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Keystone MacCentral Macintosh Users Group ♦ www.keystonemac.com

Keystone MacCentral February Program

Feb 15, 2022 06:30 PM

Please see your membership email for the links
to this month's Zoom meeting or email us
at KeystoneMacCentral@mac.com.

This month we plan to discuss

- Care and maintenance of cables & chargers
- More of Snapseed photo enhancement app
 - The word game Wordle
- sharkle.com – random activities
to fill time when you are on hold.



We have virtual meetings via Zoom
on the third Tuesday of each month.

Emails will be sent out prior to each meeting.
Follow the directions/invitation each month
on our email – that is, just click on the link
to join our meeting.

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Keystone MacCentral is a not-for-profit group of Macintosh enthusiasts who generally meet the third Tuesday of every month to exchange information, participate in question-and-answer sessions, view product demonstrations, and obtain resource materials that will help them get the most out of their computer systems. Meetings are free and open to the public. *The Keystone MacCentral printout* is the official newsletter of Keystone MacCentral and an independent publication not affiliated or otherwise associated with or sponsored or sanctioned by any for-profit organization, including Apple Inc. Copyright © 2021, Keystone MacCentral, 310 Somerset Drive, Shiresmanstown, PA 17011.

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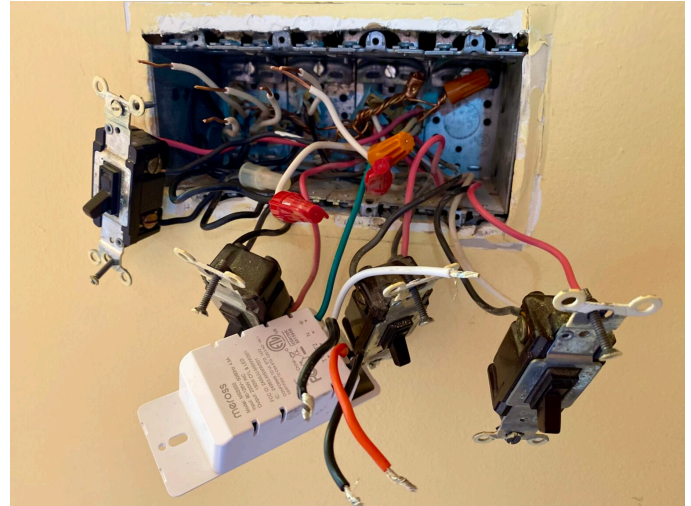
Tom Bank II

By Adam Engst

Reflections on a Year with HomeKit

Last year, I added more devices to our HomeKit setup with the Meross [Smart WiFi Plug Mini](#) outlets (as cheap as [\\$10 each at Amazon](#), with a \$5-off coupon if you click a checkbox), a Velux gateway for controlling some shades, and some Flic 2 buttons (see “[HomeKit for the Holidays \(And Home Troubleshooting Tips\)](#),” 15 January 2021). Since then, I’ve spent quite a few weekend hours replacing 16 light switches for our in-ceiling and track lighting with either Meross’s [Smart WiFi Single Pole Switches](#) (about [\\$21 at Amazon](#), with a \$3-off coupon) or [Smart WiFi 3 Way Switches](#) (about [\\$25 at Amazon](#), with a \$5-off coupon). When buying anything from Meross, be sure to get the HomeKit versions since the company also has versions that aren’t HomeKit-compatible.

I won’t pretend that this was easy or for the faint of heart. Having grown up on a farm and watched my parents build their house, I’m pretty comfortable with tools and wiring and whatnot, but I’ve only dabbled with electrical work. Figuring out exactly how the switches were wired required experimentation in our somewhat interpretive circuit breaker box, a lot of staring at the cables in the switch boxes, reading Josh Centers’s [Take Control of Apple Home Automation](#), and consulting Internet explanations that never looked like my wires. And while it’s easy to remove a switch, my old switches were smaller and had fewer wires than the Meross switches, so I always had to figure out how to integrate the extra ground and neutral wires into the thick bundles of copper in the switch box. I got good at cutting out crimp sleeves, stripping insulation, and putting it all back together with electrical wire nuts. The hardest part was getting everything to fit back into the box at the end.



But oh, was it worth it! We now have five HomeKit “rooms” of lights that we can control individually, together, and via scenes and automations. Because I put the effort into the switches rather than the smart light bulbs, it’s still easy to control all the lights from physical switches, ensuring that anyone who visits won’t be confused or find themselves incapable of controlling the lights. We direct most of our commands to a HomePod—we have original HomePods in the bedroom and dining room, and Tonya has a HomePod mini in her office—but of course, an Apple Watch or iPhone is also always ready to help.

For us, controlling lights via Siri has become the standard. It’s not always successful—at times, talking to Siri is like giving directions to a toddler. Siri sometimes interprets “Turn on the wall lights” as “Turn on all lights,” which is a bit shocking, as every light in the house goes on. It took us a few tries to come up with unique names that made sense to us and didn’t confuse Siri. Plus, we have to be careful about how we speak: “It’s time to eat dinner” generates restaurant recommendations from the HomePod, whereas “It’s time for dinner” adjusts the lighting so we can eat.

Let me explain what we've done. If you've been on the fence about home automation—I was for many years despite Josh's urging—perhaps my experiences will convince you to give it a try.

