



TAKE CONTROL OF

Focus

Manage notifications and
other interruptions on your
iPhone, iPad, Mac, and
Apple Watch

by **GLENN FLEISHMAN**

\$9.99

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Read Me First

Welcome to *Take Control of Focus*, version 1.0.1, published in April 2026 by alt concepts. This book was written by Glenn Fleishman and edited by Joe Kissell.

This book helps you understand Apple’s Focus feature, which lets you control when you’re interrupted and by whom. Given the interactions across devices, like an iPhone and a Mac, and among settings, this book teaches you to customize Focus to meet your precise needs.

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What's New in Version 1.0.1

This update fixes a number of small typos and grammatical errors.

Apple Intelligence Requirements

Some features described in this book require Apple Intelligence, Apple's catch-all term for many machine-learning and content-generation capabilities across the iPhone, iPad, and Mac operating systems.

To use Apple Intelligence, you must have installed iOS 18.1, iPadOS 18.1, or macOS 15.1 Sequoia or later. You also must have one of the following generations of Apple hardware:

- **iPhone:** iPhone 15 Pro or 15 Pro Max, iPhone 16 series or later, or iPhone Air
- **iPad:** 5th-generation iPad Air, 3rd-generation 11-inch iPad Pro, 5th-generation 12.9-inch iPad Pro, or 7th-generation iPad mini
- **Mac:** Any M-series Mac, starting with 2020 models

Enable Apple Intelligence in Settings/System Settings > Apple Intelligence & Siri. You can't cherry-pick which Apple Intelligence features to enable or disable—it's either all on or all off.

Reveal and Modify Control Center

Control Center provides a central place to turn features on and off with a tap, as well as shortcuts for selecting modes or reaching features buried in operating systems' interfaces. At points in this book, you're told to reveal Control Center or modify what appears. Here's what you need to know.

Reveal Control Center

You use different methods by device type to reveal the Control Center and access its controls:

- **iPhone and iPad:** Swipe down from the upper-right corner of the screen. (On older iPhones with a Home button, swipe up from the bottom edge instead.) To dismiss it, swipe up from the bottom or tap any empty area.
- **Mac:** Click the Control Center  icon on the menu bar.
- **Apple Watch:** Press the Side button.

Add a Control to Control Center

You can customize what appears in Control Center on each platform. In this book, you may want to add—if not already present—a Silent Mode button on your iPhone, iPad, or Apple Watch; a volume control slider on your Mac; and a Focus selection on any platform. Here's how to add a control:

- **iPhone and iPad:** Open Control Center, then touch and hold any empty area, or tap the Add Control  icon in the upper-left corner. You can now edit Control Center. Tap Add a Control at the bottom, browse or search the available options, and tap the appropriate control to insert it. Drag controls to reposition them or resize them by pulling their corner handles. Tap any empty space when you're done to exit editing mode.
- **Mac:** Apple changed control editing in the latest release of macOS. Here's how to add controls by version:
 - ▶ *macOS 26 Tahoe:* Open Control Center, click Edit Controls, browse or search for the control, and drag it into the Control Center. When complete, click Done in the Controls dialog.
 - ▶ *macOS 15 Sequoia and earlier:* Go to System Settings > Control Center. Each control listed there has options to show it in Control Center, on the menu bar, or both. Choose Control Center to add the controls you want.

- **Apple Watch:** Open Control Center, scroll to the bottom, and tap Edit. Tap the Add Control **+** icon to add a control from the available list, then tap Done.

Introduction

Attention is a scarce commodity.

Squirrel!

As I was saying, the chief export of Bolivia is tin. No, wait, attention! That's it! Our devices demand attention by vibrating, pinging, flashing alerts, playing sounds, ringing, beeping, or speaking incoming notifications via your earbuds while you're listening to a podcast.

How can we escape this visual, aural, and tactile cacophony? Apple's Focus feature is the promised answer. Focus silences whole categories of attention-grabbers, like audible and visual notifications and incoming calls that ring or vibrate your devices.

