



# THE SIRENS OF TODAY

## ADHD, Social Media, and Self-Regulation

by David D. Nowell, PhD

**I**NSPIRING IMAGES AND QUOTES on Instagram, up-to-the-second news and views on Twitter, instant connection and emotional support from your friends at Snapchat, and all of the back-and-forth sharing we enjoy on Facebook. With social media, there is no reason to be lonely and no reason to be bored. But social media are also seductive, and have something of a soft addictive quality. Maybe the reason that Friendster and Multiply aren't around anymore is that they were examples of social media which weren't sufficiently addictive or compulsive. Our engagement with social media requires self-regulation. How much time and attention do we dedicate to these various pursuits?

Your attention is a commodity. It's being bought and sold on the open market. The reason that Candy Crush is worth billions of dollars is not that it's an awesome game. Parcheesi might even be a better game. The reason that Candy Crush is valuable is because we offer

up our attentional resources to the game. The reason that WhatsApp is more valuable than the native text app in my Android phone is not necessarily that it's much better. Rather, that worth comes from the value of our collective attentional resources. What we collectively pay attention to gains value. And individually, what we pay attention to expands.

The challenge for students and adults with ADHD is this issue of self-regulation. Self-regulation is an executive function—one of the capacities that sets humans apart from other animals, and one of the capacities that sets high-functioning adults apart from younger and less independent children. In fact, I would suggest that self-regulation is the cardinal challenge in ADHD. Self-regulation involves taking control of our emotions and our boredom, managing our time and our money. Self-regulation involves budgeting and allocating and stewarding our attentional resources over the course of the day.



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One of my key recommendations to clients around this topic is to actually schedule, in advance, the time they will spend on social media. Many of my clients resist me on this, and say that it seems frivolous to actually block out time to look at pictures of kittens in baskets on Pinterest. But by not committing in advance to how much of their attentional resources they will budget and allocate, they often discover that they end up spending even more than seems just right for them.

I have no agenda about the time my clients are spending with video games or television or music or social media. My agenda is this: I want each of my clients to *be deeply seated in that place of awareness, making choices about how they spend their limited and valuable attentional resources.*

### **Living well with ADHD**

Thriving with ADHD, really living well with ADHD, requires high-awareness living. That high awareness might be called mindfulness. My definition of mindfulness, again, is to be deeply seated in the place of awareness, making choices about how we direct our attentional resources.

Odysseus is my mindfulness hero. Odysseus was a character from Greek mythology who, like many of us, experienced a split within himself. On the one hand, he enjoyed doing his job. His job was to get his little boat safely across the sea. Upon arrival, everybody threw their hands in the air and said, “Yay, Ody!” (That’s what they called him in my imagination). On the other hand, he enjoyed listening to the song of the sirens. The sirens were these half-bird, half-woman creatures with gorgeous singing voices. On leaving port, he would often hear the sweet song just off in the distance, and ask himself, “Can’t we just listen to the sirens, just for a few minutes? Can’t we just go over there a bit closer and listen to this beautiful song?” And upon directing his boat toward the sirens, he would reach shallow waters, crashing on the rocks.

One morning, Odysseus got up early and got deeply seated in that place of awareness, that place of mindfulness. He asked himself, “What do I want for myself? What’s important to me?” He established for himself that, at least on that day, what he really wanted—deep down—was to get his boat across the ocean, to do his job and to do it well. And Odysseus tied himself to the mast of the ship, so that he couldn’t change his mind at the last minute. He put wax in his sailors’ ears, so they couldn’t even hear the song of

the sirens. Having done this, he set his boat across the sea.

Most of my clients don’t encounter half-bird, half-woman creatures with amazing singing voices. But they do encounter sirens. For some of my clients, it’s alcohol and drugs. For others, it might be Snapchat or Candy Crush. What are the sirens in your life? What causes you to crash your boat onto the rocks? And how do you prepare yourself, in advance, to self-regulate in the face of all of these choices? How do you make it even easier to do that which, deep down, you want most of all?

### **An exercise**

Here’s a personal exercise to clarify the value of social media in your life. Consider pleasure, the humor, the social connection these services provide you. Make a list of all the great features and benefits of your favorites.

And while you’re at it, consider your other values and goals. In addition to lolcats and Reddit upvotes, what else is important to you? Set a timer for three minutes. With pen and paper, start writing. If you can’t think of what to write next, just keep writing, just write something. Make a list of everything you’d like to do or be or have. What qualities do you want to develop and share with others? Do you dream of travel, or falling in love, or skills you’d like to perfect? What challenges would you like to overcome?

Quick—pick one that jumps out at you, grabs you at a gut level. What is the *easiest* first step you could take? A conversation with someone who’s already done it? A web search? Maybe you could watch a brief YouTube video from someone who’s already doing that thing you want? Could you create a storyboard using PowerPoint, setting up a little narrative of how you will arrive from wish to end result?

With one or two important goals in mind, ask yourself how much social media time actually fits into your current lifestyle. Given what your heart is crying out for now, and given the time demands of those goals, get deeply seated in that place of awareness and choose. Choose for yourself. 🗨

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# Seven Strategies for Managing Social Media

Here are some strategies for self-regulation, for living well in a world full of distractions and novelties.

**1. Spend some time planning, in advance, how much time you'd like to budget for each social media platform.** When will you check Facebook or Instagram tomorrow? And how long is just right for you?



**2. Begin to notice when you reach for your phone.** Do you seek the comfort of Instagram when you're confused and overwhelmed? Do you notice that when you're bored you tend to wonder what's going on with your Facebook friends? Knowing when you're likely to be pulled off task allows you to plan, in advance. How well do you know your own patterns of social media use? What will you do today in order to limit the possibility that you will be distracted?

**3. Take some of those social media apps off your phone.** This sounds draconian, and it is rather a severe recommendation, but bear with me. You do know, don't you, that you can simply open up the browser right on your phone, navigate to [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com), sign in, and access the content? The reason we have these apps on our phone is that it makes it super easy to access that content. By taking some of these apps off your phone, by making it just a bit harder to access the content, you may reduce some of the compulsive quality.



**4. Move the icons for social media apps off of your homepage over to some folder to the side, so that you have to swipe left or right, tap a folder, and then tap the icon.** This is a slightly less draconian strategy. The principle here is, "How can I make it just a bit harder to access these distractions?"

**5. Turn off the notifications.** You may decide to leave phone and text notifications open, because you want to receive emergency messages. But there's no reason to be made aware, in real time, that someone favorited one of your pics at Instagram. You can determine for yourself when you will check those messages.



**6. Learn how much time you're actually using on social media.** Keep a time log. Use a pencil and notebook, or use applications such as RescueTime or Chronos to become more aware of your patterns.

**7. Consider a social media fast.** Could you go for a day or a week without accessing social media? What might you learn if you tried this? If you don't think that you're ready for an actual period of fasting, you might consider "intermittent fasting." For example, you might determine that you will not access social media between the hours of 12 PM and 8 PM, or you might decide that on Tuesdays and Thursdays you won't access social media at all.

-David D. Nowell, PhD