# Peter Attia MD Keypoints — Meaning, Happiness & Life Lessons

Peter Attia MD Keypoints

Episodes in this pack: 24

# #377 Special episode: Understanding true happiness and the tools to cultivate a meaningful life

Guest: Arthur Brooks
Date: 2025-12-22 · Duration: 1:38:44
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mbG7n5_yps

## KEYPOINTS

**• Happiness isn't a feeling; feelings are evidence of it.**
Arthur Brooks, the social scientist who teaches Harvard's happiness course, distinguishes happiness from happy feelings. Emotions arise from a limbic system shaped over tens of millions of years of evolution. The average person spends about 40% of their time with predominantly positive feelings and about 16–17% with predominantly negative ones—and happiness and unhappiness can coexist.

**• Negative emotions dominate attention by design.**
Negative affect grabs attention because ignoring a threat could cost your life. The limbic system reacts first; about three seconds later the prefrontal cortex catches up ('I shouldn't have flipped him off'). Political contempt exploits the insula so opponents feel disgusting, and grief is the brain demanding a separation that can't be undone go away.

**• Most adults rate themselves 7–9 out of 10, and a 5 is below the middle.**
On an anonymous 1–10 scale (anonymity matters—people lie in front of spouses and friends), most adults from their early 20s to early 50s land between 7 and 9. A 5 is roughly the 40th percentile. Happiness generally declines from 28 to 38 to 48 for many people, contrary to what they expect.

**• Happiness has three 'macronutrients': enjoyment, satisfaction and meaning.**
The happiest people—the 8s and 9s—have all three in balance and abundance, like a good diet of protein, carbs and fat. You can't run on just one.

**• Enjoyment is pleasure plus people plus memory; pleasure alone is dangerous.**
Brooks notes beer ads never show a man alone pounding a 12-pack—they show friends laughing, selling enjoyment rather than pleasure. Pure pleasure supercharged becomes fentanyl (which he links to about 100,000 deaths a year) or slot machines at 4 a.m. Peter adds that Mendelian randomization suggests alcohol is harmful at any dose, though the Mediterranean, communal pattern shows some association with benefits.

**• Satisfaction requires struggle and wears off quickly by design.**
Students who earn an A through struggle get satisfaction; copying last year's exam gives none. A raise feels great until it shows up three weeks later and homeostasis resets. The hedonic treadmill echoes Buddhism's first noble truth—life is unsatisfying—and the second, that attachment causes the dissatisfaction.

**• Meaning is the 'protein'—you can't substitute for it.**
Brooks frames meaning as coherence, purpose and significance. He uses a two-question 'exam': why are you alive, and for what would you be willing to die? Flunking it starts the adventure of finding answers.

**• Fame and success addiction hijack happiness.**
Workaholism and the pursuit of worldly success often trade away relationships. Peter pushes back that society benefits from people who make enormous sacrifices; Brooks agrees highly successful people often succeed in spite of messy mental hygiene, not because of it.

**• Metacognition lets you observe emotions rather than be run by them.**
Brooks' practices include the 'reverse bucket list' (deciding what to stop wanting), rationing news to 15–30 minutes a day in one sitting, and not answering emails on days of very good or bad news so neurochemistry doesn't drive decisions. 'I need fewer opinions because I need more friends.'

**• Transcendence 'makes you small'.**
Whether secular or religious, transcendent experiences shrink the ego; Brooks quotes Steve Martin's 'get small.' He says science is one reason he's religious, while Peter, more agnostic, spends his time coming to grips with mortality.

**• Understanding happiness works like understanding health: no single biomarker, many inputs.**
Peter draws the parallel explicitly—he tracks VO2 max, strength and body composition for longevity, and Brooks' philosophy of happiness is 'all one thing' with it. Brooks admits there's no clean biomarker for happiness the way there is for fitness, so he breaks the problem into dimensions (the macronutrients and their 'micronutrients' like family, friendship, faith and work) and tracks them. He compares the complexity to Formula 1: you wouldn't replace races with computer simulations just because racing is risky and messy.

**• Don't chase emotional highs.**
Brooks says the 'pro level' of self-management is not seeking highs, because highs don't add much to well-being. He uses the example of bipolar disorder, where patients often struggle to stay on medication because they miss the mania. The romantic notion that great artists need emotional chaos rests on spectacular cases; most succeed despite it.

## EXAMPLES

**• The 42° ice bath**
Brooks says the cold plunge still hurts every day, but because he chooses it and sees value in it, it doesn't come with 'I hate this'—his model for voluntary discomfort.

**• The class that fills in nine seconds**
His Harvard elective is competitive; students spend their elective points to get in.

**• Peter's smoking**
Peter's wife smokes twice a year with her sister; Peter can't, because he got 'the monkey on his back immediately' and stripped the pleasure out of tobacco to quit.

- **Love your enemies**
  Brooks cites Martin Luther King's sermon on Matthew 5:44: love is a decision, not a sentimental feeling—what happens between spouses too.
- **60% happier**
  Brooks says his well-being has risen about 60% in four years, testing every practice before writing about it, 8–9 weeks ahead in his Atlantic column.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Audit your three macronutrients.**
  Ask whether you're short on enjoyment (shared experiences), satisfaction (earned achievement) or meaning—and stop trying to fix one with another.
- **Choose enjoyment over isolated pleasure.**
  Pair indulgences with people and memories; solitary pleasure-seeking is where addiction lives.
- **Practice a reverse bucket list and ration news.**
  Reducing wants and inputs lowers dissatisfaction more than accumulating achievements. The conversation keeps the claim tied to named mechanisms, numbers, and caveats so a listener can act or ask better questions without flattening the nuance.
- **Accept suffering as part of a full life.**
  'If it feels terrible, make it go away' is a poor motto; some suffering builds meaning.
- **Balance the 'I self' and the 'me self'.**
  Brooks describes the observing self and the self-conscious, socially compared self; you need both—social comparison and even envy evolved for survival—but metacognition keeps the comparing self from running your life.

# 366 Transforming education with AI and an individualized, mastery-based education model

Guest: Joe Liemandt
Date: 2025-09-29 · Duration: 2:03:23
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2g2n_CkAolg

## KEYPOINTS

**• US K-12 spending is huge and results keep slipping**

Peter notes the US spends about $1 trillion on K-12, roughly a seventh of global education spending, with poor returns — paralleling healthcare. Joe Liemandt cites the national NWEA MAP norms: the average eighth grader in 2025 knew less than in 2020, who knew less than in 2015, so it isn't just COVID. Only the 99th percentile improved. AP exams were re-normed easier because college students now know less.

**• Straight-A transcripts hide years of gaps**

Placement tests at Alpha show incoming A students range from one year ahead to three years behind, and B students from three to seven years behind — a seventh grader missing many fourth-grade questions. Joe tells parents paying $40,000 for private school that the grades were misleading, but stresses the gaps are quick to fix.

**• Fact fluency frees working memory**

Drawing on cognitive load theory, Joe says memorized facts don't occupy working-memory slots, so skipping multiplication tables in favor of calculators handicaps higher math. 'Careless errors' often signal overloaded working memory from a missing foundation rather than a lack of grit.

**• Knowledge is hierarchical, so time-based promotion compounds holes**

Physics is calculus with word problems, chemistry is algebra with word problems, algebra is advanced fraction manipulation, and fraction scores predict algebra scores. Passing kids on with 70–80% mastery creates holes that surface in algebra or chemistry. His sports analogy: a point guard losing the ball 20% of the time works on dribbling, not dunking.

**• With mastery and AI tutors, a grade level takes 20–30 hours**

Instead of ~180 days of class plus homework, Alpha students finish a grade level of a subject to mastery in about 20–30 hours (around 22 each for sixth- and seventh-grade math). Bloom's 'two sigma' finding — individual tutoring to mastery lifts average students to roughly today's top 10% — underpins Joe's claim that, excluding the bottom 5%, 95% of eighth graders could reach top-10% performance in math.

**• Motivation is 90% of the problem; 'time back' is the motivator**

Edtech handles placing kids at the right difficulty; it fails at engagement. Pitching '2x learning' fell flat with parents — fewer than 10% prioritize academics — but '2-hour learning' that frees the afternoon for workshops, sports or projects motivates every kid. Lecture classrooms retain maybe 5%. Their AI watches screens and coaches against scrolling and guessing; a 'waste meter' tracks unproductive time.

