

SWAMP

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COINTEGRATED



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Swipe: The Science Behind Why We Don't Finish What We Start

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Amplify Publishing, an imprint of Amplify Publishing Group
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Herndon, VA 20170
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Library of Congress Control Number: 2022912960

CPSIA Code: PRV0922A

ISBN-13: 978-1-64543-553-2

Printed in the United States

CHAPTER 1

The Graveyard of Abandoned Dreams

Swiping equals disengagement from the deep, meaningful experiences of life and work, which inevitably leads to unhappiness and disappointment.

By his twenties, Todd Crandell was on his way to becoming a cautionary tale. Once a promising hockey player with a future in the pros, he became addicted to drugs and alcohol, ruining not only his hockey career but every relationship in his life. Then, in 1993, he found his way to sobriety and turned his compulsive streak into a passion for endurance sports. Today Todd is an avowed vegan who has finished more than eighty-five Ironman and Ultraman endurance races, and he's the fittest fiftysomething you've ever set eyes on. He's also a licensed independent chemical dependency counselor and clinical supervisor who, in 2001, founded Racing

for Recovery, an Ohio-based counseling community that works to prevent substance abuse and help people struggling with addiction discover a new lifestyle of fitness and health through sports.

That's quite a comeback story, and it's made Todd into something of an expert in endurance—more to the point, the act of not quitting. In endurance races like Ironman, competitors often say the winner is the one who can “outsuffer” everybody else. But what makes some competitors more able to gut through the agony of a marathon or a 112-mile bike leg? What keeps them from disengaging and pursuing something less taxing? To put it another way, what keeps them from Swiping? We asked Todd, who had competed in yet another Ironman the day before our conversation.

“Yesterday I had a great race,” he said. “I swam well, I biked well, and then I got to the run, and suddenly I was sick and nauseous. So I'm out there, I'm walking a lot, and it's hot. I was thinking, *Why am I finishing this?* And there are two sides to the answer: First, it's wanting to succeed. I want to succeed and add another notch to my belt. I am grateful for the people who have helped me do what I do, and I owe it to them not to quit.

“Then there's another piece of it, which is that I don't want to fail. I'm starting to see that not only in myself but it's a common characteristic in people with addiction. We take that negative passion to self-destruct and turn it into self-improvement, and that means there's this constant fire: ‘I won't be beaten this time. I'm not going to fail.’ Used properly, it's a great asset.

“I think it's easier for people who haven't gone through the adversity of addiction—let's not sugarcoat it—to give up on things. When you make that life-or-death choice to get better, you can use all the heartbreaking, tumultuous situations you've put yourself and your

loved ones through as fuel to succeed. It's an interesting psychology, or mindset, that really does become an asset."

Page-One Energy

What makes Todd Crandell and other ultraendurance athletes—not to mention those in other endeavors that demand perseverance in the face of physical or mental pain—tick isn't solely their athletic prowess. It's their will not to quit, their self-awareness, their commitment to remaining engaged in the moment, and their personal kit of psychological tricks and motivational tools—for example, mining the fear of failure—that keep them going when others fall away.

As the success of NaNoWriMo shows, in a complex world, simply sticking with something and finishing, regardless of the outcome, is often the real victory. We've stood at the finish line at the Ironman World Championships in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, and watched amateur "age group" competitors labor agonizingly on the final mile along the famous Ali'i Drive, calling on their last reserves of energy to try and finish before the seventeen-hour cutoff. When they make it, even the last finishers get a hero's welcome. Why? Because they persisted. They remained engaged, even as their bodies were screaming at them to stop. They leaned into the pain and doubt and didn't Swipe.

Many competitors can't say that. Of course, some suffer injuries and are forced to drop out. That's not a Swipe. But others simply lack the will to keep going. Some never make it back to that halloved course through the lava fields and regret it for the rest of their lives. Multiply that experience by millions in human activities as diverse as going back to college, getting in shape, composing a piece of music, or starting a company, and we see the same patterns play out again and again.

In the beginning, most people approach a new undertaking with a measure of naive enthusiasm—what we call *page-one energy*, a reference to the optimism of an author starting a new book. At this stage, things appear easy. You’ve got this. You’re like a cyclist at the top of a hill, coasting down, propelled by gravity, the wind in your hair. This is fun! Whee!

Then you hit the bottom of the hill, and that giddy speed begins . . . to . . . slow. Gradually, it dawns on you that this will not be easy. This is *hard*. Now you have to pedal, and the pedaling grows harder and harder as you realize you now have a big hill to climb. Exultation turns to trepidation, then frustration, and even outrage. Easygoing fun has given way to ugly, sweaty *work*. Why didn’t someone *tell* you it would be like this?