Apple initially created two states of focus (lowercase) that helped you in particular cases:

- *Driving*, so you aren't bombarded with distractions while trying to navigate, listen to music, or just charge your phone
- *Do Not Disturb*, so you could silence alerts and notifications while trying to work, to avoid sapping your attention

At some point, Apple decided that wasn't enough, and, as with many features (and styles of historical artistic development), they went baroque. Instead of two simple features, with Driving triggered automatically, and Do Not Disturb manually with some timed options, Apple created a full-fledged Focus feature.

The Focus feature is a set of named states or modes (see tip, below) that let you choose which notifications and calls are silenced, using apps and people as filters, among other nuances. When you enter a Focus mode, your device silences alerts from apps that meet the criteria and stops showing you Messages and other notifications from people filtered by choices in your Focus mode.

Tip: In Focus, each set of options has a name, like Driving, Reading, or Work. Apple generically calls each a “Focus” with a capital “F.” I find that confusing—go to Focus and pick a Focus? For clarity, I prefer to call them *Focus modes*, because the way your device handles attention-getting methods switches entirely into a different modality.

A Focus mode can also make other, temporary changes to your device, including switching to Dark Mode and changing the Lock Screen, Home Screen, or Apple Watch face. Apple ships with preset Focus modes to get you started, but you can customize these or define your own. The presets include Sleep, Driving, Fitness, Gaming, and Mindfulness. Some have automatic triggers, such as a sleep schedule engaging or when you connect a wireless game controller. You can even use Apple Intelligence to help figure out what’s important or not.

Each Focus mode has a different set of preset and configurable options. In some modes, you may want the fewest possible interruptions—I have Sleep set to block everything but emergencies. In others, you’re reducing distraction, such as with a Reading mode that helps eliminate distractions that would regularly or constantly take you away from being absorbed in the written word.

Apple also has lowercase *focus* features that can help you stay on task even without or in addition to enabling a Focus mode. Silent mode on iPhone, iPad, and Apple Watch is a notable element in reducing distractions that I discuss in [Silence Audible Alerts](#).

Even though this book is all about Focus, I freely admit that you might not benefit from the feature. I expect you purchased this book to find out how to tune Focus to fit how you work (or play), or you want to find out if there’s something or many things you’re missing. It may be that, after reading, you think, “Nah, I’m good”—and now you know you’re not overlooking a tool in your arsenal for efficiency or fun.

I’ve found Focus to be one of Apple’s most important features added in the last decade, but also one of the most frustrating. I hope you’ll get as much out of exploring it as I—squirrel!

Focus Quick Start

While this book is brief, you can benefit from jumping to the sections that answer questions you might have when first picking up this book.

Take a high-level look at demands on your attention:

- Get a thorough grounding in all the ways that Apple operating systems try to get your attention and how they can be silenced or mitigated; see [Stay Alert to Interruptions](#).

Understand the utility of Focus modes:

- Read through some scenarios of how Focus can work to help people with their personal and work routines; see [Use Focus for Defined Tasks](#).
- Learn how Focus organizes settings in customizable modes; see [Manage Focus Modes](#).
- Customize the settings in a mode, whether preset or one you created; see [Configure Focus](#).
- Sleep better with Sleep mode; see [Drift Off with Sleep Mode](#).

Silence alerts—audible, haptic, and visual:

- Silence audible alerts; see [How Silent Mode Hushes Devices](#).
- Prevent vibration from bothering you; see [Stifle Haptic Feedback](#).
- Reduce visual attention grabbers; see [Control Visual Displays of Alerts](#).
- Configure a Focus mode to silence notifications and alerts; see [Silence or Allow Notifications](#).

Challenge Attention Challenges

The Focus feature is often cited as something that can help people who have challenges in remaining focused on activities important to them, whether work or family—or even cleaning out a garage. Let me first present some scenarios that might make sense to build or customize Focus modes around. Then, I’ll introduce my spouse, an ADHD coach, with some advice on using Focus effectively.

Use Focus for Defined Tasks

The best way to understand a multi-pronged feature is to imagine how you might use it. To that end, let me present Case Study Theater, where we follow a few people who might be like you as they go about their business.