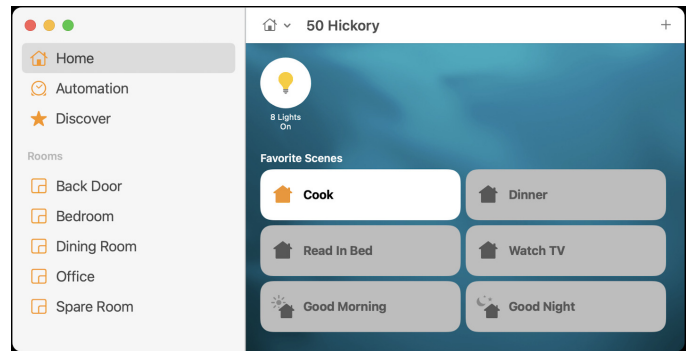
Scenes

We have six HomeKit scenes—collections of light and outlet states that we enable manually throughout the day, usually prefixed in a Siri command with “It's time to...” so it feels conversational. In chronological order:

- **Good Morning:** This suggestion from Apple is actually our least-used scene because all it does is raise the shades in the bedroom and quietly play Ray Lynch's *Deep Breakfast*, our favorite morning music. More often, we just tell Siri to raise the shades directly.
- **Cook:** I added this scene in the late fall, when the shorter days mean that the house is pitch black when I leave my office to make dinner. Instead of fumbling for light switches and turning multiple lights on and then off again as I make my way downstairs, this scene turns on the necessary stairway light plus the kitchen and pantry lights I'll need to cook.
- **Dinner:** Tonya doesn't like to eat dinner with unnecessary lights left on throughout the house. Instead of having to make the rounds to turn them all off before sitting down, the Dinner scene makes sure the light over the table is on and everything else is off.
- **Watch TV:** After dinner, we turn on various lights to clean up and then settle down to watch TV, so once again, we want to make sure only the light behind the couch is on and everything else (particularly the stairway light that shines in our eyes) is off.
- **Good Night:** This Apple suggestion was the first scene we configured way back when, so it's what we use when going upstairs to bed. It turns off all the downstairs lights except those we need to navigate the stairs and turns on the bedroom and bathroom lights so we don't have to fumble with switches in the dark. It also turns on the electric

mattress pad to warm up the bed—more on that in a bit.

- **Read in Bed:** Finally, after we've brushed our teeth and gotten in bed to read, this scene turns off all the lights we've relied on to get upstairs and get ready for bed, leaving just the reading lights above the bed. It also turns off the electric mattress pad so we don't overheat.

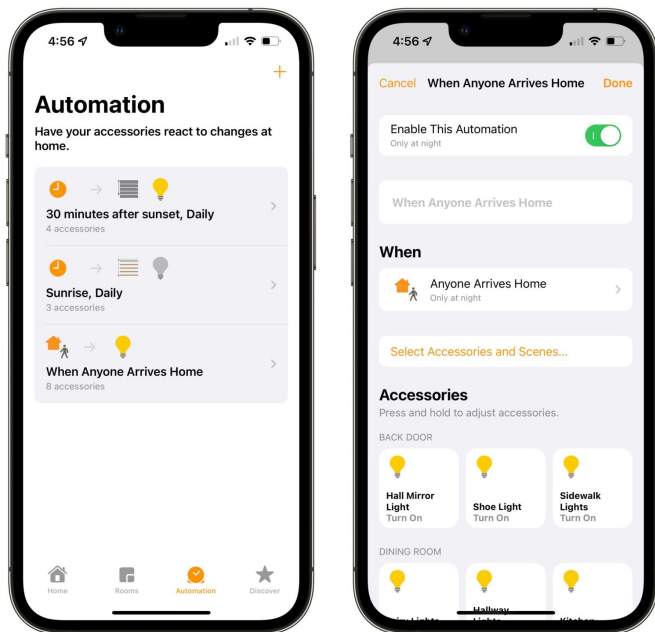


Automations

We don't rely heavily on HomeKit automations, collections of light and outlet states that trigger based on time or some other variable. Instead, we usually activate accessories and scenes manually with voice commands. In part, that's because we spend most of our time at home, so we seldom leave and return, much less do so on a schedule. Plus, the one problem we've never resolved is that we can't add Tonya's iCloud account to the “home,” which prevents us from creating automations that trigger when both of us leave the house, for instance. (Apple's best guess, after much troubleshooting last year, was that she has too many devices associated with her iCloud account.) We do use three automations:

- **Sunrise:** When the sun rises, the motorized shades in two of our three south-facing skylights go up so those rooms get light. The shades in the bedroom stay down so we get to decide when it should get bright as we're waking up.
- **30 Minutes after Sunset:** A half-hour after sunset, this automation closes all the shades for extra insulation and turns on some tiny LED fairy lights we have in our dining room for ambiance.

- **Arrive Home at Night:** This is our favorite automation. When I'm out and return home after dark, this automation automatically turns on all the lights necessary to get from the garage into the house, making it easy to come in with hands full without having to fumble for light switches. Now and then, HomeKit doesn't realize I've arrived home right away, but most of the time, it's cause for minor smugness.



Electric Mattress Pad

Here in upstate New York, it gets pretty cold in the winter, and since we heat our house with geothermal, which can't raise the temperature of the old baseboard radiators upstairs as high as the previous propane-fired boiler could, our bedroom can be on the cool side. Flannel sheets and a down quilt make sleeping comfortable, but getting into a cold bed is never fun, and Tonya particularly dislikes it. For her birthday, I decided to solve that problem with an electric mattress pad and a [Meross Smart Wi-Fi Plug Mini](#) outlet.

I did some research and found that many electric mattress pads aren't compatible with smart outlets. It seems that they don't activate at all or remember their temperature settings when they're turned on by supplying power—as opposed to pressing their built-in power switch. The electric mattress pad I

grew up with in the 1980s had a physical switch and a dial for temperature, but such simple controllers aren't generally available. The best option I found was the [Beautyrest Black Dual Zone Heated Mattress Pad](#), which advertises itself as compatible with smart outlets. Unfortunately, it's hard to find—the Amazon link above doesn't have any available to order now, and while I was able to buy it at Costco back in September, it's entirely unavailable there now.