After a while you’re not sure you can continue—or that you *want* to continue. Your page-one energy is gone, replaced by a dread of what comes next and whether or not you’re up to it. Will you have the strength, resolve, skills, or whatever else you need to get this done? Were you an idiot to even try in the first place? As your self-doubt builds, the pressure to Swipe grows. Eventually, completely *disillusioned* by the experience, you slow to a stop. You tell yourself this challenge was stupid and didn’t really matter anyway—the “whatever moment”—and you disengage, leaving the scene as quickly as you can rather than risk being shamed by others who faced the same hardship you did but found a way to keep going.

This was the experience of Australian triathlon legend Chris “Macca” McCormack. One of the greatest competitors in the history of the sport, McCormack struggled when he transitioned from cold-weather, short-course European triathlons to dare the Ironman in the heat and humidity of Hawaii. Year after year, starting in 2002, he came to the island ready to win but quit as heat and dehydration

sapped his strength. His low point came in 2005. Overcome again by the searing heat, he dropped out of the race during the marathon leg and was sitting in an air-conditioned judge's car when he spotted an amateur competitor walking along the side of the road, carrying his bike and covered in lacerations, road rash, and blood.

The athlete had crashed during the cycling leg of the race, but determined to finish, he carried his crippled bike to the finish line—from where, presumably, he would attempt to run the marathon. McCormack said he never felt more ashamed than at that moment as he watched that man, competing for nothing but pride, keep going while he, the professional, had thrown in the towel.

The thought of competing in an Ironman might not get you out of bed in the morning—honestly, it doesn't appeal to us either. We have to admit, though, that we admire those who have the fortitude to complete the grueling race. Seeing that work project through to the end gives us a sense of satisfaction. Finishing your book, spending quality time with a loved one before he or she passes away, finishing a degree, nailing that hairy work project, or getting past a rough patch in a relationship is that Ironman you didn't finish. Swiping, however, leaves us humiliated and angry that, once again, we failed.

Swiping is Universal

The made-to-order world of smart devices might make Swiping more ubiquitous and even more tempting, but before you think we're going to label the Swipe as a millennial or Gen Z phenomenon, stop. We're not going to predictably gripe about peripatetic, tech-addicted youngsters who can't finish what they start. Younger people are no more likely to Swipe through life than boomers. Swiping is a *universal* phenomenon.

There's been little true scientific research into the phenomenon of quitting what we start, but there's been plenty into a Swipe-adjacent phenomenon: *procrastination*. According to work done by Joseph Ferrari, professor of psychology at DePaul University, 25 percent of people around the world are chronic procrastinators.¹ While one-fourth of the world fits this “chronic” label, nearly all of us fit somewhere on the don't-finish-what-we-start spectrum.

Research conducted at the University of Scranton found that 92 percent of people who set New Year's resolutions fail to achieve them²—which will come as no surprise to anyone who's sworn on December 31 to look like a runway model by beach season, only to reach the Fourth of July with only their wallet lighter after purchasing unused workout equipment.

But here's the big problem: according to research from Finder, 74.72 percent of all Americans planning to make New Year's resolutions for 2021 were confident they would achieve their resolutions.³ That's a deep disconnect between aspiration and accomplishment. That's why the best evidence of the Swipe is literally the people around us. We all know dozens of family members, friends, peers, and colleagues who complain bitterly about the things they've meant to do for years but haven't done—big things, like going back to school, and seemingly small goals, like finishing household projects. You almost certainly have your own list of unfinished frustrations; we all do. That's why an undercurrent of discontent runs through life for so many of us. We know we're capable of more, but we just can't get there.

In 2014, when employee experience firm DecisionWise began researching “intent to stay” statistics (data on individuals who plan to remain with their current employers) they were surprised to find that, despite what many had claimed, fewer than 11 percent

of employees had been actively circulating their résumés. Much of that lack of activity was likely related to a tough global job market. However, that number has increased dramatically. In 2022 CNBC reported that, according to studies conducted by consulting firm Willis Towers Watson, 44 percent of workers reported looking for a new job.⁴ When given the opportunity to look around and compare our current situation to a hypothetical alternative, it seems we quickly become dissatisfied.

