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Doctor Z, you're one of our very first guests on Career Contessa, which I told you before we started recording. I thought it was in 2020.

It was in 2018, I. So this is going to kind of seem like a silly question, but what has changed in your work since then and led you to writing, finding focus, which I almost feel like I should rephrase that to like what hasn't changed in your life since forever ago. But anyway, that's how I phrased it. You know what?

Change is a constant. I think that, you know, the sooner we realize that being human means that things always change and are always shifting is the moment we begin to kind of like equalize and normalize or are nervous system to just accept that, like things fluctuate. I was just talking to a friend this morning and she's like, it must be so crazy to have quiet in the house that the kids are back in school.

I'm like, yeah, but I'm just waiting for something to like, drop or come up and like, because, like, that's what you learn right now. I'm, I'm, you know, three kids in. So I know, I know what to expect. But it's like it's always shifting anyway. Yeah. You know, a lot has changed. I have three children now.

And I believe when we last spoke, I had to. Yeah, we had, we had I mean, everything monumentally shifted after, you know, I mean, my, my third was born a week before the Covid lockdown and, it, you know, everything shifted. I think I, you know, I, I think over time in the work I was doing on resilience because we spoke about my, my first book at the time, or do we even talk about my book when the book came out and the 21 days resilience I'm trying to write, I think, yeah, I think we did talk about it.

And I mean, we've talked from everything from positive psychology to resilience right now. Focus. You've got really important, right? That's obviously right. And I think, you know, in the work I do as a behavioral scientist and speaker and I work with companies and organizations and executive teams. And I think, you know, across the board, I've noticed over the past few years, especially, that everyone is feeling really burnt out and anxious and disconnected, and we're more connected than ever.

We have so many resources now. I mean, there seems to be it seems to be on the exterior that we should be in a pretty decent space and not as burnt out culturally as we all are. Like we've completely normalized that word as a as part of just the human condition. And it's

really not it's not. Okay. And so, I started to dig deeper into what is what is the actual root of this?

Like when you peel that onion, like I like to say, like what's at the core of this? And I think I really started to land on the fact that we are in a crisis of attention and disconnection and I believe that our inability to sustain attention on the things that really are purposeful and matter is eroding our sense of like consciousness and well-being and our relationships and so, so, so many things in our life.

And so I started to dig into that really, and realized that, you know, our lack of focus is the issue. It is the primary issue. It is the most urgent issue of our generation. And it's not necessarily our fault. You know, it's not something that we're conscious about even necessarily. And so many of us think we're really good at it and can our fine multitasking and all of those things.

So I wanted to write a book about not about productivity in the way that we normally think about focus, but about how do we how do we take back this power, this right that we have as human beings that we've sort of just it's been hijacked by all of these really brilliant companies that know what to do and how to how to hijack our attention.

And how do we take it back, how do we take back our power, and how do we take back? How do we come home to ourselves? Yeah, because I think at the core, like so many of us are just floating like we're just like in this nebulous state of not being able to anchor to anything. And that's really problematic for our brain and the way our brain functions.

I'm excited to break down sort of the neuroscience of it, because I feel this way, and it's like even when I'm trying to focus, I can sense this feeling of like, almost like I can't sit still, like I'm deeply uncomfortable by, you know, trying to or wanting to do something two things at once while I try to focus on one thing, if that makes sense.

It's like I'm so well trained to not be able to focus in that way that I, I almost get uncomfortable when I can't do the multitasking. So I feel this way, and I certainly because I have kids now too. I'm like really aware of like, how are they watching me and like what that means. And I'm sure people who are, even if you're not a parent, you can understand this feeling of like, I was just on my phone for three hours.

What was the point of that? You know? So, to your point, we have this, like, attention problem. I don't really feel like it's like it's not a productivity thing. It's a focus and attention thing, for sure. You know, and we talk a lot about, I think as parents too, like, oh, I want to spend more time with my kids.

Time, time, time. It's always been about time. And we've sort of created a myth that our most valuable resource is time, but it's actually not. It's our attention. It's what we're doing during that time that actually matters. And so what has occurred by us, sort of framing life

that way is that we've normalized exhaustion and that we're it's not and the exhaustion isn't from doing too much or being everywhere and nowhere, all at the same time.

It's just this relentless task switching that we're always doing, and the pull of notifications and all of the cultural noise saying yes to so many things that we know we shouldn't be doing just because we're uncomfortable with the silence that comes with, like, you know, actually plugging out of things, right? And not being in the know for half a second.