Adrian Does Not Want To Be Disturbed

Like most people, Adrian has times when they simply want to be left alone—to work, to walk, to read, to stare at the wall. They have used the preset Do Not Disturb mode since Apple introduced it as a stand-alone feature prior to Focus. (See [Manage Focus Modes](#).)

To customize Do Not Disturb, they set the People section to only allow a handful of special folks to text them while the mode is active, and only allow calls from those people, too (who know better than to bother Adrian most of the time with a voice call). They have disabled the call-twice bypass because every time a call slips through their cone of silence, it’s not one they want. (See [Allow or Silence People](#).) The same with apps: only a few apps can have their notifications passed. (See [Allow or Silence Apps](#) again.)

Adrian leaves Do Not Disturb on a lot of the time. They let their Focus status be seen in Messages, and people who know Adrian well know

the times they should override Delivered Quietly in Messages and Notify Anyway. (See [Mediate Access in Messages with Others.](#))

Lena Has Work and Personal Modes

Lena likes to keep her personal life and her work life separate. She believes in a work-life balance—and is generally able to maintain it, as her office doesn't expect her to be available outside of working hours (with rare exceptions).

Lena wears an Apple Watch and carries a MacBook Air and iPhone back and forth between home and office—she doesn't have a dedicated office desktop computer.

Because of how she runs her digital life, Lena configured the preset Focus modes labeled Personal and Work to separate the parts of her routine. She mostly adjusts notification settings for apps and people rather than using Focus to silence calls. She also set up Work Do Not Disturb and Personal Do Not Disturb for when she wants fewer interruptions. (See [Manage Focus Modes.](#))

Here's how each mode is set up:

- **Work mode (regular):** In the Work mode, Lena lets all notifications pass through. However, because her work is strict about taking personal calls in the office, she uses a Contacts list of her friends and family to silence their incoming calls. They are aware of this, and because she has the call-twice option enabled, they know to call, wait for a number of rings or voicemail, hang up, and call again a moment later if there's a real emergency. (See [Allow or Silence People.](#)) Lena has Focus Filters set to show only her work calendars in Calendar, and Mail shows just her work email account. She has set up a custom work Lock Screen and Apple Watch face that activate when Work mode is on. On her iPhone, she moved her personal apps, like social media ones, to a separate Home Screen, which she has suppressed when Work mode is active. Because she works from an office, she sets a schedule by location (a quirk of the schedule feature): when she gets close to her office, her Work mode activates. (See [Set a Schedule.](#))

Stay Alert to Interruptions

The Notifications section in Settings and System Settings lets you control how apps notify you. But Notifications is about the style, nature, and persistence of alerts—does an app inform you about particular things that occur or not? Does it throw up a banner? Does the banner stay there until you dismiss it? Do you hear a sound and/or get a haptic vibration?

Apple created Focus to filter notifications. If you have a Focus mode enabled, every kind of alert has to pass through the Focus settings to determine whether or not you should hear it, see it, or feel it—or all three. Focus also goes beyond Notifications by allowing you to silence or pass through incoming calls.

And yet, Focus isn't everything! Silent mode, an option interrelated with Focus, appears on iPhone, iPad, and Apple Watch, and lets you suppress audio alerts even if Focus is off or a Focus mode would pass the visual or haptics portion of a notification.

This chapter tries to sort out these details by detailing all the kinds of behavior that try to grab your attention, which part of Apple's operating system controls, silences, or shapes that behavior, and where Notifications, Focus, and Silent mode fit in.

Tip: If this section feels like too much of a 30,000-foot (10,000-meter) view on distraction interactions, skip ahead to [Manage Focus Modes](#). You can come back and review it later if you want to understand the nuances of what tries to get your attention and in which circumstances.

