makes it so you don't have to retreat quite so often to that small, safe, suffocating place.

This is what it means to be open. This is what it means to be free.

But *how* can we open more to life? This is the essential question of *Open*. It's a question we will answer together by exploring new science, age-old practices, and experiences designed to see what insights we find at the outer edges of opening to life.

The goal in mapping out this inner terrain is to give you the tools to break this habit of closing down when life gets crazy and to help you discover your own practices for opening to a more expansive life.