Well, I like your your argument essentially that attention, not time, is our most valuable resource because I feel like that definitely debunks something we hear a lot. Can you explain why this shift in thinking matters, especially for people who maybe want to succeed at work? I know we were talking a little bit about family life, but I also think, you know, there's not a like a line of demarcation here.

Whatever your feelings or even your personal life, you also have maybe you're feeling maybe even more in your work life because talk about the emails, the slacks, the, you know, the meetings, in-person meetings versus now remote meetings. Like, I feel like we just keep adding different communication channels, to talk about this shift in thinking of reevaluating time versus attention.

So, I mean, it's really it I think it's more simple than we we make it out to be like, you know, we we guard our time. And so we've, we think about our lives and our days as time chunks, which by the way, is very effective. And I do talk about time blocking in the book as a tool. And I do think it can be effective, but the time blocking doesn't work if we're not attuned and paying attention and focused in those moments that we're blocking. Right. So time no longer should be a metric of how we think about our days and our presence and our effectiveness within the days. Right. And our efficiency. I mean, I don't like thinking about efficiency really at all.

But, you know, from a work, let's just say from like a productivity workflow standpoint, it's really about what are we doing within that time. So if we're yeah, we can we can pay attention. We can be with our kids a ton. But if we're not attentive, it's not good. If we're not paying attention, if we're not intentionally right attuned to those moments, it's it's irrelevant. And they've actually done really great research on this when it comes to kids or work, is that it's not the amount of time we spend, obviously. It's, it's the it's the attunement within those times. So, you know, we can spend five minutes or even ten minutes on a project. And if we're really focused and we're not triple screening and we're not getting notifications and we're not task switching, we're going to do incredible work within those ten minutes. And so much more than if we were multitasking for an hour, because every time we task switch, we actually lose about 23 minutes. But it takes hours. Yeah, that it takes for our brain to fully go into what we're doing. We lose about 23 minutes of, of productivity neurologically. Okay. So wait, I love the downside. So this there's a I do hold my multitasking as a badge of honor.

I also work from home. So I feel like that allows my multitasking like, self loving person that I am to like optimize even more. So to me, what am I doing to my brain and why I need to stop this? Please. My boss, I hope, is not listening to this because she's probably like we're getting like less great, high quality work from you because you're multitasking so much, I'm sure, or something like that.

So basically every time we task switch, our brain takes time to go to the next moment. So after any interruption, whether it's checking a notification or if you're looking in an email while also buying groceries, it can take an average of. When I say 23 minutes, it's really like 23 minutes in like 10 or 15 seconds to fully get back into a state of deep focus.

So you're not literally losing 23 minutes every single time. But it's basically like an average that, you know, sometimes it takes less, sometimes it takes more, and it depends on the task and your environment. But the real cost of multitasking is what what I call sort of this like attention residue. So even if you jump back fast and part of your mental bandwidth inevitably, neurologically is going to linger on the thing that you just switched from.

So that drag right reduces your accuracy and performance and all the things until your brain can fully clear it. And over the day it compounds. So that's something else that people don't often think about is like if you're constantly multitasking and context switching between things, a dozen times a day, which we do so much more than that, you just lose hours, hours of productivity.

So. Oh, sorry. Yeah. God, what does that say? What about if you're like, okay, I want to focus on this thing and then I'm going to. So sometimes I'm working on something so long I'm like I just need to get up and have a break from it. And so I'll like switch to another task on. This is like a break for my brain, which is probably the opposite.

So like, what should you do when you are in that deep focus work? And you're like, but I realize like there's that thing called the Pomodoro technique. Yeah. Yeah. So talk about some practical things people can do to maybe schedule or optimize for that focused time. But then also, I mean, it has to end at some point, right?

I totally focused. Yeah. And remember like we so I just want like we've trained our brain to not focus. Our brain sort of takes on whatever we practice. Right. And you know that you've probably heard of that where it's every time you, you know, your neurons build what you practice, right? And they grow stronger. So we have practiced constantly task switching and multitasking and being distracted.

So that's what our brain is going to want to do. That's what feels comfortable. That's what feels safe. It's also the dopamine hit. It feels good to task switch. The short form videos are feel good, but are deeply, deeply damaging over time. So this is going to feel really hard. You're not alone in this where you're like, oh, okay, great.