Swiping affects virtually every individual in every environment. Apart from the obvious examples we've already cited—work life, creative projects, weight loss—there are many others. College students who drop out after sophomore year because the work is too grueling are often Swiping, assuming that one day they'll circle back to finish their degree. Many never do. Nicotine is a highly addictive substance, making cigarette smoking a notoriously difficult habit to quit. Despite this, roughly 1.3 million Americans quit each year, but the individuals who fail are those who can't help but swipe past the unpleasant physical and psychological sensations that come with nicotine withdrawal. They quickly pivot to the relief of a satisfying smoke, only to feel guilt and shame after they do.

The serial dater who ghosts potential partners as soon as casual dating becomes something more serious is a Swiper. So is the patient who fires their physician because said doctor gave them health advice they didn't want to follow, like losing weight or cutting saturated fats. Then there is the employee who is "just here for the paycheck until that dream job comes along."

Perhaps you know someone who is always working the next business angle—the friend who leaves one business venture for another under the pretense that the next big opportunity is just around the corner. We tend to idolize serial entrepreneurs—those

who seem to have the Midas touch—as paragons of business moxie. But for every true entrepreneur, we find many more people who bounce from one business experiment to the next because they become bored or frustrated, or lose interest once the exhilaration of a startup fades into the day-to-day grind of running a company.

Declining to engage when things get difficult or complex doesn't just affect individuals either. We see it in organizations too. After years of researching engagement in the workplace and collecting millions of survey results from thousands of businesses, we know for certain that when people disengage—when they stop caring and recoil from the task or challenge in front of them—the results of their work suffer. Companies invest millions of dollars to encourage employee engagement because they know that when people disengage they don't just retreat from their own responsibilities. Their indifference and discontent affect and *infect* others. Quality slips, productivity drops, customer service declines, and turnover spikes. In a business setting, disengagement is a quiet, creeping disease that kills cultures and ruins organizations (heads up: we will discuss this more in chapter 4). But do you know what makes this even more dangerous? That bad job spills over into other areas of life as well; you take it home with you. More on this later.

Even giant corporations Swipe. Remember Blockbuster Video? If you're under thirty, you might not. That's because the retail video rental company, which dominated the video rental market back in the day when you and your friends had to drive to a store to rent movies on DVD and VHS, Swiped away from what might have been its salvation.

In 1999, two years after Blockbuster said, “Thanks, but no thanks,” to buying Netflix for a paltry \$50 million, the company teamed up with Enron—yes, *that* Enron—to create a robust video-on-demand

platform. The result was a platform that worked and that customers liked. Blockbuster was poised to seize a substantial portion of the fledgling streaming market. But Blockbuster was so single-minded about its stores that it neglected the video-on-demand service. In 2001 they completely abandoned it, and by 2010 the company was bankrupt. Meanwhile, despite some setbacks in 2022, Netflix has become the dominant brand in streaming entertainment.

Governments Swipe too. The People's Republic of China got into the act with the medieval-themed Wonderland, which it insisted would become the largest, grandest amusement park in Asia. When the Chinese government got into an endless series of disputes with local officials and farmers, however, the half-finished project was abandoned in 1998. An attempt to restart development in 2008 also flopped, and the park was finally demolished in 2013. In its place now stands an outlet mall.

NERD ALERT!

For software developers, Swiping is a work-around for choice paralysis, the inability to make a decision because you're overwhelmed by too many options. A swipe-centric interface for, say, e-commerce, lets users view one option at a time so they're less likely to become exhausted and disengage altogether from the product choices in front of them.

A Formula for Unhappiness

That familiar process not only leads inexorably to misery but it impedes our growth. Angela Duckworth, author of the bestselling

book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, writes that the key to reaching goals is about holding steadfast to them even after you fall down or make mistakes, or when progress toward the goal is agonizingly slow. Grit is the quality that makes that possible. But we develop grit through trial and error, through the water torture of failure, embarrassment, and heartache. Recovering from setbacks—and discovering they don't end us—makes us strong.

But what about those times we don't get off the mat after being knocked down—or worse, don't even get into the ring? When we swipe, we deny ourselves the opportunity to rise to the occasion and prove we have what it takes to succeed. Human beings are at our best when we're striving, working to overcome obstacles. When our backs are against the wall, that's when we find courage and creativity we didn't know we had. But without that tension and resolution, it's easy to become apathetic and defeatist. Over time, this leads to regret, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness.

Then, after we've pulled the rip cord and bailed out of the plane, what do we do? We beat ourselves up. Quitting something shames us. We feel like we're missing some magical "get-it-done" gene. Swipe often enough, and you begin to believe you don't have what it takes, that you're not worthy. Instead of mastering what you care about, you just master the Swipe.