The Beautyrest Black Dual Zone Heated Mattress Pad works as advertised, providing a mode where it remembers its temperature settings whenever a smart outlet turns it on. (The only downside is the hard connectors that your feet can feel at the bottom of the bed.) As I mentioned, our Good Night scene turns it on automatically, but Tonya gleefully tells Siri to “Turn on the mattress” most nights when we finish watching TV. That adds a few more minutes of heating time and makes sure the sheets are toasty warm. Talk about a birthday present that keeps on giving!

Two Siri Tips

We occasionally come across new ways of using Siri, and since Apple doesn't deign to share all the phrases that Siri knows, I figured this is as good a way to spread the word as any.

- Tonya often sets an alarm on her iPhone when she needs to get up by a particular time in the morning. Turning such an alarm off can be a pain, though, and the other day I tested a hunch and told Siri to “Stop the alarm.” Siri on the HomePod asked if it should stop the alarm on “Big X,” which is the name of Tonya's iPhone, and when I said yes, it did so. I was surprised, particularly since Tonya isn't in our “home.” This hasn't worked every time—sometimes Siri tells us to finish on the iPhone, but it's worth a try to see if it works well for you.
- In Apple's latest operating systems, Siri can perform HomeKit actions at scheduled times or when you leave or arrive at home. We haven't used these features yet, but I can think of several real-world examples. For instance, if we know

Tristan is getting home from visiting friends after we've gone to bed, all the lights we would normally leave on for him would have been turned off by our Read in Bed scene. It would be easy to tell Siri to turn certain lights on at some time after we've gone to sleep but before he has arrived home. Plus, when we leave the house after dark, it would be nice to tell Siri to turn off all the lights after we've left. Note that scheduling actions actually creates a HomeKit automation, so you may need to clear out old ones periodically.

How Do You Reset a Switch?

A few months ago, we had a power outage. Nothing particularly out of the ordinary, but after the power came back on, three of the Meross smart switches I had installed were seemingly dead, ignoring both Siri commands and manual presses. I was quite worried that the power outage had been accompanied by a surge that had damaged them, and I wasn't looking forward to having to fuss with the wiring again.

Acting on another hunch, I went to my circuit breaker box and toggled the power to those circuits off and back on. Happily, that restored the dead switches to normal functioning. Keep that in mind if you ever run into a similar situation.

The Real Benefit of Home Automation

For many years, I was something of a home automation skeptic. It just didn't seem like that much of a win to schedule lights turning on and off. Even after an iPhone became my constant companion, I couldn't see how pulling it out of my pocket was easier than just flipping a light switch. The real key to making home automation work has been the HomePod. Being able to issue a command wherever I am in the house and as I'm walking from room to room has made all the difference—it really is easier than walking over to a light switch and flipping it.

There's an important point to be made here. Home automation isn't mostly about making tasks *physically* easier. The goal is not to end up like the people in the animated film [WALL-E](#), who have, as Wikipedia notes, "degenerated into corpulence due

to laziness and microgravity, their every whim catered to by machinery." (Fun fact from that article: the AUTO artificial intelligence in WALL-E was voiced by [MacInTalk](#).) We're happy to exercise in significant ways throughout the day, and turning off lights before sitting down to dinner is a meaningless addition.

The real win of home automation is eliminating cognitive distractions. When it's time for dinner, it's time to eat—the food is hot, one of us is likely already sitting down, and it's disruptive if the other person has to traipse around the house, shutting off lights. Similarly, when we want to watch TV, getting all the lights set right wastes time and distracts from the focus of the activity. These might be self-imposed distractions—we could just leave all the lights on unnecessarily—but they're no less annoying than unwanted notifications or spam phone calls. It's quite similar to using Keyboard Maestro to automate a repetitive task on your Mac to save time and mental energy.

Finally, I can't say if this will be true for you, but we're actively gleeful when we control our house with voice commands. It truly is magic, in the sense of [Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law](#): "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." It's also another example of living in the future, just like using Apple Pay on the Apple Watch. Not just any future, but a good one, like that of the original *Star Trek*, which was the first instance I remember of people talking to computers. Perhaps turning lights on and off with our voices and having things happen automatically will eventually become commonplace, but we haven't gotten the slightest bit jaded so far.

HomeKit isn't for everyone. It's still fussy to install and configure the necessary hardware, and you have to be willing to laugh at Siri's occasional lapses rather than getting offended that voice recognition isn't perfect. And we're still early in the home automation game. I imagine we'll eventually have technology with room-level awareness of our locations, for instance, which will enable our houses to configure themselves for us, rather than us having to manage everything manually. 🏠

AirTags: Hidden Stalking Menace or Latest Overblown Urban Myth?

The plural of anecdote is not statistics. In the absence of hard data, however, anecdotes often stand in. That seems to be the case with the risk of unwanted tracking associated with Apple's AirTags, cited in several recent news stories and some police reports as a vector for stalking and car theft.

If we take all reported incidents at face value, the total known incidents number no more than a couple dozen across the United States and Canada. Why the outrage and heavy coverage? The fear of what's known is just the tip of the iceberg. That's normal anxiety in regular times and accentuated in a pandemic era, in which our calibration is so far off it can be hard to understand how to judge risk and reaction.

Tracking the Unknown

Let's review how an AirTag and the similar Chipolo ONE Spot work (see "[Apple's AirTag Promises to Help You Find Your Keys](#)," 20 April 2021, and "[Chipolo Ahoy! The ONE Spot Find My Network Tracker Arrives](#)," 24 August 2021). These small, low-power Bluetooth-based items continuously broadcast an encrypted Bluetooth identifier that can be picked up within a range of up to hundreds of feet by Apple devices running recent operating systems. The Bluetooth ID changes at regular intervals to avoid reverse tracking: a static ID would allow someone to track the broadcasting item. (Apple adapted this approach for the system that it and Google provide for COVID-19 exposure tracking.)