I'm going to I'm going to time block. This is going to be great. I'm going to do like 30 minutes of work and then I'm going to task, which is something else. You probably can't even get to ten minutes. I would bet the most people can't even get to five without without looking at an email. And you know, this is true.

You all like you're just sitting there. Think what? But it's I'm just going to I'm just going to call it out. And it's not you. It's just the system that we've set up for ourselves. So it's important to start slowly building up to what, like you say, the Pomodoro. Yes. That's great. The Pomodoro. It's a classic, like I and I talk about this in the book, your 25 minutes of work, five minute break, and it sort of supports immersing yourself in whatever you're doing, which is what I'm advocating versus like chipping away at different tasks at different times. But you need to start with what works for you, with where you're starting from, and then build up and choose the right intervals. So 25 minutes of work may be easy for you, or most likely won't be. So then you start with like let's say 15 minutes of work and then you get a ten minute break because you realize your brain just needs time to get into the flow. And this is really hard. And you need to practice this for a couple weeks before you build up, right? So if you're training for focus, which I believe is a skill that we have to relearn because our brain is a muscle, you start, you know, you start with like 15, 20 minutes ideally and build up to 30. And if you're already really focused and you have good endurance, you start with you really.

You ramp up and aim for a full, ideally just super hard to do, but a 90 minute. And I talk about the ultradian rhythms in my book and how important that is. Those are the body's sort of natural focus cycles, and when we work within that context, it's ideal. But again, most of us can't focus for 90 minutes at all.

And that's alarming, but also something that we can work toward. And I think the way we start. So in addition to this, like time blocking, you were asking about tools and and I do I do talk about these tools in the book. And I think that's part of it is I'm not talking necessarily about productivity, although inevitably it will all strengthen and your productivity will skyrocket.

You'll be like, whoa, I'm working way less, but doing way more. What's happening? But because this stuff really works neurologically, and I'm thinking about it from a neuroscience perspective, but it's basically really simple. It's like one task, one tab, one goal. It's it's just you eliminate all the other apps, windows notifications, put in another room, leave it on airplane mode like you are doing what you need to do in that one focus block.

In that one moment you are and being. You're being very specific about what you're doing and what you're achieving so that your brain can say, okay, I did it right, and you're protecting your environment. Your, I don't know, like silence, Lo-Fi beats, like soundscapes. If you need it, you're at the same time, you know, the same pad of paper, the same pen. So your body knows. Like I'm in focus mode. You're removing cues of distraction. Your desk is cleared. You know, you can even have rituals that start and end your focus block. And

you don't scroll your brain, you know, that's another. That's another attention shift. Even during your breaks, you're trying really hard unless you map it in to not just consume content, because that also keeps your brain working.

So you're not actually rebooting and resting in the way you should during your break time. So during your break time, you're instead you're stretching, you're going outside, you're taking a breath. You're doing anything like physical and actually restorative. So that's kind of the ideal doesn't count if you like to go for a walk and listen to a podcast asking for a friend, which is what so many people do, right?

Are like, we're driving and listening to podcasts. I mean, does it count as what? As a as a break? Like, do I get the full benefit of a break? No, no, I have to do that. Not I know, I know, that's not what you want to hear. Well, it's funny because walking without listening to a podcast or music or talking to someone is I know I've changed my brain to be like this, but it's like, this is so boring.

Like I'm like, I can only walk for like ten minutes before I'm like, I'm done. You know what I mean? I like if I'm going to podcast, I go forever. That's because we resist boredom, because it's really hard for our brain, and it activates creativity and things that we're normally not sitting with, which is really, actually critically important for our brain to have. And so we, we want to fill that time by putting like TV in the background or podcast on or music even now, listening, walking with a podcast, like, let's just, let's track back, like moving your body. Great resets energy. Like that's, that's really, really positive. If the podcast is really light and entertaining, it can feel somewhat restorative.

If the podcast has information that's like learning or work related, it's you're processing information. So that doesn't give your attentional system the reset that you need. It just sort of swaps tasks. Right. So activities that don't require or demand you to think or focus on anything is ideal. Right? So like nature walks stair even staring out the window, which is so hard in this day and age because we're just not we're not, you know, I know like I saw someone at a coffee shop just looking out the window, not even on their phone with no AirPods on.