Psychology even has a term to describe how we feel when we leave things undone: the Zeigarnik effect.⁵ If we are engaged in a task that's interesting but not impossibly difficult, we feel distress and frustration when we don't complete it, coupled with a compulsion to go back and get to the finish line. The Zeigarnik effect might also explain why we regret the things we *didn't* do—so-called "regrettable omissions"—more than the things we did.⁶

Pre-Swipe Warning Signs

Let's review. We have identified a clear, predictable psychological and emotional process that people go through when they Swipe, and an equally clear path showing what happens when we decline to Swipe and engage with our discomfort. We'll get to that process later, but right now it's important to understand the conditions that lead us to Swipe.

Swiping is typically preceded by a state of benign self-delusion, usually about how difficult the task before you will be. In fact, not apprehending how hard it will be to reach your goal is a powerful predictor of a future Swipe. For example, a child might believe learning to play the piano will be all about playing flawless chords and sweeping arpeggios in a matter of days, not endlessly playing scales, which is the bane of every piano novice's existence. Or a man might believe that because he's watched lots of *This Old House* episodes and owns a hammer drill he's ready to build a wooden deck off the back of his house, only to find he has no idea what he's doing. The presumption that the glide path to success will be smooth and easy creates false expectations of what lies ahead, and this often causes the person to venture into a complex task with lots of page-one energy and little else.

That page-one energy is the base for our motivation. But motivation is a fickle partner, despite the fact that we think the same energy we experience on page 1 will be with us through page 250. We rely on motivation, however, to carry us through—"future motivation," that is. As we begin, we mistakenly believe the "future me" will have the same motivation as the "in-the-moment me." This is why we sign up for gym memberships, buy that hammer drill, register for free online classes, and sign up for diet plans. The current me wants it and is energized by the promises made

by in-the-moment me's page-one energy. The future me? Not so much. Today's me's bursts of motivation make promises the future me doesn't find as energizing.

When a reversal inevitably comes—running out of gas at page sixty of that novel, discovering that a job promotion requires more than three months of employment, discovering that earning a black belt in karate takes years, finding out you don't know a ledger board from a rim joist—it triggers a *disillusionment event* similar to the action-provoking *inciting event* in a movie screenplay. Reality shatters your false perceptions that achieving your goal would be relatively effortless, leaving you bitterly disillusioned and overwhelmed. When people reach that disillusioning event, and they have no tools or mental processes to help them stay on course and not lose faith in themselves, they almost always Swipe.

Having accurate, specific foreknowledge of how challenging a goal will be to reach reduces the odds of Swiping. When you know that building a deck or training for a 10K will take time, require rigorous preparation, and come with several setbacks, you won't be as thrown by reversals or be as apt to become fatally discouraged, because you already knew this journey would come with bumps. You give yourself a break, jump back in, and keep pushing.

HOW NOT TO SWIPE

Before you take your first step toward a goal or into unfamiliar territory, give yourself some “Swipe insurance” by reciting and remembering this Harry Belafonte–inspired acronym: DAYO, which stands for Don't Assume You're the Outlier. When you're confronting something you haven't done before, avoid the mistake so many others have made

and don't kid yourself that the lessons learned by those who came before you—it's grueling, study hard, give yourself enough time, etc.—don't apply to you. In reality, they almost always do. Don't assume you're smarter, braver, more gifted, or tougher than anyone else. You will be better prepared for what's to come and will increase your chances of reaching the finish line.

Tapping Out—How Swiping Changes Us

Each of us will disengage at times. As we detail later in this book, it's part of our psychological and physical programming. There will always be moments where we disengage, where we're simply not dedicating our hearts, spirits, minds, or hands to what is in front of us. But that doesn't always result in a Swipe.

Every time we Swipe away from difficulty, we veer away from a different and potentially promising future. When you hit that critical crossroads, where you can either Swipe or engage with something hard, it's generally not a time for deep thought and consideration. Swiping is a reflexive action, not a mental or emotional process. Nevertheless, when you Swipe, you're choosing one of the paths that leads away from that crossroads, like someone in a Robert Frost poem. Swiping is taking one road at a fork and not looking back. When you do that, you will miss out on everything that might be found down the other road, including the potential to grow or find happiness.