Any Mac, iPhone, or iPad with an Internet connection and the Find My network enabled combines its currently known location with any Bluetooth network identifier that fits the pattern for a Find My item. This pairing of location data and Bluetooth ID is uploaded to Apple. Apple can't use those location pings to determine the identity of

any given device because the Bluetooth ID encryption allows only a native Find My app that's part of an iCloud-linked account to request and decrypt the data. All AirTags and Find My items are paired using a single iPhone or iPad, and their encryption keys are shared among that user's other devices.

Because of its compact size, intermittent Bluetooth transmission, regular ID change, automatic signal relaying, and long battery life, an AirTag would seem to be an ideal device to track someone without their knowledge. And it would be, except for the safeguards Apple has put in place to alert people who have an AirTag near them. I wrote an article that describes all the cases in which someone is alerted—see "[When You're Told an AirTag Is Moving with You](#)" (4 June 2021). In brief:

- If an AirTag or other item relays consistently through your iPhone or iPad as you move across locations, you should receive an alert. That alert provides a lot of advice to the device owner about how to proceed.
- An Android user with Apple's new [Tracker Detect](#) app installed can manually scan to detect AirTags and Find My items near them, but only on demand—not in the background as with iOS and iPadOS.
- After a random interval between 8 and 24 hours apart from an owner's devices, a Find My item will produce a loud noise at regular intervals.

Those safeguards leave a fair amount of room to squeeze around the edges of notification. As I described in "[13 AirTag Tracking Scenarios](#)" (15 May 2021), a malicious person could put a tracker in a vehicle or bag owned by a partner and ensure that partner's iPhone had the Find My network disabled. As long as the vehicle or bag was back near the stalker within about 8 hours, its alarm might never go off.

The issue of unwanted tracking is exacerbated by the squishiness around nearly every aspect of AirTags. We don't know how many AirTags and similar Chipolo ONE Spot Find My trackers have been sold. We don't know the number of alerts people receive daily about trackers traveling with them. Of that number, we don't know how many are false positives: the times that a tracker incidentally near someone provokes an alert that has nothing to do with them.

Most important, we don't know what number of Find My trackers are being used to attempt to track adults or non-custodial children without their knowledge and consent. (The issue of tracking your children or those you have guardianship over gets into more complicated legal issues that vary by state.)

What do we know?

- It's feasible to use AirTags to track someone without their knowledge. It's cheap and easy, but fraught with the chance of discovery and tracing it back to the AirTags' owner.
- Police and individuals have found AirTags hidden in vehicles a few times.
- Police don't quite know how to deal with reports by individuals who suspect they are being tracked.
- A fair number of media reports and some police announcements make a lot of assertions; the worst start to verge on common urban myths that play on deep-seated fears.

Let's look into the media and police reporting.

A Roundup Reveals We Should Round Down

I've assembled several stories from the last few weeks, as seemingly credible accounts appeared of people believing that someone was either actively tracking them or had done so at one time. (Simultaneously, I've started seeing more people sharing first-hand experiences of using AirTags to recover lost and sometimes stolen stuff.)

The biggest flurry of stories and subsequent reporting emerged from the York Regional Police in Ontario, Canada, who said that, in what they believed were five different incidents, car thieves hid an AirTag on an expensive vehicle in a public parking lot in order to find it later at an owner's home and steal it at their leisure.



Police in Ontario, Canada, posted this image, stating that a car thief had hidden this AirTag inside a hitch electrical adapter compartment.

The department posted [this video to Twitter](#) and a media release on their website ([Internet Archive link](#)) with a more detailed description and photos. (The release is no longer available, but this isn't a retraction: the tweet is still up, and the York police appear to remove their posts consistently within four weeks, likely automatically.)

That was 2 December 2021, and several stories followed with specific incidents:

- [A swimsuit model found one in her coat pocket:](#) Brooks Nader explained on her Instagram account that she had received a warning about an AirTag

traveling with her as she moved among bars one night and then headed home.

- [Man finds Apple AirTag tracker on his Dodge Charger](#) (Detroit, MI): This TV station has a single first-hand account. It also quotes local police anonymously with a story that's suspiciously like the York release: "Thieves track the target vehicle and pick the most opportune time to steal—found mostly on Dodge products, parked in mall parking lots."
- [West Seneca Police warn of Apple AirTags being hidden on cars and Apple's AirTags used to follow 2 women in West Seneca](#) (West Seneca, NY): The West Seneca Police cite two cases and found a hidden AirTag in one of them.
- [Crowley Police: Apple AirTag facilitating crime](#) (Lafayette, LA): A local police chief asserts two cases with "a notification" but provides no details.
- [Burlington Police give warning about Apple AirTags](#) (Burlington, IA): "Police say they are getting calls from people who have received notifications on their phones that they have been air tagged and it will show them their route of travel."
- [Are Apple AirTags Being Used to Track People and Steal Cars?](#): This prominent end-of-year story in the New York Times had more smoke than fire, asking a question instead of making a statement. The story features several first-hand accounts but includes Mary Ford, "a 17-year-old high school student from Cary, N.C....[who] realized it wasn't a threat when her mother revealed she had put the tracker in the vehicle about two weeks earlier to follow her daughter's whereabouts." But "[Ashley] Estrada, who got the notification while in Los Angeles, eventually found the quarter-sized tracker lodged in a space behind the license plate of her 2020 Dodge Charger."

I also found more general pieces that combined raising awareness and promoting general anxiety:

- [Police warn of AirTags used to track people instead of items](#) (Jacksonville, FL): Despite stating

the police warning, this story doesn't quote any police officers or leaders.