Pick Apart Modes of Behavior

To understand Focus, let's look at what it's trying to manage for you. I think about my interactions with all of Apple's operating systems and apps as a balance between what happens in the apps and external

behavior. Focus doesn't cover all of this, but it does carve out a big part. I would make this distinction as follows:

- **Alerts within an app you're using:** I'm working within an app, performing or responding to actions or behavior created by the app. For instance, if I'm in a writing app, I may be typing away, and the app informs me that I've made a typo, makes a suggestion about something to insert, or automatically formats something I've typed. Generally, I don't cover these kinds of alerts because they are intentionally provided to you within the environment in which you're working.
- **Alerts outside the app you're using:** While I'm using an app for one activity, an alert of some kind requires that I examine information coming from somewhere else: a message has come in, someone is trying to call me, a timer has gone off, someone is at the front door, or a news alert wants me to know about a global event. These kinds of behaviors can mostly be controlled through app preferences, the Notifications settings on all of Apple's operating systems, and using a Focus mode, and they're the focus of this book.

Here are the categories and kinds of behavior that you might see and how Focus interacts with them, which I'll detail further in sections below:

- **Audible alerts:** Any kind of sound your device produces from a speaker (or any connected audio output hardware). Several apps and subsystems have distinct audio alerts that can be enabled or switched to haptic or silent output. This can include speech, if you have Siri set up for that. Focus interacts with nearly all audio output from all device types, though you may have to tweak settings in Notifications, too. See [Silence Audible Alerts](#).
- **Haptic feedback:** An iPhone or Apple Watch can use internal actuators that can produce distinct tap patterns, referred to as *haptics*. iPads can activate haptics in some peripherals. Macs with trackpads use haptics for click feedback, but macOS doesn't tap back at you for other purposes. Focus can suppress or filter most

Manage Focus Modes

Navigate to Settings/System Settings > Focus, and you immediately notice that Focus, whether on an iPhone, iPad, Mac, or Apple Watch, shows its preset Focus states, or modes. These modes are a selection of polarized lenses through which you view the world in different ways. You can also create custom modes that can be dramatically different in function, filter, and purpose.

Note: I noted earlier that I like to call these *modes*—both as a shorter way to describe them, and to distinguish Focus states from the Focus feature or its settings.

When you enable a Focus mode, several things may happen, depending on your settings for that named state:

- Notifications are silenced (from some or all apps).
- Incoming call signals, like a ringtone or haptics, are disabled (for some or all people).
- Your Lock Screen or Home Screen on an iPhone or iPad and watch face on an Apple Watch changes.
- Apps display different settings, such as disabling or enabling email accounts in Mail, or sets of calendars in the Calendar app.
- Dark Mode engages or disengages.

In this chapter, I look at how you activate and deactivate Focus modes, then dig into the modes themselves: preset ones shipped by Apple, and custom modes you can define. Finally, I explain how Apple Intelligence fits into Focus, however imprecisely Apple explains it. In the next chapter, [Configure Focus](#), I walk through all the settings for modes—including ones available only for special modes, like Sleep—and how to disable, refine, or add them for your purposes.

Activate or Deactivate a Focus Mode

Even before we get into the details of Focus modes, you should know how to activate or deactivate them manually. (In [Configure Focus](#), I go through details on automatic activation and deactivation.) Here's how, with details by operating system, including where to spot the Focus mode status icon or text.

Warning! By default, Apple synchronizes your Focus modes across all your devices. That means if you enable or disable a Focus mode on your iPhone, the same state is synced on your iPad, Apple Watch, and Mac. This can lead to missing calls or other unintended consequences. See [Sync Focus States and Current Mode](#).

Tip: When you deactivate a Focus mode, in most cases, you will receive a notification that summarizes all the alerts you missed while in that mode.

Use Focus Modes on an iPhone or iPad

Reveal Control Center, and tap the Focus icon to activate the current mode, typically the Do Not Disturb . Tap elsewhere on the Focus control to choose other modes.

Tip: See [Reveal Control Center](#) for details. Also, see [Add a Control to Control Center](#) if you're missing a Focus control or want to add one to another Control Center screen.

When a Focus mode is active on an iPhone or iPad, the icon for a preset mode—or for a custom mode you chose, described below—appears in the status bar.