**• Keep students in the zone of proximal development**

Questions should be answered correctly about 80–85% of the time — 99% is too easy, 50–60% causes disengagement — with lessons completed first-time-right 90–95% of the time. A Stanford lecture conveys one to five facts or concepts per hour; their engines reach 20–40, aiming for 100 with generative AI.

**• Mastery turns ability into a decision**

Joe argues good grades in a time-based system track IQ plus conscientiousness; mastery removes the IQ ceiling for K–8 concepts, and extrinsic motivators compensate for low conscientiousness. Once kids see their remaining gap in hours ('you're 60 hours behind'), reaching the top becomes a choice of effort. He says the 'I'm not a math girl' story has no basis in learning science.

**• Paying kids is kindling, not the fire**

Alpha uses extrinsic rewards — time back above all, but also money, such as $1,000 for middle schoolers who reach the top 1%. Critics worry it undermines intrinsic motivation; Joe says those studies cover already-motivated kids, while his students gain belief in their capability. Peter's framing: kindling you don't need forever.

**• AI is education's light microscope**

Peter compares the light microscope enabling germ theory to AI enabling 40 years of learning science to finally work at scale: precise teaching plus closed-loop measurement of what each child knows. Joe expects this year's math curriculum to teach more in 20% less time based on last year's data. He's adamant that schools, adults and classmates remain; the teacher's role changes.

## EXAMPLES

**• 740 to 790 by relearning times tables**

A student stuck at a 740 math SAT reviewed 'game film', found she knew the material but made careless errors, went back to third-grade multiplication and division to fluency, and scored 790.

**• $100 for 100 on any grade's state test**

Joe offered seventh-grade boys $100 for a perfect Texas STAAR score at any grade level. They aced third and fourth, hit 75–85 at fifth, let the AI generate lessons for the gaps, and climbed to grade level for about $400 each. Fewer than 10% of incoming parents think their kid can score 100; after a year, about 90% of kids say they can.

**• His daughter and the $1,000 Amazon cart**

His younger daughter, sure she wasn't 'top 1% like her sister', filled a $1,000 Amazon cart and ground through lessons to reach it — then told her skeptical mother it had changed how she saw herself. She later weighed about 20 extra hours to chase a perfect 800 SAT math.

**• Second graders run a 5K**

Guide Faith, teaching Atomic Habits, signed second graders up for a 5K: walk it first, then add a quarter lap of running at a time, until all ran it by December.

- **Peter's daughter**

  She arrived in seventh grade convinced she couldn't do math; after filling third- and fourth-grade gaps she was acing math by eighth grade and still is in public high school.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **When a student struggles, look backward**

  Struggles in algebra or chemistry often trace to fractions or times tables; filling prerequisites is faster than grinding current material.

- **Review 'game film' on tests**

  Classify each miss as careless or not-known; repeated careless errors suggest a fluency gap.

- **Pair high standards with high support**

  Citing David Yeager's 10 to 25, Joe argues kids thrive on struggle and failure with a caring adult; guides hold the standards so parents can focus on love and support.

- **Know the caveats**

  Alpha is selective and expensive ($40k–75k, with scholarships); real-time AI costs about $10,000 per child per year now, though Joe predicts an on-device tablet under $1,000 within three to five years. He insists dropping the software into a six-hour classroom won't work without rebuilding the school day.

# 360 How to change your habits: why they form and how to build or break them

Guest: Charles Duhigg
Date: 2025-08-11 · Duration: 2:27:34
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhLHfPZEKgU

## KEYPOINTS

**• Every habit is a loop of cue, routine and reward, and habits make up roughly 40–45% of daily behaviour.**
Duhigg, author of The Power of Habit, cites Wendy Wood's research at USC for the 40–45% figure. The basal ganglia strengthens the links between cue, behaviour and reward until the behaviour runs automatically. He became interested after an Army major in Iraq told him 'the military is a giant habit change machine,' and after realising that despite professional success he couldn't make himself run or lose weight.

**• Positive reinforcement is roughly 20 times more effective than punishment.**
In Duhigg's example, you'd need about 20 cane strikes to match the motivation of one post-run smoothie. Negative rewards work best as tension imposed before the behaviour and relieved by doing it, like the interrogator's 'I'll let you out of the box if you talk.' He suggests the brain prices punishments accurately but overvalues rewards, especially unexpected ones—the slot-machine effect—so pair any punishment with a reward.

**• Rewards must be immediate, then shift from extrinsic to intrinsic.**
Newcomers to exercise don't anticipate the runner's high, so it can't motivate them yet. Start with a smoothie, a long shower or praise. Over time the felt reward—accomplishment, endorphins, relief—takes over. Many people sabotage new habits by accidentally punishing themselves, such as rushing a shower and running late after a morning run.

**• Cues fall into five types; stack as many as possible for a new habit.**
The five: time of day, place, emotional state, other people, and a preceding ritual. For a new running habit: alarm at 7, shoes and clothes by the bed, a friend waiting at the corner, and a reward decided in advance. Attia finds other people—accountability partners or trainers—among the most powerful cues.

**• You don't break a bad habit; you change it.**
Neural pathways for habits rarely thin, which is why a lapsed meditator restarts quickly and an ex-smoker still craves a cigarette after breakfast. Identify the cue and the reward, then insert a new routine that delivers a similar reward. Duhigg says physical nicotine dependence fades within about 100 hours; the habit loop is what persists.

**• Willpower is like a muscle: trainable, but it fatigues within a day.**
Errors cluster in surgeons' second or third operations or very long cases; affairs among lawyers and doctors cluster after 9–9:30 pm. Plan for depleted moments. Duhigg says willpower has low heritability and is learned through parenting, sport and practice.

**• Relapse is data; treat yourself like a scientist.**
Prochaska's work shows committed smokers quit about seven times before it sticks. Early attempts rely on willpower; later ones succeed with 'implementation intentions,' such as keeping candy ready for the mother-in-law visit that triggers a cigarette. Attia coaches patients never to judge a missed day—just don't let one become two—because self-blame floods the brain with negative reward.

**• Mental habits matter as much as behavioural ones, and contemplative routines enable deep thinking.**
The mind produces something like 47 thoughts a minute. Serial innovators build rituals—a weekly reflection or a walk before brainstorming—that trigger depth on demand. 'Making the right choice is so much more powerful than executing really well on the wrong choice.' Cal Newport's work explains why walks feel unproductive compared with clearing email, and why they aren't.

**• Decision fatigue is real; design which decisions you make, and when.**
Obama wore identical suits to save decisions for important ones. Decide in a 'cold' state—choose lunch after breakfast, not when starving. Attia admits he struggles to pick a restaurant late in the day; Duhigg says the fix is to plan for frailties, not deny them.

**• Motivation is the prerequisite no coaching can supply, and it changes across life.**
Duhigg argues information and reinforcement—whether from a book like Outlive or an AI coach—only help someone already motivated. Tony Robbins' gift is generating motivation, not sophisticated advice. Attia's reasons for training at 52 differ completely from those at 20, so keep experimenting with what motivates you.

## EXAMPLES

**• Soap in South Asia (Val Curtis's research)**
Families saved soap for guests or prayer. Health messaging failed. What worked: a less perfumed scent that felt medicinal, and ads framing handwashing as being a good parent—an identity reward—built on disgust research.

**• Marines and IED dust**
Training used charges that made dust clouds without noise or fire, because dust is a more reliable cue than sound. The reward was squad-mates saying 'good job,' and camaraderie becomes why soldiers stay.

**• Savings experiment (Wharton)**
In cash economies in South America, a bank clerk praising savers each week raised savings by about 40% compared with the same box and information alone.

**• Qantas Flight 32**
After an engine blew apart and 12 of 14 key systems failed, Captain Richard de Crespigny reframed the A380 as a Cessna and landed all 469 people safely; simulators usually crash. Before every flight he quizzed co-pilots on emergencies and argued with their answers.

**• Toothpaste mint and vitamin gummies**
Mint's tingle made brushing feel like it was working; sugar coatings boosted vitamin use. Both manufacture immediate rewards.