- [Is it legal to track people using AirTags in Alabama?](#) (Huntsville, AL): "The Huntsville Police Department says they have not had any cases of AirTag stalking yet."
- [Some Atlanta residents being tracked with Apple AirTags](#): "We uncovered eight police reports in our area, most within the last month..." the news station said, which could include people receiving false positives. But one person was definitely tracked via her vehicle across a long drive.

The most sensible accounting came from the University of Wisconsin's police department in its post, [Apple AirTags and Your Safety](#). The blog reports that "UWPD has had three reports of individuals reporting they've received an AirTag warning message in the past few weeks on the UW-Madison campus." But it continues with a very important proviso: "In every instance, the AirTag could not be located... it's very likely the AirTag signal was being picked up from a nearby apartment or residence hall room rather than the individual being maliciously tracked."

Are people overreacting? No: the message is absolutely disturbing. If I were in a situation where I suspected someone might have followed me from a bar, from my place of work, or from school, I would absolutely call the police. And I'm a straight man—if you identify as a gender other than male and an orientation other than straight, I expect the sense of concern would be vastly higher due to the well-documented heightened risk of stranger, domestic, and ex-partner stalking and violence among the 70% or so of the population that covers.

But wait. If these incidents were happening regularly, I would expect to see an explosion of news stories. The AirTag offers a specific alert; finding one provides an actionable element for police, who are accustomed to GPS trackers being hidden on cars for stalking purposes. Reporting an alert might not get an officer excited, but finding an AirTag would certainly warrant a report. In some of the stories above, police even began or completed

the process to obtain the registered information associated with the AirTag. In theory, that should lead to a culprit, and the news media should be following up on these stories.

Remember, AirTags are locked to an iCloud account, are associated with a phone number, and have an immutable serial number inside. To read the serial number, someone finding an AirTag only needs an NFC-capable Apple or other device; with other Find My items, an iPhone or iPad is required. All this would seemingly add up to making an AirTag a high-risk way for a perpetrator to track someone unless they had the foresight to create a burner Apple ID and potentially use a burner iPhone that could otherwise be tracked by its unique cellular ID. Apple may promise privacy for iMessage and a lot of other data, but the company will reveal via warrant things like to whom an iCloud account belongs.

Some of the reporting and the police statements smack of past panics and recurring urban myths. In the 1980s, law enforcement across the United States was convinced Satanism was rampant with human sacrifice, including the murder of infants. No matter that no adults or babies were missing—Satanist! From [the Chicago Tribune in 1987](#):

But to a growing number of police investigators around the nation, stories of ritual mutilation, blood-letting and sometimes murder are all too real. In seminars and conferences, they have begun to train others to see signs of satanic motives behind otherwise bizarre and inexplicable crimes.”

Similarly, police alerts appear every year around Halloween about razor blades in apples or poison in candy, even though only [four cases were reported between 2008 and 2019 in the US](#) and almost none before that. A prominent 1974 candy poisoning story wasn’t random: [a father murdered his child](#). There’s also the [ongoing hoax of LSD-coated stickers](#) intended for children. And the one about how flashing your brights at someone with their headlights off at night [will lead them to follow you and kill you](#) as part of a gang initiation despite no deaths ever reported this way. (Road rage is something else.)

It’s human to tell stories. It’s human to manifest fears within the modern world as expressions of distrust of technology. And there’s definitely a risk with Find My trackers that you could be tracked in a way vastly easier than with any previous device. Being aware can help, and Apple could do more.

Keep Alert for Trackers

If you’re worried, what reasonable efforts can you take to protect yourself and your loved ones against unwanted tracking?

- **Leave Find My enabled:** If you disable the Find My network, you won’t receive warnings that an AirTag is moving with you. (Conversely, disabling it prevents your device from relaying, but the value in receiving warnings is very high.)
- **Pay attention to alerts:** Apple’s alerts and explanatory details are clear and informative—read them and follow the provided links. No specialized knowledge is necessary to understand Apple’s instructions for finding and disabling Find My items.
- **Listen for odd alarm sounds:** Find My separation alarms are designed to alert people to the tracker’s presence—if you hear something odd, listen carefully and look for it. The alarm may be faint if someone has tried to muffle the sound.
- **Explain the basics of Find My to others:** Help those who know little or nothing about technology or the tech industry to learn what an AirTag is and what to do if they receive an alert or hear a sound.
- **Contact authorities, if it makes sense:** Upon finding an AirTag, if you have any doubts about your safety and you trust that law enforcement could improve on that, file a police report so the authorities can investigate further with Apple.

One thing that’s out of our control? Active scanning for nearby Find My items. It’s quirky that you can force a scan of your vicinity for Find My devices from an Android phone, but you can’t do the same from a piece of Apple hardware. In the iOS 15.2 beta, an item in the Find My app’s Items view read

[Items That Can Track Me](#), appearing to offer Tracker Detect capabilities. It didn't ship in the production release of 15.2, but Apple should make sure it's in an upcoming release. This would allow iPhone and iPad users to check their car, bags, or home if they're concerned. (And Tracker Detect for Android should work automatically, as the Find My app does in iOS.)

Fundamentally, we can't keep people from engaging in bad behavior. Before wireless technology, someone could have attached a can of flour to the back of your car, punctured it with a small hole, and followed the trail of white powder through the streets. Relatively expensive

GPS trackers that are more powerful and don't require relaying abound. An abusive or mistrustful partner might simply use Find My via Family Sharing to see your iPhone or MacBook's whereabouts.