To deactivate the mode, tap the icon in Control Center. Or, on the default Lock Screen, you can touch and hold the Focus mode at the bottom-center of the screen and then tap to disable the selected mode or choose a different one.

Configure Focus

The previous chapters were all preamble to the meat, or Portobello mushroom, that follows: how to dig into the general settings and those specific to each of Apple’s major platforms to make Focus fit your needs.

Note: For the top-level Focus settings [Share Across Devices](#) and [Focus Status](#), see [Sync Focus States and Current Mode](#), near the end of this chapter.

To follow along in this chapter, I suggest creating a new custom mode (see [Create Custom Modes](#)) so that you can make changes and try things out without disrupting any of the preset Focus states, though you are free to modify those, too, if you like.

But Focus doesn’t offer a revert or undo: if you make a change you don’t like, you have to remember the way the setting was before. In some cases, that’s as simple as enabling or disabling an option. In others, you might need to recreate a list of people or apps.

Silence or Allow Notifications

The crux of Focus is preventing alerts from showing up when you don’t want them. Or, contrariwise, ensuring only the alerts you want appear.

At the top of a Focus mode, or just below Intelligent Breakthrough & Silencing with Apple Intelligence enabled, you see a section that can be labeled in one of three ways:

- Silence Notifications
- Allow Notifications
- Notifications

What you see depends on the configuration of People and Apps, which appears in this section. Tap either People or Apps, or click Allowed/Silenced People or Allowed/Silenced Apps, and you can set up what gets to break through your self-imposed isolation.

Allow or Silence People

The People section lets you control whether notifications come through or are silenced from people you specify, as well as whether incoming calls are allowed. Tap People or click Allowed People/Silenced People (**Figure 12**).