- **Katie Milkman's 'temptation bundling'**
  She listened to Harry Potter audiobooks only on the bike. Attia does the same with favourite podcasts during zone 2.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Start additive habits absurdly small**
  Attia's prescription for a cardio-hater: three 15-minute rides a week, tracking only time; showing up is the win. For subtractive habits, control your environment—an hour of grocery-store willpower buys 167 easy hours.
- **Make a game board for long-horizon goals**
  Duhigg and Attia both use spreadsheets to gamify saving. Duhigg updates his weekly, tracking 1–3-year earnings next to net worth so market dips don't kill motivation.
- **Parent for agency**
  Praise effort ('you worked hard') rather than traits (Carol Dweck). Narrate your own cues and rewards out loud, and admit failures as data points.
- **Find a reward you actually want**
  Kale smoothies rarely work as rewards; experiment. For a pill with no felt benefit, attach a meaning—'I'm staying around for my kids.' Social praise turns intrinsic fastest; AI encouragement may help some people.

# 354 – What the dying can teach us about living well: lessons on life and reflections on mortality

Guest: Dr. BJ Miller & Bridget Sumser
Date: 2025-06-23 · Duration: 2:34:59
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBVsRIRj31Q

## KEYPOINTS

**• Dying is something bodies are built to do, and most of the work happens long before the final moment.**
Hospice and palliative physician BJ Miller (who nearly died at 19 after an electrical injury and spent about three months in a burn unit, losing both legs and an arm) and social worker Bridget Sumser push back on the movie deathbed epiphany. More than 80% of people now die of chronic illness, meeting the cause of their death well in advance. 'There's nothing wrong with you for dying. This is the way it's supposed to go.'

**• Palliative care is the broad umbrella. Hospice is its final, narrower part.**
Palliative care is team-based care focused on quality of life 'as defined by the patient' for anyone with serious illness, alongside full curative treatment and without a prognosis requirement. Hospice, the older model, enshrined in Medicare in 1982, requires giving up curative treatment and certification of six months or less to live if the disease runs its course. Miller calls palliative care 'just good healthcare', yet few patients get it. People confuse it with hospice, clinicians assume they already provide it, and there aren't enough trained staff.

**• Americans enter hospice far too late, averaging about three weeks.**
Sumser and Miller say patients, families and especially referring physicians wait too long, adding suffering and treatments that no longer help. Peter describes the trap: an older patient admitted for an emergency ends up intubated and on dialysis, can't be moved to hospice, and dies in the ICU. Miller says anyone stating 'I never want to die in a hospital' should be flagged for early referral, and that the six-month cutoff was an arbitrary political choice. The original thinkers wanted a year.

**• Home hospice is a service, not a place, and families carry most of the work.**
About 80% of hospice is delivered where people live. Hospice houses are rare because room and board count as social rather than medical costs. The famous six-bed house where Miller worked closed for lack of funding. The team is on call 24/7 and visits perhaps a few times a week, but most of the daily care falls to family. Private caregivers in the Bay Area cost about $20–55 an hour. The result is costly cycles of hospital, rehab and home that are worse for everyone.

**• End-of-life delirium is common, and what people say during it shouldn't be taken literally.**
It's often quiet (hypoactive) and easy to miss. Miller recalls a widow tormented for two years by her husband's harsh last words. He has become slower to sedate delirium automatically and prefers to ask patients in advance what they'd want. Sumser stresses minimizing triggers like lighting, noise and interruptions. Loss of appetite and thirst is the body's signal that the gut is shutting down, and forcing food or fluid can cause pain or fluid buildup.

**• Pain can almost always be controlled, but suffering is a different thing.**
Miller says no one in 2025 needs to die in physical distress if palliative sedation is included, and that dosing opioids for symptoms is not euthanasia. Suffering is when symptoms threaten your sense of self. Someone who sees pain as redemptive may hurt without suffering, while mild pain can be devastating to someone else. Turning down symptoms is only the starting point, so the 'meaty' work on fears, unfinished business and faith can begin. Sumser explores what opioids mean to each patient, including people in recovery.

**• Advance directives are free, need no lawyer, and the proxy is the key choice.**
Most people think they matter, but only about 20% have one. Everyone over 18 should. Sumser made hers in her late 20s, picturing her estranged parents and a casual partner trying to decide for her. Peter tells friends who name him as proxy that they must talk it through over dinner first. Because people adapt (healthcare workers say they wouldn't want to live with quadriplegia, while most people who have it are glad to be alive), revisit the directive over time and frame it around what makes life worth living, not just DNR/DNI. One proposed term is 'AND', allow natural death.

**• We tend to die the way we lived, so practice now.**
Sumser: people who lived connected and reflective tend to die that way. If you want forgiveness or connection at the end, build it now. Miller's biggest lesson is honesty with yourself. The common thread in regrets is not letting themselves feel, letting shame drive 'a wedge' between them and others. Most often patients need to forgive themselves. 'I love you, I forgive you, please forgive me, thank you' holds up across cultures. Accept fear and regret rather than chasing fearlessness.

## EXAMPLES

**• Meeting a 42-year-old with stage 3 breast cancer.**
Sumser would start not with prognosis but with 'what has this meant to you?', the 4 a.m. fears and effects like changes in sexual function. Rapport may take several visits. Friends often minimize ('you'll be fine'), which is why an outside listener helps.

**• A new Alzheimer's diagnosis.**
The first question is what the person understands, and the family is part of the unit of care. Spouses often cry when asked 'how has this been for you?' because no one has asked them. About 60% of clients at Mettle Health, Miller and Sumser's service, are family members.

**• The last 24–48 hours.**
Kidneys shut down and the resulting metabolites cause dreaminess. Skin becomes mottled and bluish, breathing includes long pauses, and the 'death rattle' is probably harder on listeners than on the patient. Many people seem to die in the moment loved ones step out.

**• Psychedelics at end of life.**
Miller has seen psilocybin achieve in one session what years of talk therapy didn't, a felt sense of connection, while urging caution and more study.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Complete an advance directive and name a proxy this year.**
  Download a free form, then have a real conversation with your proxy about what a good day looks like for you.
- **Ask for palliative care early in any serious illness.**
  It can run alongside curative treatment and covers emotional, family and practical needs, not just pain.
- **If you keep vigil, take care of yourself.**
  Sleep, eat and take walks. Your loved one may need you out of the room to let go.
- **Make mortality a daily practice.**
  Sumser reminds herself 'this is my life' in each moment. Miller suggests the Serenity Prayer, including practicing being comfortable with what you can't control.

# 315 Life after near-death: a new perspective on living, dying, and the afterlife

Guest: Sebastian Junger
Date: 2024-08-26 · Duration: 2:19:13
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lekPcBKAA-0

## KEYPOINTS

**• A hidden aneurysm nearly killed a fit, healthy 58-year-old.**
In June 2020, Junger—author and journalist, a lifelong athlete in his 50s in excellent health—suffered a ruptured pancreatic artery aneurysm that had probably been growing for decades. He was losing perhaps a pint of blood every 10–15 minutes into his abdomen; of roughly 10 units in the body, losing about two-thirds becomes very hard to survive, and he estimates he lost around 60%.

**• He survived because of a long chain of improbable events.**
Peter and Junger use the Swiss-cheese model: about ten things all had to go right, from getting to a hospital in time to having the right interventional radiologist on duty. Another physician later told him the radiologist was one of maybe 5% of IR doctors who could have saved him—like Captain Sullenberger being the one pilot in 50 who could land on the Hudson.

**• The numbers show how close he came.**
His hemoglobin had fallen to a level his doctor said he'd almost never seen (normal is about 14; hematocrit in the mid-40s fell to perhaps 10). His blood pressure was around 60/40. He received about 10 people's donated blood, and spent five days in the ICU before recovering quickly.

**• His body may have warned him 36 hours earlier.**
The only symptom was intermittent abdominal pain that came and went. Thirty-six hours before nearly dying, he was woken by a disturbing dream that he discussed with his wife—he wonders if some part of him sensed a 'five-alarm fire' coming. He became a father late, at 55, and had daughters aged 3 and 6 months.

**• He experienced a near-death vision of a black pit and his dead father.**
He felt a sudden, unfamiliar pull, like standing at the edge of a cliff and feeling the void—'I'm getting pulled into this hole.' As he grew scared, he 'saw' his father, an atheist physicist who had died eight years earlier, above him, clearly inviting him to join. Junger, also an atheist, felt the stark dichotomy: the black pit and his dead father meant nothingness, a journey he wouldn't return from. He was almost offended his father would think he'd choose that over staying with his wife and two little girls—'I'm only 58, for God's sake.'

**• The experience didn't make him religious, but it unsettled his materialism.**
A rationalist journalist, Junger couldn't explain the vision away, yet resists claiming it proves an afterlife. He wrestles with the 'god problem': he doesn't understand how any of us exist, and the fine-tuning of the universe's ~30 physical constants makes existence seem wildly improbable—he cites odds of 1 in 10^230 for a universe like ours. His father had trained him in precise, rationalist questioning—he used to needle Junger's mother about what 'bad energy' even meant—which makes the vision harder for Junger to dismiss or to embrace.