And I literally, for a split second, thought something was wrong with them. Yeah, yeah. You're like, what kind of psychopath are you? Yeah, that's how far we've come. So these, these like lo like looking out the window, breathing, daydreaming which we don't do anymore. Let the brain's default mode network do its thing. And the reason that is very important is that during it staying is consolidating memory.

It's like cleaning and clearing residue, like it's doing all of these things like restoring willpower, motivation, all of these things that are so critical. We don't allow time for anymore. We fill it with things. So the music, the light, podcasts, but even like conversations,

whatever, it can be restful. But it's not as restorative or cleansing as movement without input.

Gotcha. That makes sense. I you know what I mean? I do, and I'm thinking about the person who feels just like overwhelmed by the constant pings, emails, slack, social feeds, I guess. What are some strategies that you would recommend, for someone who's trying to navigate these digital demands? I mean, I feel like social feeds, that one. It's like, take the app maybe off your phone.

Like I get that one. But work stuff feels harder because it almost feels like, you know, you need to have slack on your phone. You need to have email on your phone saying, you guys, it's insane. It's it's it's really up to us to set limits and boundaries. But I know it's also work. And so the the way we work has changed so significantly.

But our nervous system and brain is not set up for that. So how do we bridge the gap. Right. The ping, what I call sort of like the ping economy is designed to keep us on edge. It wants you for every ding, every whatever. It spikes your cortisol, it hijacks your focus and it trains your brain to expect interruption.

That's the problem, right? So the strategy is to redesign sort of how you get notified and control your access to this. So silence by default like always always, always unless like something that's really, really urgent you want to keep on. So maybe it's like your child's school calling or something. Everything else has to stay off. I really love batch checking. So give yourself like 2 to 3 times a day to process messages. Especially after my community was burnt down and the fire I was put, I was like, put on, I don't even know, like 15 WhatsApp group messages, which was amazing to, you know, keep the community going and the rebuild and know what's happening. But I would get literally like thousands of messages every day.

And it was so overwhelming because I felt like I was missing really important stuff. So I would start to like batch check and that really helped. And, you know, it's a rhythm. So you have to kind of adapt to this. I would basically remove like all, all red, like all of the badges that are engineered to cultivate anxiety and like, oh my God, I have to check, like turn that all off, put your phone in another place.

If you're batch working and you really need to stay focused, out of sight, out of mind, and then, you know, iPhones are great. Now with focus modes, Apple's really trying like they understand this. They've they've used it to their advantage. But now they're hiring people like me to try to help a little bit because they're realizing that this is this can be good for them too.

And so now they've set like these preset modes, which we know about. So you can filter calls and texts and like there's a focus mode on computers. Now there's a focus mode on phones. And so you have to just protect your space. Yeah. And you don't have to answer every paying. I think that's the biggest issue. And especially, you know, if you're working, you're also a parent and your child is like pre-teen teen age, really training the brain to understand that every message is not urgent.

I'm seeing that's like the hardest thing for the younger generation to understand. Like, oh, I don't have to respond right away because it used to be, I think for us, for our age group, like we grew up without these devices and now we have them and we were trained that a text message is urgent because there were so few of them right?

Right. Like if someone was reaching out via text, it was like, oh my gosh, that's that's via instead of email. It was like, that can't wait. Because a text text in my brain was always like an urgent reach out. But now it's the obvious. Like very few emails can take eons to take weeks to respond. DMs are also this like weird thing WhatsApp slack like so we have to batch check.

We cannot be constantly plugged into these messaging systems if we're going to get anything done. Yeah, and I think to your point, it's about kind of proactively setting the schedule like what is your routine going to be? And maybe you read it out, maybe. And then you use these apps to help you, and maybe you just start with the expectation, like this is going to be hard.

It's going to be uncomfortable. But the goal the other side is that you have these you have this ability to focus. And not only is it good for like, who you are as a person, your overall well-being and your quality of work, but it's like it's just good for your brain. Like this, this kind of like constant anxiety or like urgency that we all feel.

I was funny, I was getting a coffee the other day and I was like, everything I do has urgency. Like I'm waiting in this line and I have nowhere to be in, nothing to do. But I have urgency. It's just like my brain is just in this constant. Like everything can be optimized, everything needs to go quickly, even when it does it.

I was like this can't be like a good way to just constantly live in this. Like it's like this constant fight or flight mode, even though I'm not fighting anything other than just like, life. And I think about that often, too. Like, maybe that's why I have trouble sleeping. It's like 3 a.m. on the dot. I always wake up and my brain starts going.