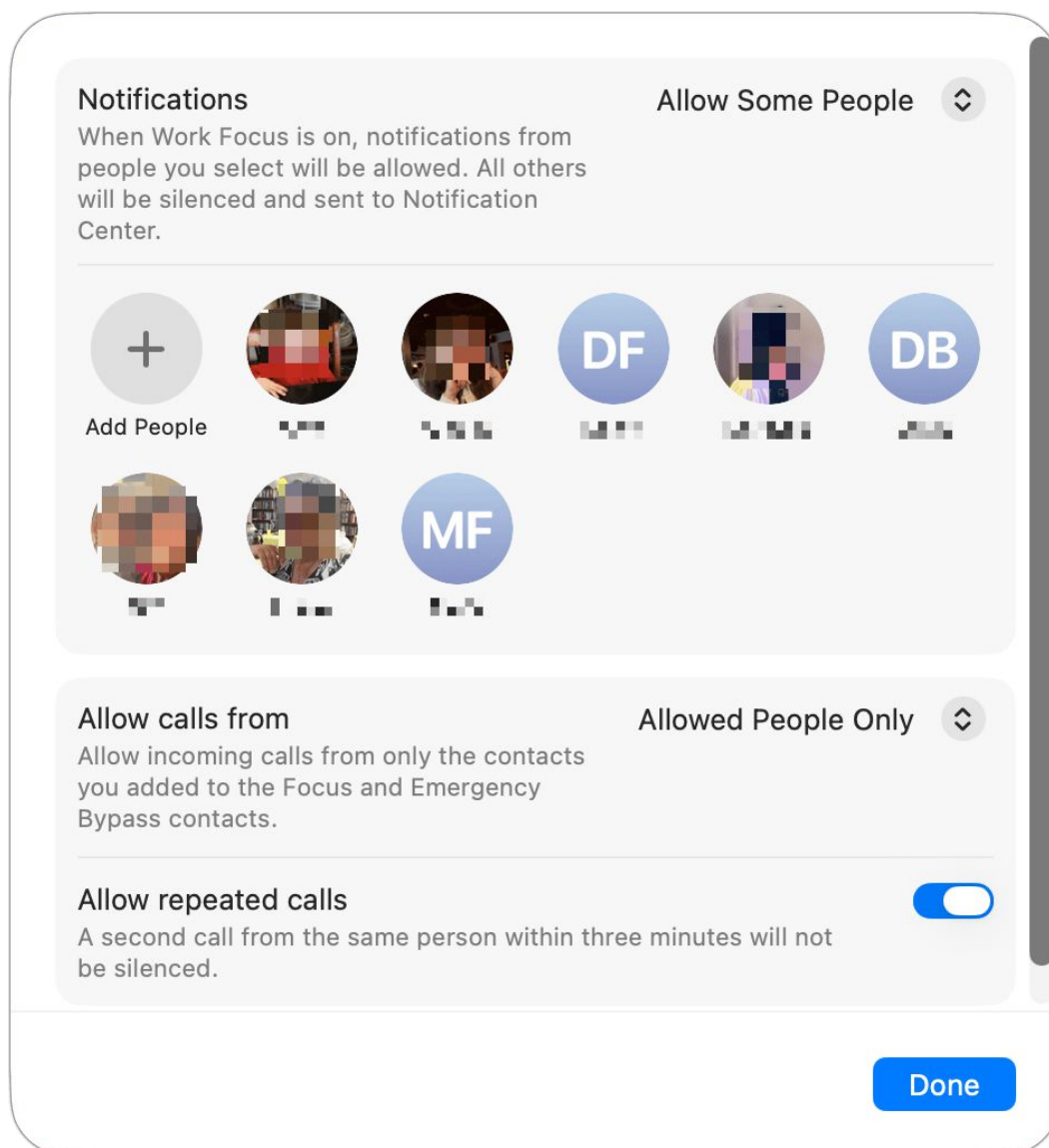


Figure 12: The People section lets you create a set of people to pass through or silence. (My People blurred for their privacy!)

Drift Off with Sleep Mode

Sleep mode might be one of the most useful features ever added to Apple devices. I rely on it for better sleep and as an aid in tracking how well I slept. Apple has integrated Sleep mode with the Health app and Apple Watch, making it a cousin to the Fitness app in how well it interacts with multiple devices and apps.

Note: Yes, I know one can wake up and feel whether one slept well! But, given a number of health problems I've had, I find the quantification of sleep coupled with looking at morning data on a CPAP machine—to deter nighttime breathing obstruction—helps me identify blips in my wellbeing I need to discuss with healthcare providers.

Apple splits Sleep features across several apps:

- **Health:** Manage your sleep schedule and view an analysis of sleep. With an Apple Watch, the analysis is quite detailed.
- **Focus:** The special Sleep state is connected with Health, but can be invoked manually, too, or disabled.
- **Clock:** If you set a sleep schedule, you can change only the next day's schedule and only via the Alarm tab of Clock.
- **Watch:** The Watch app has settings unique to an Apple Watch and sleep, such as a reminder to charge before bedtime.

The best place to start with Sleep mode is in the iPhone Health app. Open the app and tap the Sleep pane. If you don't see it, tap Sleep Score > Sleep, or tap the Search  icon and search for Sleep. Now, under Your Schedule, tap Sleep Schedule. After you set one up, this changes to Full Schedule & Options (**Figure 28**).

Note: The iPad Health app doesn't let you manage the sleep schedule, and there's no Health app for Mac.