**• Quantum physics frames his openness to mystery.**
His father, a physicist, was close to Erwin Schrödinger. Junger explains Schrödinger's cat (an isotope with a 50/50 chance of decaying in an hour) and entanglement experiments, where particles seem to coordinate faster than light. Physicists a century ago found Newtonian physics broke down at the atomic level; Junger draws from them humility about what we can know.

**• An infinite afterlife might drain life of meaning.**
Junger argues that if eternity follows our 70–80 years, it strips the dignity, struggle and victory out of life; conversely, the black pit of nothingness may be so troubling that we struggle to live those years with dignity.

**• Married men live longer, and he watched why.**
Junger recalls the statistic flashing through his mind as his wife pushed for urgent action—her insistence on getting him to the hospital was part of what saved him. She couldn't accompany him because of COVID rules.

**• The aftermath brought psychological fallout.**
After recovering physically, he was haunted by how close he came—statistically his wife 'should be grieving me right now by odds of 100 to one'—and spun into what-ifs and gratitude. He felt reverence for medicine: the team in the room and decades of researchers and inventors.

## EXAMPLES

**• Running obsession**
As a young man Junger ran a 4:12 mile, 30 minutes for 10K and a 2:21 marathon on 100–120 miles a week—a maniacal focus he later channeled into journalism.

**• War reporting**
He recalls being shot at from about 500 meters by AK-47 or PKM fire in Afghanistan, and how a second's luck reshaped his life.

**• His father's escape**
His father, born in Dresden in 1923 to a Jewish father and Catholic mother, fled Germany for Spain, then France, then the U.S. as fascism spread.

**• Schrödinger and the twins**
Schrödinger tutored twin girls failing math, related to Junger's family, and had an affair with one of them—a story preserved in a biography where his father kept a bookmark.

**• Dostoevsky's mock execution**
In the 1840s Dostoevsky was sentenced to death for radical politics, reprieved at the last moment by Tsar Nicholas I—a story Junger uses to illustrate facing infinity 30 seconds away.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Take recurring, unexplained pain seriously.**
  Junger's only warning was intermittent abdominal pain; prompt evaluation matters even in fit people.
- **Get to an ER fast when something feels catastrophically wrong.**
  Scoop-and-run beats on-site stabilization in some emergencies; minutes mattered.
- **Let mortality sharpen reverence.**
  Junger came away with gratitude and a sense that life's finite struggle gives it meaning.
- **Keep the people who'll push for you close.**
  His wife's insistence was a crucial link in the chain.
- **Medicine's progress is a collective gift.**
  Junger stresses he's alive because of the specific team and because of decades of doctors, researchers and inventors who built interventional radiology—and the roughly ten strangers who donated blood. Donating blood is one way to be a link in someone else's chain.

# 288 The impact of gratitude, serving others, embracing mortality, and living intentionally

Guest: Walter Green
Date: 2024-02-05 · Duration: 1:39:38
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yQ-p-mypFk

## KEYPOINTS

**• Walter Green sees his life as three 29-year stages**

Walter is about to turn 85. He describes the first 28–29 years as finding himself, the next 29 as making himself, and the last 29 as giving back. He says he has spent the last 30 years in mentoring and philanthropy rather than business.

**• A childhood of loss taught him that life can be short and that relationships matter**

His father put about $4,000 of savings into an Adirondacks dude ranch, and a flood that wiped out the bridge bankrupted the family. They moved into a two-bedroom flat in the Bronx with grandparents who didn't speak English, and Walter lived in 16 different cities growing up. His mother got breast cancer when he was nine. His father died of a heart attack at 53, two months after Walter left for the University of Michigan, and an uncle also died at 53. He later calls this deprivation an advantage.

**• A breakdown at 22 was born of empathy, and he kept it secret for 40 years**

Two months into selling rags in Pittsburgh, he was praised and told the older man training him would be let go once Walter learned the job. He couldn't get out of bed and was hospitalized for two to three months, followed by two years of therapy. He didn't talk about it for 40 years because of the stigma around mental hospitals. He says he was terrified of failing, failed, and survived.

**• The fear of dying at 53 shaped how fast he lived**

He became president of an executive conference-centre company at 32, with 400 employees. Over the next 25 years he became its major shareholder, growing it to 10 centres running about 6,000 conferences a year for 150,000 executives. He never had a long-term view of his life because he assumed he would die at 53 like his father. So he became 'really good at deciding what I don't do'.

**• Thinking in reverse: define success before you start**

In his 30s, a course with Fred Jervis at the Center for Constructive Change taught him to start every important interaction, including personal ones, by asking: 'If this is really successful, what will have happened by the end?' He applies it to meetings, health targets and his life plan. For over 40 years he has written out an ideal next few years; the horizon has shrunk from five years to one. Saying no gets easier because anything that doesn't serve the outcome is easy to drop.

**• His tributes began at his 50th birthday**

He invited his five closest friends, their spouses and his family, 17 people, to New York for the opening weekend of Phantom of the Opera. At the reception he paid tribute to each friend in front of everyone, explaining specifically how each had enriched his life. He says a tribute in front of a group is far more powerful than a private one.

**• At 70 he spent 11 months thanking 44 people in person**

Tim Russert's death in his early 50s, and the crowds at the funeral he never got to see, combined with turning 70 to prompt a gratitude journey. Walter visited 44 people in Kenya, Mexico, Canada and across the US, combining trips where he could. He insists that most listeners have at least one such person, and that one is enough to start.

**• Each meeting followed the same four 'bases'**

First, how they met. Second, the experiences they shared. Third, the main one: reading from a prepared legal pad exactly why that person mattered, with specifics rather than a general 'I love you'. Fourth, asking each person for one piece of a 'mosaic' of who Walter is. He recorded every conversation. Because appreciation is hard to take in during the moment, he later mailed each person a framed photo, a 120-word letter and a CD of the conversation.

**• Deep friendship rests on authenticity, empathy and compassion**

Asked why he is the first or second person his peers turn to with a problem, Walter credits authenticity, empathy and compassion, which he believes everyone has but not everyone uses. He has spent about 800 sessions, roughly 4,000 hours, in groups of 10–12 company presidents, some lasting 37 years. Not all 44 people were close friends: one was a blind man in New Hampshire who taught him how to think.

**• We save our best words for funerals, and the dying want to hear them first**

Walter cites a hospice nurse who said that for months before death her patients' central belief was that they don't matter to anyone, and that her own ideal death would include hearing that she mattered. Peter points out how absurd it is to let people die believing that, then praise them at their funerals. Walter blames custom and a lack of models.

## EXAMPLES

**• Say It Now went global**

After the book, a Hay House editorial director heard his story and a contract followed three days later. That led to the Say It Now movement. Its teaching materials are now in about 38,000 classrooms in 75 countries, mostly grades 5–12, and a kindergarten teacher in Ontario has used them too. His goal was a million expressions of gratitude by his 85th birthday, and they passed 1.4 million.

**• Finishing strong after a recent medical scare**

He reverse-planned the end of his life with key results and says he achieved them within a year. He moved his wife into a lifestyle community she could settle into, wound down complex investments, and left a 15-step financial checklist. He also says he is 'current' with every relationship and mentee, many of whom attended his TEDx talk.

**• Bargaining in Corsica**

In his 60s, while on a cruise, he needed emergency surgery at a clinic in Corsica that he says saved his life. He promised to be of service if given more time.

- **A ritual for peace**
  In his office, Walter has portraits of the 44 people from his journey next to photos of his mentees. He plays a favourite violin concerto and goes through them one by one, about 60 lives, remembering what each gave him.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Start expressing gratitude now**
  Walter's point: if you wait until your 60s or 80s, it's really tough. Pick one person, write down specifically what they gave you, and tell them while they can hear it.
- **Use the reverse question before important conversations**
  Before a meeting, a visit or even a hard talk with a friend, define what would make the time well spent, such as 'I want to help lighten his load'. Then let that shape what you say yes and no to.
- **Make tributes specific and, where possible, public**
  General affection fades. Specific stories of impact, said in front of others or written down so the person can reread them, land more deeply.
- **Put your affairs in order as an act of care**
  Writing a clear financial checklist and planning your spouse's living situation spares loved ones chaos. Walter has kept his estate in order for 35 years.