Former financial consultant and ecclesiastical leader Stanley G. Ellis recounts his experiences in working with multimillionaires in Texas who were successful entrepreneurs. Most had built successful

businesses from the ground up, facing numerous trials and hard work along the way. According to Ellis, one of the saddest things to hear was that some of them wanted to make life easier for their children by ensuring their children didn't suffer as they had. As caring as this parental wish might have been, Ellis lamented, "In other words, they would deprive their children of the very thing that had made them successful." Whether it's for ourselves or for those we love, that tough love and the learning it brings is what makes us who we are. Yet most of us would prefer to take the easier fork, and many of us—and our children—learn to reactively Swipe to the path of least resistance.⁷

But there are instances in which this choice is conscious. When it is, deliberate thought precedes action. That's not a Swipe. That's what we call *tapping out*. Sometimes abandoning a project or ending a relationship is a perfectly rational, even empowering decision. It's not always a bad idea to move on from something that isn't working. The difference lies in the psychological mechanism. When you Swipe, you're not making a deliberate decision to disengage or quit. You're recoiling out of alarm, like someone ducking away from an explosion. When you tap out, you're weighing the evidence and making a call that says, "This is not right for me, and I'm electing to step away." While Swiping is often fraught with regret and disappointment, tapping out can be courageous and positive.

Consider US gymnast Simone Biles at the 2021 Summer Olympics. When she bowed out of the women's all-around competition because she had developed the "twisties"—a gymnastics term for becoming spatially disoriented in midair during potentially dangerous leaps or vaults—there was no panic involved. There was no, "Ah, I just don't wanna do it, so I'm going to try something new for a change."

Instead, she made a brave, proactive decision to look after her own physical and mental health, even though doing so likely cost her a gold medal. She was quite rightfully praised for her decision.

Another example is former army intelligence officer and Missouri secretary of state Jason Kander. A young, rising Democratic star, after losing the 2016 race for the US Senate, Kander announced his candidacy for mayor of Kansas City, Missouri. Then, in October 2018, he announced he was quitting politics for the foreseeable future, revealing his battles with posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and suicidal thoughts. As with Biles, this was not a Swipe, but a measured, intentional choice in Kander's best interest. He chose to put his mental health and his family—not to mention his advocacy group Let America Vote, a nonprofit that fights against voter suppression efforts—before a perceived obligation to remain a candidate.

It's true that Swiping and tapping out can lead us to the same destination. After all, in either case, we're not finishing what we set out to do. The difference, however, lies in who we are when we get off that side path and back to the main road. Swiping can leave a bitter taste of shame and surrender in its wake. Tapping out, on the other hand, is knowingly walking away from something that's poorly suited to our skills or aspirations while choosing to engage in something more beneficial. Quitting a job with terrible hours, leaving an abusive partner, dropping out of college to pursue a lifelong dream via another means, these aren't Swipes. These are affirmative acts of self-love and self-preservation that give us room to heal and become more completely who we are.

The act of Swiping affects us in a variety of negative ways:

- **Bypassing**—In dodging uncomfortable situations and feelings, we also dodge opportunities to discover new abilities

and dimensions of ourselves that might never come again. People who do this often become fearful that they will never complete tasks or reach goals because failure becomes their new normal.

- **Stasis**—If the Swipe becomes habitual, we don't progress and grow. We don't take the opportunity to stretch and learn, which leads to stagnation. We remain stuck in a state of nonchallenge that feels safe but is actually detrimental.
- **Fatalism**—Like the would-be author who, after multiple unsuccessful attempts to finish a novel, berates herself, "See? I'll never be a real writer," repeated Swipes can eventually lead us to conclude that we can't finish things and that nothing in our lives will ever change.

But the most dangerous effect of the Swipe is that it's corrosive to our *self-efficacy*, the belief that we have what it takes to meet challenges and achieve success in situations that matter to us. Self-efficacy and self-esteem are closely linked, and when someone continually fails to finish what they start and misses cherished goals, their belief in their ability to achieve what's important—their belief in their fortitude, strength, and will—erodes until it crumbles like an old stone seawall.

One reason for that is that disengagement doesn't equal dissolution. When you Swipe, what you disengage with typically doesn't go away. It's still out there, having an impact on your life. Call off the wedding the day before the ceremony because of cold feet, and you might breathe a temporary sigh of relief, but you still have a lot of people who want you dead. When you Swipe, you lay traps for yourself that you can't even see, but that often come back to haunt you in the future.

Swiping is a short-term action, but it can have consequences that last for years. But the situation isn't hopeless. As we'll demonstrate, it is possible to "take back" a Swipe if we act quickly. We can also learn to resist the temptation to Swipe and engage with what we've been avoiding, gaining the opportunity to grow and discover our strengths. So maybe it's time we understood how and why the Swipe happens. Let's dig deeper into the mechanics of what's happening when we Swipe and how we can take control of this universal human experience.