AirTags don't offer a new kind of risk. They're just a new and ill-understood entry in an old game that might encourage some people to go farther than is sensible or legal with regard to tracking other people. Apple should continue to refine parameters around the AirTags to favor safety while still making them useful for finding a lost backpack or keys. 🗑️

By Adam Engst

Apple's Feature May Be Overkill

Apple walks a fine line with the iPhone. On the one hand, it's magic made manifest, giving you access to both the accumulated knowledge of the world and all the people you can juggle. On the other, the combination of Apple's elegant hardware and the psychologically manipulative efforts of untold numbers of apps and services make the iPhone the ultimate distraction device, bordering on an addiction. For many, what happens on the iPhone is more compelling than nearly anything in real life. It's the digital equivalent of crack cocaine rolled in Doritos coating, glammed up in the latest fashions. (The same applies, more or less, to all smartphones—I'm not actually singling out Apple here; I just don't pay attention to Android smartphones.)

Of course, Apple is entirely aware of this tension. The company makes billions and billions from those who want their digital dopamine hits while proclaiming their fashion sense and deepening their tribal affiliation. But despite what detractors say, Apple isn't a soulless moneymaking machine—

if Facebook controlled the iPhone, we'd all be drooling zombies by now, incessantly pressing on the phone's prominent Like button. Apple offers several solutions beyond the protections afforded by its flawed and controversial App Store approval process. First, the Screen Time technology lets us set limits to help corral our electronic urges. Second, Do Not Disturb gives us a chance to focus on the real world around us without fear of being sucked back in by the next notification. And Apple just introduced a way of gathering less-important notifications into scheduled groups—see [“Reduce Distractions with Notification Summaries”](#) (20 December 2021). We can argue about how effective these features are, but at least they're present for those who have trouble being their best selves in the face of compelling digital distractions.

With iOS 15 and iPadOS 15, Apple revisited Do Not Disturb, a technology that had grown organically and somewhat awkwardly. When it was introduced in iOS 6 in 2012, Do Not Disturb focused on phone calls, but five years later, Apple added Do Not

Disturb While Driving (see [“iOS 11 to Bring Do Not Disturb While Driving,”](#) 21 August 2017). The next year, iOS 12’s new Bedtime mode helped cut down on iPhone-induced wakeups (see [“Inside iOS 12: Do Not Disturb Learns to Turn Itself Off,”](#) 19 September 2018).

The product of 2021’s rethink is [Focus](#), which subsumes all three of those features, suggests other scenarios, and lets users customize precisely which people and apps can break through your virtual cone of silence. Plus, Focus works on (and optionally syncs between) your iPhone, iPad, and Mac (running macOS 12 Monterey).

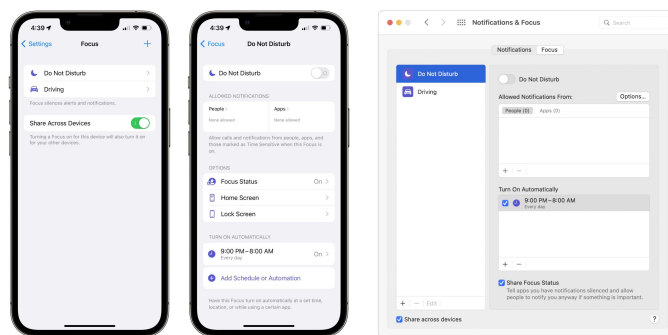
Focus on Functionality

In essence, Focus abstracts and extends the core functionality of Do Not Disturb, automatically blocking calls and notifications at certain times, at particular locations, or when you’re using certain apps. The idea is that you’ll be able to avoid interruptions during activities like working out, doing homework, eating dinner, or gaming. But not all interruptions—you can allow certain people and apps to break through. A Focus can also hide or show certain Home screen pages, prevent notifications from appearing on the Lock screen, and more.

To ensure that no one loses familiar capabilities, in Settings > Focus, Apple provides pre-built Focuses for Do Not Disturb, Driving, and Sleep to match the old Do Not Disturb options:

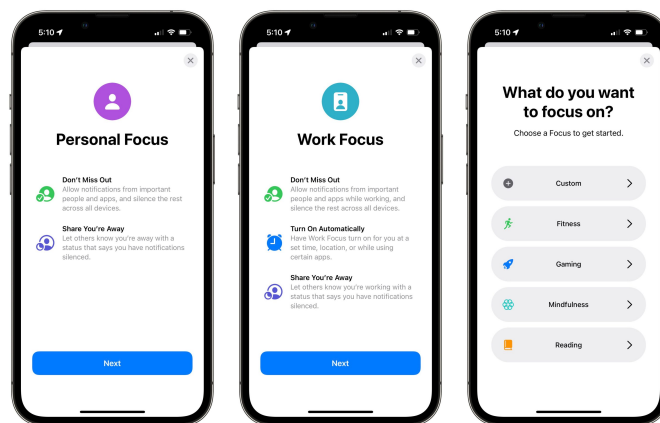
- **Do Not Disturb:** This catch-all Focus takes over from the old Do Not Disturb setting and may be all you need apart from the next item.
- **Driving:** This Focus replaces the old Do Not Disturb While Driving option. It doesn’t let you allow any app notifications through at all (keep your eyes on the road!). But you can write a custom auto-reply for those who text you while you’re driving.
- **Sleep:** If you use Apple’s sleep management features in the Health app, you’ll use this Focus to control which notifications can get through while

you’re asleep—it replaces the previous Bedtime mode.



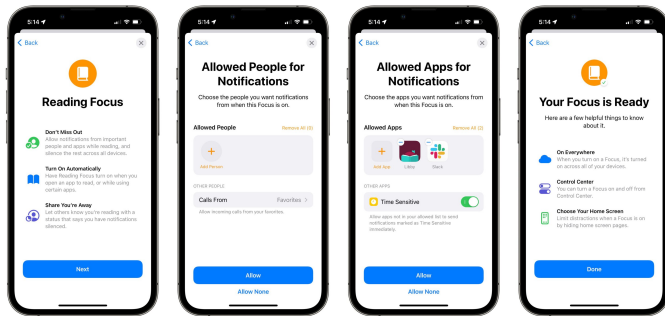
(Those three are on the iPhone, which seems to be the focus of Focus. The iPad and Mac lack Sleep and can’t activate Driving automatically. On the Mac, look for Focus settings in System Preferences > Notifications & Focus > Focus.)