# 280 Cultivating happiness, emotional self-management, and more | Arthur Brooks Ph.D.

Guest: Arthur Brooks, PhD
Date: 2023-11-27 · Duration: 2:06:04
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1GNc70-584

## KEYPOINTS

**• Feelings are evidence of happiness, not happiness itself.**

Harvard professor Arthur Brooks, discussing his book Build the Life You Want, says happy feelings relate to happiness the way the smell of turkey relates to Thanksgiving dinner. Emotions are limbic-system signals carrying information. If you mistake them for happiness, last night's sleep or a morning argument end up running your life. Happiness and unhappiness aren't opposite ends of one scale and can coexist. The average person spends about 40% of their time with predominantly positive feelings and about 16–17% with predominantly negative ones, which evolution makes louder because they kept us alive.

**• Six basic emotions: four negative, two positive.**

Fear and anger run through the amygdala. Arthur says the stress response to a car about to hit you takes about 74 milliseconds, and only seconds later does your prefrontal cortex ask whether flipping off the driver fit your values. Disgust, centered in the insular cortex, protects against pathogens, and demagogues exploit it by making opponents seem like cockroaches. Sadness, the mental pain of separation, registers in the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, the same region that handles the 'I hate this' part of physical pain. Grief is unremediated sadness. The two widely agreed positive emotions are joy, often after struggle, and interest.

**• Know your emotional profile, and look for complementarity in partners.**

Using the PANAS positive/negative affect scales, people fall roughly into quarters. 'Cheerleaders' run high positive and low negative. 'Mad scientists' run high on both (Arthur is about 95th percentile positive and 90th negative). 'Poets' run low positive and high negative. 'Judges' run low on both and are unflappable. Twin studies suggest about 44–52% of baseline well-being is heritable, which Arthur sees as useful knowledge to manage, not destiny. In relationships, he urges a baseline of compatibility plus complementarity: introvert with extrovert, mad scientist with judge. Two mad scientists can 'be an accelerant to each other.'

**• Happiness has three 'macronutrients': enjoyment, satisfaction and meaning.**

Enjoyment is pleasure plus people plus memory. Arthur warns that pleasure-seeking alone, supercharged by technology into fentanyl, slot machines or pornography, makes us miserable: 'if something gives you pleasure and you're doing it alone, you're usually doing it wrong.' Peter connects this to alcohol data, where any benefit seems tied to Mediterranean-style drinking with food and company, not the molecule. Arthur says people who eat candy one to three times a month live about a year longer than total abstainers, while eating it daily is another matter. His wife smokes twice a year with her sister. He, a former smoker, won't touch it.

**• Satisfaction fades fast by design: satisfaction equals haves divided by wants.**

Satisfaction is joy after struggle, which is why cheating on an exam brings none. Evolution hides how short it lasts: for admission to Harvard Business School, studies show a few weeks. The joy of a bonus peaks when you hear about it, not when it hits your paycheck, and moving to California brings 'a few months' of happiness while 'the taxes are forever.' This hedonic treadmill drives a 'more' strategy. Arthur's alternative is to want less. He cites the Buddhist view that dukkha means dissatisfaction caused by attachment, and the Dalai Lama's line about wanting what you have.

**• Meaning has three parts, tested by two questions.**

Arthur calls meaning the 'protein' of happiness, the macronutrient you can't do without. It combines coherence (things happen for a reason), purpose (a heading, like a navigator's rhumb line) and significance (it would matter if you were gone). His diagnostic questions are 'Why are you alive?' and 'For what would you be willing to die today?' Failing them begins the search. His son, a Marine scout sniper, answers 'God made me to serve' and 'faith, family, fellow Marines, country.' Peter, who leans agnostic, finds peace with mortality by accepting his insignificance. Arthur cites research on awe and 'getting small.'

**• Metacognition moves emotions from the limbic system to your 'CEO.'**

Dogs and toddlers are limbic. 'Use your words' teaches kids to process emotions in the prefrontal cortex, which is also why chosen discomfort like Peter's 42°F cold plunge 'hurts so good.' Arthur's tools: write down the five things bothering you to turn diffuse anxiety into bounded problems; ration news to 15–30 minutes a day rather than avoiding it; and keep a failure and disappointment journal. In it, he writes each setback, adds after 30 days what he learned, and after six months something good that came from it. 'There's no good or bad emotions, there's only information.'

**• US happiness has declined for 50 years, with periodic 'storms.'**

Using General Social Survey data back to the 1970s, and dismissing cross-country rankings because cultures define happiness differently, Arthur describes a slow decline punctuated by sharp drops, including around 2008. Historically about twice as many Americans said they were 'very happy' as 'not happy.' That has now flipped for the first time. His message: treat your happiness like a CEO running a startup, deciding by what's right rather than what feels good. Happiness is a direction, not a destination.

## EXAMPLES

**• The reverse bucket list.**

Every birthday Arthur lists his worldly attachments and crosses them out. Last year he crossed out about half his political opinions, inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching that opinions are a great source of misery: 'I need fewer opinions because I need more friends.'

**• Sculpture, not painting.**

By your mid-40s a striver's canvas is full. Arthur suggests seeing your life as a sculpture you chip away at rather than a painting you keep adding to.

**• Optimism versus hope.**

Optimism predicts things will be OK. Hope says something can be done and I can do it. Hope, not optimism, is tied to

happiness, and its opposite is despair.

- **Dragging the gas pump.**
  Lost in thought, Arthur drove off with the hose still in his tank, an illustration of William James's 'I self' (observing the world) versus 'me self' (being observed). Social media pushes us toward the latter.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Share pleasures to turn them into enjoyment.**
  Pair indulgences with people and memories, and keep them occasional.
- **Run a twice-yearly happiness review.**
  Arthur scores his enjoyment, satisfaction and meaning in a weighted spreadsheet, avoiding days of unusual highs or lows.
- **Expect a 'second adolescence' around 50.**
  The Hindu stage of vanaprastha ('retiring to the forest') suggests shifting toward transcendent priorities in midlife.
- **Faith and science can coexist for some.**
  Arthur, a religious scientist, sees no conflict. Peter suspects believers may find death easier to process.

# 265 - Time, productivity, and purpose: insights from Four Thousand Weeks | Oliver Burkeman

Guest: Oliver Burkeman
Date: 2023-08-07 · Duration: 2:08:51
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0PaNe5sb4g

## KEYPOINTS

**• Chasing productivity is often an attempt to avoid the emotional fact that we're finite.**

Burkeman, author of Four Thousand Weeks, tried about 100 productivity systems. He kept feeling just 'a month or two' away from effortless control, then starting again with a new app or notebook. He realised the systems never gave him the emotional peace he was after, so the problem was the question he was asking. He quotes Richard Bach: we teach what we most need to learn. He says he still struggles with all of it.

**• Treating time as a resource to master is a fairly modern idea, and it makes us feel at odds with time.**

Philosophers have always grappled with death. But viewing time as something separate from you, to be handled efficiently, spread mainly around the industrial era. Burkeman argues that much of the stress around time comes from this view. Our most meaningful moments tend to be the ones where it falls away. He links the urge to David Brooks's 'insecure overachievers,' whose sense of worth depends on output.

**• Efficiency brings in more work.**

In any system with effectively unlimited demands, processing faster just attracts more. Answer email quickly and people reply to your replies, and you get a reputation that brings more email. Burkeman says he misread David Allen's Getting Things Done, which is about staying calm with too much to do, as a way to stop having too much to do.

**• The 'big rocks in the jar' story is rigged.**

The professor brought only as many big rocks as would fit. In real life there are always more things that truly matter than you have time for. The real skill is choosing which important things to neglect. Elizabeth Gilbert puts it this way: the true art of saying no is saying no to things you do want to do. In the (probably misattributed) Buffett story, you list 25 goals and then avoid numbers 6 to 25, the middling priorities, at all costs.

**• Time is a network good, valuable mainly when shared.**

Unlike money, time is more like phones: valuable because others have them too. The Soviet Union tried a staggered five-day week with colour-coded groups so factories never stopped. It meant friends and even spouses rarely shared days off, and someone wrote to Pravda that a holiday spent alone in a café isn't a holiday. Burkeman says modern flexible schedules do something similar, which is why three friends struggle to meet for a beer. Choirs, sports and families all depend on shared time.