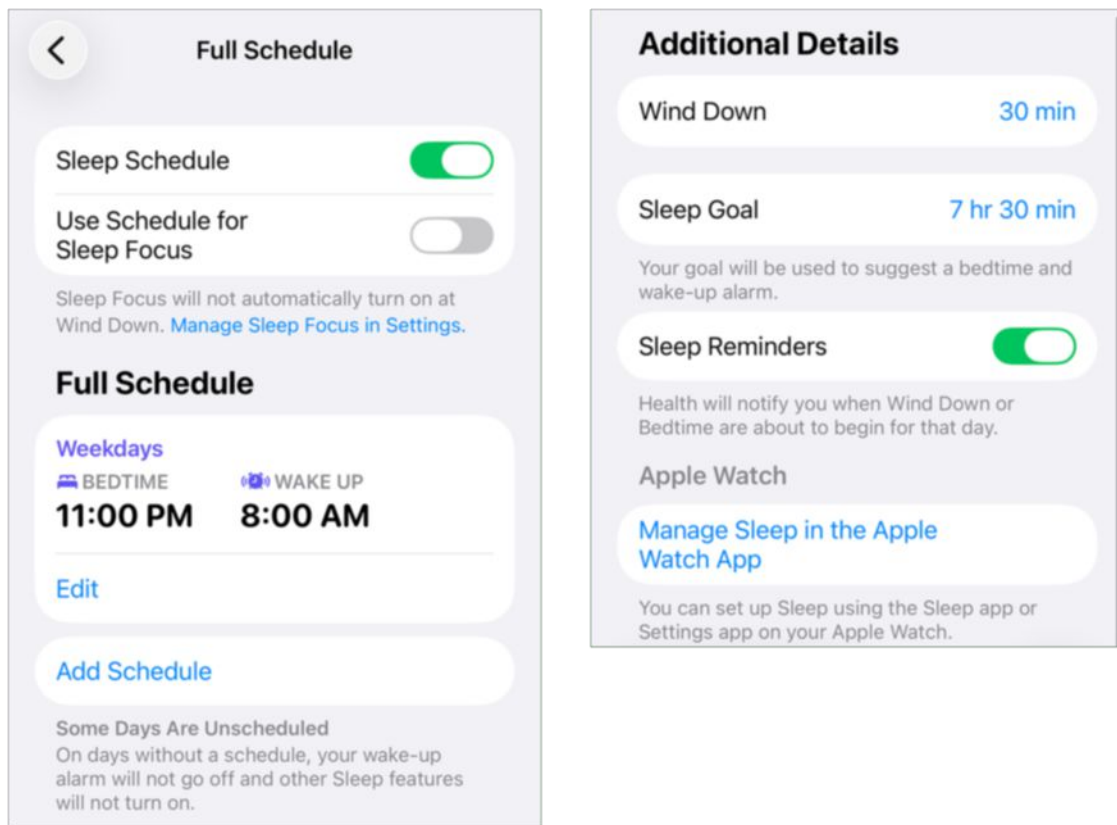


Figure 28: The main schedule page lets you enable Sleep Focus sync, as well as set related sleep parameters.

At the top, you see Use Schedule for Sleep Focus. If you enable this, the Sleep mode turns on when you reach the point you set as your Wind Down period—when you want to start moving toward sleep. If you don’t enable this option, you can still turn the Sleep mode on and off, but you give up some of the benefits.

Tap Set Your First Schedule to configure your desired sleep period (**Figure 29**). (After the first time, Edit and Add Schedule appear.) You can select which days of the week and when you want to go to bed and wake up.

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About the Author



Take Control Books Executive Editor Glenn Fleishman never stops writing about technology and its implications. Among other pursuits, he was a two-game champion on Jeopardy! in 2012.

After nearly 30 years of writing for publications like *American History*, *Fast Company*, the *Economist*, *Increment*, the *New York Times*, *Macworld*, and *TidBITS*, Glenn now focuses his time on Take Control Books (executive editor), *Six Colors* (columnist), and *Aperiodical Publishing Co.*, his own micro-publishing house. He also [edits books](#) and [consults on crowdfunding projects](#), mostly for print books.

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Shameless Plug

[Six Centuries of Type & Printing](#) is a brisk yet thorough look at the technological development that has taken us from Gutenberg (and even before) to the present day. You can order a copy of the print, ebook, or audiobook edition [directly from Glenn](#). You can [subscribe to](#)

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alt concepts, publisher of Take Control Books, is operated by [Joe Kissell](#) and [Morgen Jahnke](#), who acquired the ebook series from TidBITS Publishing Inc.'s owners, Adam and Tonya Engst, in 2017. Joe brings his decades of experience as author of more than 75 books on tech topics (including many popular Take Control titles) to his role as Publisher. Morgen's professional background is in development work for nonprofit organizations, and she employs those skills as Director of Marketing and Publicity. Joe and Morgen live in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, with their two children.

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