If you can’t immediately think of how you would use Focus beyond these options, you’re not alone. As a result, Apple makes six suggestions: Personal and Work (in the main list) and Fitness, Gaming, Mindfulness, and Reading (when you add a new Focus). You can also create a custom Focus from scratch. Three of these suggestions are special: Fitness, Gaming, and Mindfulness can turn on automatically: when you’re engaged in a workout, when you connect a wireless controller, and when you’re in a Mindfulness session started from your Apple Watch, respectively.



When configuring a suggested focus or creating a new one from scratch, Focus runs you through several setup screens. One has you choose people whose notifications you want to come through regardless, and what to do about incoming phone

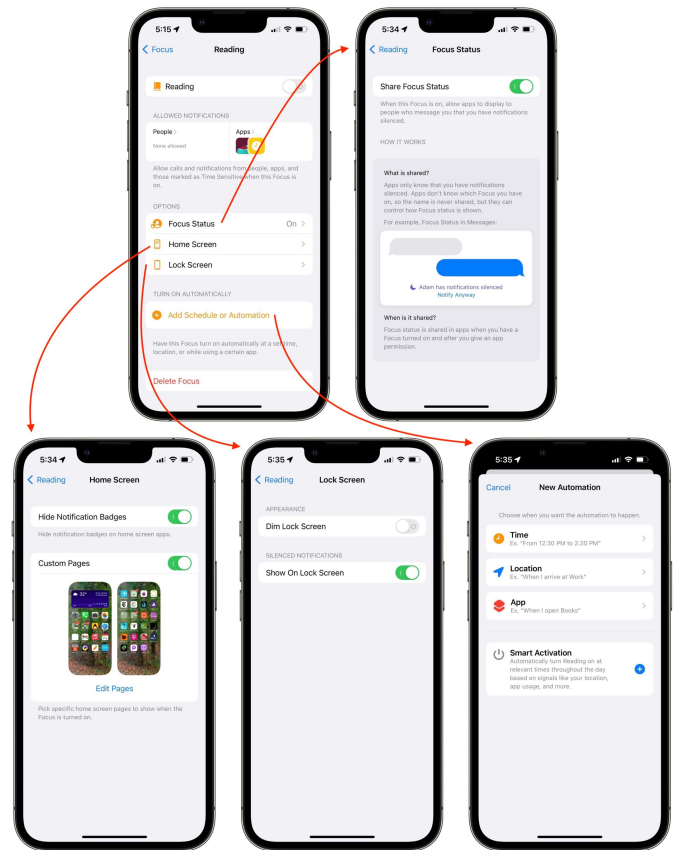
calls. The other screen lets you pick which apps can notify you when the focus is active, with an additional option to allow notifications marked as Time Sensitive regardless. (Time Sensitive notifications include timed Reminders alerts, for instance, and are usually best left enabled—see “[A Quick Primer on Time Sensitive Notifications](#),” 13 December 2021.)



Once your Focus is ready, you can configure various options, including:

- **Focus Status:** Enable this option to allow apps to alert those who message you that you have notifications silenced. As far as we know, this applies only to Messages; you can’t have a reply go through Slack or another messaging app.
- **Home Screen:** If your focus involves you using the Home screen a lot, you can have it hide notification badges that might lure you into another app or even hide entire Home screen pages that could be distracting. Beware, though, since having Home screen pages disappear unpredictably could be unsettling.
- **Lock Screen:** If you might be looking at your Lock screen while the focus is active, you can have it dim automatically and hide or show silenced notifications as appropriate. Again, be careful, since this feels like the sort of thing that could cause you confusion in the future.
- **Schedule or Automation:** Although you can turn on any focus from Control Center (tap the new Focus button), it may be easier to have it turn itself on automatically at certain times, in particular locations, or when certain apps are active. Automatic triggering is the ultimate confusion generator if you set something up, miss the

banner or Lock screen icon, and later wonder why you missed important notifications.



In terms of functionality, the Focus feature provides all the flexibility one could want. But as I suggest above, with such power comes the opportunity to mess things up royally. When I was first testing Focus, I created a Fitness focus that turned on automatically when I was working out. I don’t use the Workout app on the Apple Watch, but I do use Strava, and on a 6-mile hike during which I was hoping to pass the time on phone calls with some relatives, I missed several return calls—I’d called and left messages—because Strava’s workout triggered the Fitness focus. Curses!

I’ll be blunt. The more I’ve lived with Focus and helped friends and relatives understand the implications of using it, the more the feature annoys me. My irritations include:

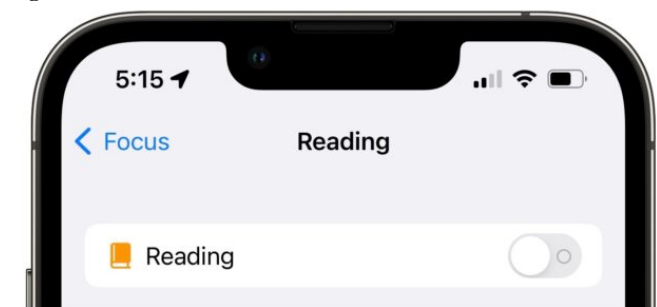
- **Excessive encouragement:** Apple’s suggestions encourage you to use Focus in situations where you might not have thought you had a problem on your own. Who doesn’t think, “Wow, wouldn’t

it be nice to block notifications while I'm deep in some project?" But my strong suspicion is that most people will be incapable of designing a focus that's simultaneously effective at blocking unwanted notifications and sufficiently porous for desired notifications. The question becomes: is it more problematic to process extra notifications or miss potentially important ones? I suspect most people will err on the side of processing extra alerts.