**• Seeing that the task is impossible, not just hard, is freeing.**

In 2014, on a Brooklyn park bench, Burkeman was trying to schedule an impossible week. He realised it simply couldn't be done, and felt relief. Moving from 'really hard' to 'impossible' ends the self-blame. He suggests the same applies to longevity: living forever is impossible, but you can still improve your odds and the quality of your life.

**• Meaning doesn't have to be cosmic.**

Burkeman draws on philosopher Iddo Landau. The nihilist thinks he's facing facts but is holding onto impossibly godlike standards for meaning. You don't call a dog useless because it can't drive. Helping a friend through a crisis, parenting and being a good neighbour are real meaning on a human scale. Attia describes swinging from wanting a surgical-manual 'legacy' in residency to feeling nothing matters, and lands on mattering to his family and friends.

**• Living for the future postpones life.**

Burkeman quotes Keynes on the 'purposive' man who loves not his cat but its kittens, and their kittens, forever. Projecting meaning forward gives a false sense of immortality. Attia admits he spends enjoyable days thinking about the next one. Burkeman suggests 'atelic' activities (philosopher Kieran Setiya's term), such as hiking, done for their own sake.

## EXAMPLES

**• Three practical tools**

'Pay yourself first': do some of your most important work at the start of the day, before clearing other tasks. Limit work in progress: keep an open list and a closed list of five, adding a new item only when one is finished. Watch for middling priorities. Attia kept a 'no journal' of things he wanted to do but turned down, and reviewed it with an accountability partner.

**• Three hours with one painting**

Harvard's Jennifer Roberts has students look at one artwork for three hours. Burkeman did it with a Dürer. Once the discomfort passed, he saw objects he'd missed for the first 45 minutes. Reading is similar: what feels like 'not liking reading' is often discomfort at slowing down.

**• Stopping on a roll**

Researcher Robert Boice found the most productive academic writers wrote modestly every day and stopped on schedule, even when going well. Attia now leaves 'matches in the matchbox' at the end of workouts.

**• Northern Lights**

Burkeman tried so hard to be present that he ended up thinking they looked like an old PC screensaver.

## OTHER RELEVANT

**• Act on generosity immediately**

Meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein acts on a generous impulse right away. Burkeman warns that plans to become 'someone who sends three notes a week' can get in the way of sending one now.

**• Being a researcher in relationships**

Approach people with curiosity about how things will go, not a fixed idea of how they should. The conversation keeps the

claim tied to named mechanisms, numbers, and caveats so a listener can act or ask better questions without flattening the nuance.

- **Gratitude for experience itself**

  A grieving man in traffic thought about what his friend would give to be stuck there. Zen teacher Joko Beck: what makes it unbearable is the belief it can be cured.

- **Attia's desert-island test**

  Most patients say they wouldn't be happy living forever with everything except other people. The conversation keeps the claim tied to named mechanisms, numbers, and caveats so a listener can act or ask better questions without flattening the nuance.

# 241 Living intentionally, valuing time, prioritizing relationships, & more keys to a rich life

Guest: Ric Elias
Date: 2023-02-06 · Duration: 1:31:25
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qb4_WiSFHvU

## KEYPOINTS

**• Parenting teenagers is a tug of war you must eventually lose**

Ric Elias says this was the last meaningful lesson from his mother, given over coffee while she had Alzheimer's and he was asking for advice about his teenage daughter. You can't drop the rope right away, but by the time children leave for college they should have pulled you over the line. His version: they will always be your kids, but you won't always be their parent.

**• Memories made with people you love are what a year leaves behind**

When Ric looks back over a year, what he actually remembers is time spent with people. So he started creating those experiences on purpose. One was a 'friends summit': about 30 friends, each personally chosen by him, who arrived open-minded because the only thing they had in common was knowing Ric. Peter, who attended, says he left with a list of men he couldn't wait to see again.

**• People who finish life well keep looking forward**

Ric has studied people in their 70s, 80s and 90s who are thriving. The common thread is that they keep planning and building instead of retreating into the past. Staying 'in the arena', even at a slower pace, keeps the mind engaged and keeps them feeling relevant. He connects this with Arthur Brooks's idea that crystallized intelligence takes over as fluid intelligence declines, so older people stay productive by teaching and advising.

**• Live with complete intention, and count your time**

Since Flight 1549, Ric has tried to live with full intention. He knows, for example, that he has 242 weeks left until he turns 60. Each week he sets his big intentions, because he expects lower energy and some physical debts to come due after 60. He says this way of living is what makes his life feel rich.

**• The most important relationship is with yourself**

Ric calls this his biggest growth since the plane. If that relationship is wrong, every other one carries friction. He argues that most religions and much of society use guilt to teach or control us, and that guilt is 'the most useless emotion'. He has spent five years getting rid of it. The alternative is to own mistakes quickly. When he snaps at someone, he apologises within about 20–30 minutes and asks for forgiveness, rather than carrying the guilt around.

**• Happiness and wealth are only as linked as you decide**

Ric points out that some of the happiest people in the world have no wealth, so the two can't be tied together. But many people chase wealth for their whole lives because society tells them to, then arrive feeling empty and guilty about what they sacrificed. He calls that the worst place to be: getting what you wanted and finding it was a mirage.

**• Play the infinite game**

At the friends summit, Simon Sinek spoke about finite and infinite games. Ric says the book put into words what he already believed: in an infinite game there is no winning, and the goal is to stay in the game and ultimately keep it going. After the plane, he decided to 'run a different race' than everyone else. He says he feels no jealousy and rarely reads comments about himself.

**• Struggle builds greatness, and that is hard on privileged children**

Peter recalls an old interview in which a young Arnold Schwarzenegger said his drive came from hardship and a need to escape. Ric agrees and adds that perfect 4.0 students who never faced adversity often struggle to be productive later. He notes that his generation came from little while their children come from plenty.

**• The twenties are an apprenticeship that remote work may erode**

Ric thinks something special about the US is that companies, hospitals and other employers spend the decade from 20 to 30 training people for the rest of their lives. He loves the flexibility of hybrid work and doesn't want to lose it. But he worries that if young people no longer learn alongside experienced colleagues, the country could lose much of its edge in 10–30 years.

## EXAMPLES

**• Flight 1549 and the last seconds**

Ric was on the US Airways plane that landed on the Hudson in January 2009. He has said that if he had died, he would have felt only sadness rather than gratitude. Peter asks whether he has asked other passengers what they thought in the final seconds. He hasn't yet, but plans to.

**• Marshall at 96**

Ric has known Marshall, a former North Carolina state senator of 26 years who played basketball at Duke around 1939 and served in World War II, for about 20 years and over roughly 100 lunches. At 96, Marshall brought Ric a serious business idea based on where trends would be in 10 years. Peter compares this to his 85-year-old father, who in his 60s bought undeveloped limestone land expecting demand over the next 30 years and still works at a quarry every day.

**• Red Ventures and the Giving Pledge**

Red Ventures has grown from about 1,200 employees around 2014–15 to about 4,500. Ric expects that by 80 he'll have about 15 people and will be giving the money away. About 18 months before the interview he signed the Giving Pledge, which commits signers to give at least half their wealth away during their lifetime or at death. He says he and his wife did this with real trepidation while their children were still in high school.

**• Golden Door Scholars and Road to Hire**

Golden Door Scholars funds college for undocumented students who can't get in-state tuition. Ric says about 80,000 such students graduate from high school each year and can no longer obtain DACA permits. The latest round had about 1,200 applicants, more than 300 of them with GPAs close to 4.0, and about 520 students are in the programme. A sister programme, Road to Hire, teaches mostly Black and brown students from Title I schools to code through paid apprenticeships; more than

220 graduated this year, all with jobs.

- **A learning list to stay humble**
  Ric works out with a coach twice a week and keeps a list of eight or nine things he wants to learn. One is salsa: as a Puerto Rican, he says he can't die without knowing how to dance it.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Plan the year around shared experiences**
  Deliberately create gatherings and trips with people you love. Those are the memories that remain.
- **Count the weeks to your next milestone**
  Pick a horizon, work out how many weeks remain, and set a few clear intentions each week so time is spent on purpose.
- **Replace guilt with a fast apology**
  When you've wronged someone, own it quickly and ask forgiveness instead of carrying guilt.
- **Keep a beginner's list**
  Choose a handful of skills you're bad at and practise them. It keeps you looking forward and keeps you humble.