And so I feel like you probably did some research, but I'm assuming that other parts of your life get better when you start to have focus and you could, you know, have real attention be put towards something meaningful. My right in that guess you're 100% correct in a million

ways that you, that many of us haven't even experienced yet, because the problem is our relationships completely erode when we live the way we're living right now.

I mean, think about it. We're with our partners or husbands or wives or whatever, and we're sitting, but we're also holding our phones, probably grocery shopping, but also watching Netflix, because that's our way of unwinding at night. Right? But the reality is we're not actually with our partners at all. The distance is growing. There's so many conversations that are uncomfortable that we should be having, but we don't want to.

So we use our devices as our pacifiers to kind of prevent us from having to actually face each other, right? Yeah. It's so much easier to scroll than to actually, like, have these harder conversations. And then it's like, we, we, we, we build resentment and we're sort of like, oh, I don't want to, you know? And so that's kind of what out from our friendships because it's like it's way more fun to stay home and just get those quick dopamine hits than to make an effort.

Yeah. And we're just we're failing. We're flailing right in our relationships, and our relationship with our self to that's more importantly the biggest issue. Yeah, I have definitely felt that way. So when we're able to really focus on the things that matter, the domino effect is massive in a positive way. What's one surprising habit that has the biggest impact on our ability to concentrate?

Have you notice, There's there's actually a few, I would say that have a huge impact. I want to do I do want to say that if you are doing all of these things, but are still having a really hard time, we often forget the most foundational things about being human. And I do talk about this in the book sleep.

Yeah. Portion, hydration. Like those are basic and you sort of expect people to already do that or. No, but we just don't. And you can do all the things in the world, like you can do all the hacks, the red lights, the green juices, the journaling, the time blocking. But if you're not focusing on those basics, it won't work.

Yeah. So that's like the biggest sort of like easy hack, but needs to happen. But I think even more importantly, because we're so tethered to our devices, I think we underestimate the power of keeping phones in another room and just away from our space, because they've done research that even a phone on a desk, even if you're not looking at it, will play with your cortisol levels and your hormones and your just ability to to pay attention.

So even just docking it, maybe as you walk in, in a different space that's not on your desk makes a huge impact. And like for example, not reaching for your phone within 30 minutes of waking. I know that's so hard to do, but reaching for your phone is just going to trigger your attention metrics and just it'll it'll slowly erode your your attention over the day at a much higher capacity than if you didn't.

So a little humongous impact. Yeah, I love that. I love habits and tricks like that where it's like, I know it's simple, but sometimes those are reminders. And the most important thing, as we wrap up for someone who's listening and maybe who's not doing these things because they're feeling really overwhelmed and scattered, what is the very first small step that they can take today to reclaim their focus?

I know you just mentioned a couple, but like that, I feel like it's maybe for the person who's maybe already doing some good things. What about the person who's like, I'm so overwhelmed I can't even begin to think about where to start. Where do they start? Put your phone in another room for the next ten minutes. That's great.

Yeah, I think there's three. Like literally it's so simple. But just do it right now. It removes the number one source of pings and attention leaks. It gives your nervous system a chance to downshift from like alert mode. And your it basically tells your brain, I am not reachable for the next ten minutes. Yeah, right. And that physical separation is the quickest and most powerful way to start the process of reclaiming your focus and doing the work that's in the book.

I love that I mostly because I feel like sometimes with these topics, they can feel a little abstract, and I love when they're very tangible. And like that is the most tangible piece of advice we can get is like, physically pick this thing up, put it somewhere else. So yeah, I've loved this conversation. Tell people about your book where they can pick it up, follow your work, learn more about you.

And then we'll put all those links in the show notes as well. Yeah. No, my book is called Finding Focus on Your Attention in the Age of Distraction. It includes a 21 day focus plan, if that's what you're into. You can find this anywhere. Books are sold. I have a ton of resources on my website.

Doctor, Salon.com, Dr. Zella, Entercom, and on my socials. I have an incredible community. Please join and stay engaged, and you can keep up with my appearances in different stuff. It's Dr. Dot Zelena. Amazing. Thank you so much for coming back on the show. We'll have to have you back on before, you know, for another, like, seven years passes.

Oh, my God. Yeah. It's so great to be talking to you. And thank you for all the work you're doing. Thank you."