- **Activation option overload:** There are so many activation options—by time, by location, or by app—that it becomes nearly impossible to keep track of what might have triggered a particular focus. Making it even more unpredictable is the Smart Activation option, which turns the focus on automatically “at relevant times throughout the day based on signals like your location, app usage, and more.” Oh good, just what we need.



- **Confusing state switch:** At the top of each focus is a single switch that tracks the state of the focus and lets you toggle it manually. Maybe it's just me, but whenever I edit a focus, I'm tripped up by the fact the switch is generally off. That's “correct” if the focus *is* off, but it feels to me like it should be on to indicate that the focus will turn on at the right moment.

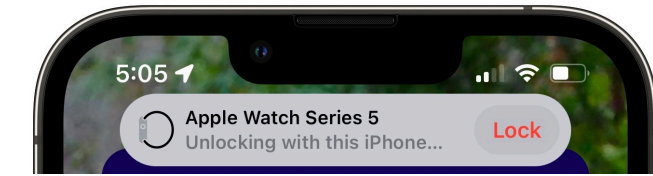


- **Awkward cross-device sharing:** On the main Focus screen, there's an option, which I believe is the default, to Share Across Devices. When enabled, it makes Focus even more unpredictable, if such a thing could be possible. Open an app that triggers a focus on your iPhone, and suddenly your Mac is using the same focus. Who knows what effect that will have? Josh Centers noted that he set up a focus on his iPad so notifications wouldn't appear when his son was practicing piano (see “[Learn to Tickle the Ivories with Simply Piano](#),” 20 January 2022), but it disabled notifications on Josh's iPhone and Mac at the same time, which obviously wasn't desirable.



- **Annoying banners:** Whenever a focus turns on, my iPhone displays one of the new 6-second banners at the top of the screen—before Focus, I saw it primarily when my iPhone unlocked my Apple Watch in the morning. I hate these banners with an all-consuming passion because they are:
 - **Distracting:** They distract me from what I'm doing. I don't need to know that my iPhone is unlocking my Apple Watch—that becomes obvious because it is unlocked afterward. In the case of Focus banners, it's not unreasonable to notify the user in some way, but a 6-second banner is far too much. A haptic alert or a status icon or even a brief spoken notification—“Reading on”—would

be less annoying.



- **Obscuring:** They block the top of the current app. In the case of the Libby app and my Reading focus, that makes me wait 6 seconds—an eternity in interface design—to tap the A display button that I regularly use to adjust the display to whether or not I’m wearing my glasses (font size) or reading in the middle of the night while Tonya is asleep (background color).



- **Finicky:** Their interaction modes can be confusing. If you don’t want to wait for 6 seconds, you can swipe the banner up to dismiss it while leaving the focus enabled. However, if you miss and tap the X button on the right side, that disables the focus. These are appropriate controls, but it’s too much to expect users to figure them out and use them as intended.

So here are my recommendations if you aren’t already happy with your Focus setup:

- Stick with the standard scheduled Do Not Disturb and Driving notifications, plus Sleep if you use watchOS’s sleep tracking capabilities. Those classic capabilities—blocking notifications during specific times, such as when you’re asleep and while driving—address the needs of most people.
- If you want to block notifications when using a particular app, add it to the Do Not Disturb focus (or a new custom one) by tapping Add Schedule or Automation > App and selecting the app. That might be useful for preventing notifications from distracting you while taking photos or videos using the Camera app, for instance.

- Add a new focus only if it seems absolutely necessary. For instance, I don’t use the Mindfulness app on the Apple Watch, but if you do, that seems like a legitimate time to block distracting notifications. But adding a Work focus that goes on automatically when you arrive at the office is the sort of thing that will prevent you from receiving an important phone call from your doctor.
- If you do add a focus, configure it as sparingly and leniently as possible to start. The more apps and locations and schedules and automations you add, the less you’ll be able to predict when it will activate. I recommend allowing calls from your Favorites group along with the Repeated Calls option that lets someone get through to you if they call a second time within 3 minutes.
- If a focus isn’t working as you’d like, consider whether it’s possible to configure it to work better, or if it would be easier to delete it entirely and control notifications on a per-app basis or with the occasional manual triggering of Do Not Disturb for an hour or until you leave your location.
- If you dislike the 6-second banners as much as I do, [send feedback to Apple](#). As I noted in mine, it’s unreasonable to subject users to frequent unwanted notifications that they can’t control in Settings > Notifications.

The core problem with Focus is that it’s an allow-few approach—it blocks everything other than what you allow through. That’s not unreasonable because you can separately employ a block-few approach that allows everything except what you specify by making use of Notification Summaries and disabling individual app notification settings. But allow-few approaches often inadvertently catch more than is desired—they force you to imagine what might be caught in advance—and must thus be implemented with caution.

Or perhaps I’m merely grumpy about Focus because its banners interrupt me more than the notifications from which it is supposedly protecting me. 🗑️

Random Messages From Somewhere

[Pestle](#) is an app for those who like to try their hand at new recipes.:

[Keychron Q2](#) [is](#) a small (and VERY configurable) keyboard

[iOS 15.4 beta](#): check out a bunch of new features soon to be on your devices.

[Wordle spoiler alert](#): Go to this page only if you have not idea how to start. 🗑️

Apple Updates

Security Update 2022-001 (Catalina)

Jan 26, 2022 — 1.52 GB

System Requirements

macOS 10.15

macOS Catalina Security Update 2022-001 (19H1713) is recommended for all users and improves the security of macOS. 🗑️