# 237 Optimizing life for maximum fulfillment | Bill Perkins

Guest: Bill Perkins
Date: 2023-01-09 · Duration: 1:58:06
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eE8W1Lp_VRE

## KEYPOINTS

**• Money is only useful as a means to experiences, and its value is tied to time.**
Perkins, a hedge-fund manager and energy trader and author of Die With Zero, frames every purchase in hours of life: a $10 shirt cost 'an hour and 15 minutes' of work. He asks people whether they'd rather be 20 with nothing or 90 with $100 billion; nearly everyone picks 20, revealing that health and time outrank money.

**• Experiences have seasons; some expire.**
Perkins' biggest regret is skipping a backpacking trip through Europe with his roommate Jason in his early 20s while he kept his head down as a clerk. Jason came back 'richer' with no real career cost. When Perkins later went, with money, he wouldn't stay in hostels or ride the trains, and the experience was good but 'not as rich' because its moment had passed.

**• Solve for net fulfillment, not maximum wealth.**
The book is essentially a life-cycle hypothesis plus what Perkins calls counterfactual regret minimization: plan to convert money into the highest-value experiences while you can still enjoy them, instead of autopiloting toward a bigger number. Attia pushes back that 22–24 is early to think this way, and they agree saving still matters.

**• Use time buckets to plan.**
Divide life into segments (20–25, 35–40, 50–60 and so on) and list the experiences you want in each across leisure, relationships and career. Some activities transfer to later decades, some get less enjoyable, some become impossible, so you can't push everything to the 80–86 bucket. Leave room for 20–30% discovery of things you didn't plan.

**• Net worth should probably peak in your 50s.**
Perkins estimates net worth should crest somewhere in the 50s, after which you deliberately spend down on experiences, gifts and giving rather than dying with a large surplus. Health, he notes, is the multiplier on every bucket.

**• Fear is usually fear of judgment, not risk.**
When people resist a bold change, Perkins breaks down what they actually fear; often they can survive the financial hit and are really afraid of what others will think. He separates real risk from imagined risk and sets explicit tolerances, like a physical risk threshold of about 1 in 10,000 unless the reward is extraordinary.

**• Think in expected value.**
Perkins, a trader and poker player, explains that a 50/50 bet paying 4-to-1 is a great bet even though you lose half the time. Casinos make money on edges as small as fractions of a percent; good traders are right perhaps 55–60% of the time.

**• Give to people when it matters most.**
Perkins criticizes the secret-millionaire story of a secretary who lived frugally and left about $10 million at death: the gift arrived too late to help her or the people she might have helped. He prefers giving to children around ages 25–33 rather than at 60-plus, and admires John Arnold for quitting full-time trading before 40 to focus on philanthropy.

**• Countdown clocks break autopilot.**
Perkins notes that people tend to say kids don't want to be with you at 13, forgetting how quickly that window closes. Perkins uses a 4,000-weeks calendar and 'death clock', and counts down to milestones like a daughter's 14th birthday, to make time concrete. Autopilot is how two years and 40 extra pounds slip by unnoticed.

**• Many people have no buffer at all.**
Attia recalls a 2008-era figure, from a friend involved in running the TARP program, that roughly 30% of Americans couldn't come up with $1,000 in an emergency. For a 40-year-old with $50,000 net worth, Perkins says the thinking still applies: map experiences to seasons and find lower-cost equivalents.

## EXAMPLES

**• The $30,000 safari**
An African safari with kids priced at about $30,000. Perkins asks whether you'd rather die with $30,000 more or have that shared experience now; if a $30,000 trip is never realistic, find a cheaper experience that gives similar fulfillment.

**• Reading his own book**
After writing it, Perkins went through his will, made a list of 30–50 people and started giving them annual tax-free gifts now, rather than leaving bequests.

**• The hospital bill vs. time**
Perkins describes intensive hospital care for his father costing a huge sum per night, and notes that late-life spending buys little extra life compared with earlier spending on experiences.

**• Counting reunions**
At a wedding of about 117 guests, Perkins realized most pairs in the room would see each other perhaps 20 times, and fewer than 50 times, in their lives, so he began throwing parties to increase those numbers.

**• A big 45th birthday**
Perkins rented out a hotel for a large birthday celebration, a 'memory dividend' he still draws on, while recalling that his wedding years earlier cost under $20,000, an obscene sum to him then.

## OTHER RELEVANT

**• Price things in time.**
Convert costs into hours of your life to see trade-offs clearly. The conversation keeps the claim tied to named mechanisms, numbers, and caveats so a listener can act or ask better questions without flattening the nuance.

- **Build time buckets.**
  List the experiences you want per decade, especially those with physical or relational expiration dates, like time with young kids.
- **Interrogate your fear.**
  Ask what the real downside is and whether it's survivable; separate risk from fear of judgment. The conversation keeps the claim tied to named mechanisms, numbers, and caveats so a listener can act or ask better questions without flattening the nuance.
- **Give while it helps.**
  Consider giving to children, family and charities when the money has the most utility, not at death. Perkins' own children's money sits in a trust set to release between about ages 25 and 33, which he considers the optimal window, and he argues charitable giving loses impact the longer it's deferred.
- **Protect health as the multiplier.**
  Every bucket depends on being able to do things; Attia ties this to training for later decades.

# 226 The science of happiness | Arthur Brooks, Ph.D.

Guest: Arthur Brooks
Date: 2022-10-10 · Duration: 1:47:49
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dA5OmuP8vTQ

## KEYPOINTS

**• Fluid intelligence peaks early; crystallized intelligence rises later.**
Drawing on Raymond Cattell's work, Brooks explains that fluid intelligence — raw processing speed, innovation, solving novel problems — peaks in the late 30s and declines through the 40s and 50s. Crystallized intelligence — pattern recognition, explaining, teaching, managing people — improves through the 40s, 50s and 60s and stays high into the 70s and 80s. That's why many classical musicians peak in their late 30s, and why he can no longer read his own mathematically dense academic papers from age 35.

**• Thriving later means jumping to the 'second curve'.**
Brooks argues the people who end up happy in later life deliberately move from fluid-intelligence work to crystallized-intelligence work — teaching, mentoring, synthesizing. His 2019 article on this became one of the 50 most-read pieces of that year across publications and grew into his book 'From Strength to Strength' (February 2022).

**• Happiness has three 'macronutrients': enjoyment, satisfaction and purpose.**
Parallel to Attia's healthspan framing, Brooks proposes a 'happiness span'. Without enjoyment, satisfaction and purpose in abundance and balance, you won't report being a happy person. He also stresses that unhappiness is a separate subject, not simply the absence of happiness.

**• Satisfaction fades by design.**
The elation of a job well done leaves quickly so you'll be ready for the next circumstance — just as your pulse returns to baseline 15–30 minutes after a treadmill session. An ancestor staring joyfully at berries while a sabre-toothed tiger crept up wouldn't survive. Homeostasis is why accomplishments never satisfy for long.

**• Satisfaction = what you have ÷ what you want.**
Rather than endlessly managing your 'haves', Brooks advises managing the denominator — your wants. Serious 'wants management' can be a game-changer for driven people.

**• Use a 'reverse bucket list'.**
His old bucket list made him feel like a loser for everything unfulfilled. Now he lists his worldly cravings and ambitions and makes a conscious, metacognitive commitment not to be attached to them — including his own opinions.

**• Men especially lack real friends.**
Happy people without spouses have very close lifelong friends — people who know your secrets and would take your 2 a.m. call. Successful men often have plenty of 'deal friends' but no real friends; when Brooks asks men to name two and when they last spoke, they struggle. Spouses are great, but even married people need friends.

**• Loneliness and solitude are different.**
Isolation is always bad, but solitude is needed at different levels for different people. You can be lonely inside a relationship — partners who are lonely while living together is a strong predictor of divorce. Longitudinal data, including the Harvard Study of Adult Development, show happy people in their 80s and 90s had cultivated strong relationships decades earlier.

**• Money, power, pleasure and fame are the four idols.**
Fame sounds unappealing to most, but the desire for admiration and prestige is the same idol. Success addiction and workaholism trade being happy for being special; Brooks calls the belief that the world would be better if everyone were success-addicted a fallacy of composition.

**• Identify your 'death fear'.**
Brooks says most people aren't afraid of dying itself but of the extinction of how they understand themselves — becoming irrelevant, being forgotten. For many of his Harvard students it's fear of failure. Fear, he argues, is the antithesis of love.

**• Ancient Hindu stages map the second half of life.**
The Vedic ashramas divide an ideal life into four 25-year quarters. The hardest transition — a 'second adolescence' — is around 50, entering vanaprastha (50–75), which requires wanting less and chipping away, followed by the final stage from 75. Brooks notes the odds of reaching 100 in the US are about one in 6,000, so the ages aren't dogma.

## EXAMPLES

**• French horn decline**
Brooks went professional at 19 aiming to be a soloist, but by his mid-20s his technique was declining for unclear reasons. He finished a college degree by correspondence a month before turning 30 — partly in secret, because classical music is 'a cult' — left horn at 31 and earned his PhD at 34.

**• The man on the plane**
On a red-eye from LA to Dulles, Brooks overheard a famous, admired older man tell his wife he might as well be dead because no one cared about him anymore. Brooks realized he'd be that man in 30 years without a plan; he has never revealed the man's identity.

**• Bach's second curve**
Bach died surrounded by people who loved him because he dedicated his work to others rather than clinging to the ego of fame.

**• Running a think tank**
As CEO of the American Enterprise Institute for 10 years, Brooks managed about 300 employees, raised roughly $50 million a year and worked 80-hour weeks — 'like running for the Senate and never getting elected'.

**• The five-years exercise**

He asks both his ~27-year-old MBA students and peers his own age to imagine themselves five years older, as a way to reveal how they neglect relationships.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Plan your second curve before you need it.**
  Shift deliberately toward teaching, mentoring and synthesis as fluid abilities decline.
- **Manage wants, not just haves.**
  Write a reverse bucket list and practise detaching from ambitions. The conversation keeps the claim tied to named mechanisms, numbers, and caveats so a listener can act or ask better questions without flattening the nuance.
- **Audit your real friendships.**
  Name two people who'd take your 2 a.m. call and when you last spoke; schedule time with them.
- **Seek solitude, avoid isolation.**
  Distinguish chosen quiet from loneliness, including loneliness within a partnership. The conversation keeps the claim tied to named mechanisms, numbers, and caveats so a listener can act or ask better questions without flattening the nuance.
- **Name your death fear.**
  Reflect on what you fear losing about your identity, and how it drives the four idols.

# 208 - Tragedy, grief, healing, and finding happiness | Kelsey Chittick

Guest: Kelsey Chittick
Date: 2022-05-23 · Duration: 2:11:50
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCp101ucrsM

## KEYPOINTS

**• Nate Chittick lived to the extreme, in good ways and bad**

Kelsey Chittick met Nate in the summer of 1998, when she was a swimmer at UNC Chapel Hill. He was a poor kid from Allentown, Pennsylvania, who made everyone he talked to feel like the most important person in the room. He wasn't a first-round prospect, but he hustled his way into the NFL as a center and won a Super Bowl with the St. Louis Rams. They got engaged at the top of the World Trade Center in July 2001 and married in 2002. Kelsey says he was extreme in every way, good and bad.

**• Leaving the NFL in your mid-20s is a brutal transition**

Nate retired around 2004, before their son was born. Kelsey describes the drop from signing autographs as a Super Bowl champion to an ordinary job that might pay in a year what he used to earn in a week. Peter points out that the median NFL player's career looks nothing like Tom Brady's. Nate went back to school and was offered $50,000 a year. He eventually found purpose in serving others, but Kelsey says many former players 'fall off a cliff' after football.

**• His weight became a lifelong fight**

To play on the line, Nate bulked up to about 300 lb. He felt good at 235 and loved himself around 260, which Kelsey thought was still too heavy. In 21 years together, she never slept beside him without a sleep apnea mask. His weight was a recurring fight between them, and she later said she had been 'mean' about it before learning how sick he really was.

**• She had premonitions for years**

From about 2014–15, Kelsey dreaded leaving the family whenever she travelled and sometimes woke up screaming that Nate was gone. In November 2017, Nate encouraged her to go to a spiritual retreat in Jamaica. They texted lovingly for four days because she was too frugal to buy a calling plan. While she was there, he collapsed and died at age 40 while playing basketball with children during a toddler session at a trampoline park. Paramedics worked on him for 50 minutes. He died on 11/11, at about 11, which she takes as one of his 'nods' to her.

**• Her North Star: the kids lost their dad but would not lose her**

On the flight home, Kelsey decided her children, then 9 and 12, had lost their father but were not going to lose her. As a child, she had watched friends lose a parent and then lose the surviving parent to unending grief. She told her children they were not victims. They had had the best father for 9 and 12 years, and they would figure out a great life together.

**• The autopsy found heart disease and stage 2–3 CTE**

The cause of death was left ventricular cardiomyopathy, an enlarged heart; she says it fit, because he had a really big heart. The LA County coroner's brain exam found nothing, so she sent the brain to Boston University. She admits she partly hoped for compensation and wanted to know whether to let her son play football. Dr. Ann McKee told her Nate had stage two, almost stage three CTE, with lesions throughout his brain, and that it would have been a very hard life. Kelsey says this lets her feel grateful that she didn't have to watch him slowly deteriorate.

**• Grief and happiness can coexist**

Kelsey rejects the idea of moving neatly from one stage of grief to the next. She misses Nate terribly and is happier than she has ever been. She now has a very different relationship with death, and her household openly accepts it. She suggests modern comfort has made us less used to pain than people 10,000 years ago, who regularly recovered from terrible losses.

**• Children grieve differently**

Kelsey believes children are wired to move on faster, especially around 12, when friends become their whole world. Her daughter didn't want to draw her father dying, and needed to forget for a while to integrate what she had seen. Her son needed someone to talk to who 'didn't have a dog in the fight'. The family uses dark humour about how absurd Nate's death was.

## EXAMPLES

**• Jeff Saturday's start**

Jeff Saturday, later one of the NFL's greatest centers, was Nate's freshman roommate. When they met, Nate was sobbing and hugging his parents, and Jeff wondered why he was rooming with 'this baby'. They became best friends. Jeff was overlooked in the draft before building an exceptional career.

**• A plant-medicine ceremony**

Kelsey grew up spiritually open but was an uptight, anxious non-drinker who judged drug users, partly because of addiction in her family. About a year after Nate's death she joined a shaman-led group ceremony with 'level 10' anxiety. In it she felt rage at Nate: 'you left me at 40 with a 9- and 12-year-old, I told you to lose weight'. Then she sensed him explaining that football was the easiest way to get people to listen to him so he could share about love. Her son, now 16, later photographed her notes.

**• Rationing grief**

Peter asks whether she limited how much time she spent watching old videos of Nate. Kelsey says grief groups discuss this a lot. Borrowing from Buddhist practice, she sets times to feel her emotions rather than either suppressing them or letting them flood her all day.

**• Ric Elias's two minutes**

Peter compares Kelsey's story to his friend Ric Elias, who was on the 2009 Hudson River landing and spent about two minutes certain he would die. That near miss changed how he lived.

## OTHER RELEVANT

**• Practice radical acceptance**

Kelsey first met the idea in Tara Brach's work through her mother. Acceptance means not labelling what happened as good or

bad, and it brought her peace.

- **Make meditation non-negotiable**
  She calls herself 'militant' about daily meditation and wishes children learned this kind of mental distancing throughout school.
- **Tell children the truth and give them stability**
  Children need honesty, a steady parent and someone neutral to talk to. Don't expect them to grieve on an adult schedule.
- **Take health warnings seriously in former athletes**
  Weight gain, sleep apnea and a history of head trauma deserve proactive medical attention rather than arguments.

# 183 - Building & Changing Habits with James Clear of "Atomic Habits"

Guest: James Clear
Date: 2021-11-08 · Duration: 2:34:23
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tn1w7Kw8x5E

## KEYPOINTS

**• Much of what we do is automatic.**
James Clear, author of Atomic Habits, cites research suggesting 40–50% of daily behaviors are habitual, though he notes studies typically count specific behaviors. Habits evolved to save mental effort, but modern environments, built over the last 100–500 years, are mismatched with the brain, which favors immediate rewards.

**• Immediate feedback drives repetition.**
Bad habits feel good now and cost later; good habits cost now and pay later. 'Ten p.m. James ruins things for tomorrow James' by staying up late. The challenge is engineering immediate satisfaction into behaviors whose payoff is delayed.

**• Genes shape where effort pays off most.**
Attia contrasts learning to ride a bike at 20 (easy, because balance is intuitive) with learning to swim at 20 (hard to master); he says even with parents who threw him in the water at two, he wasn't going to swim like someone gifted. Clear agrees predispositions matter, so choose arenas that fit your nature, where hard work compounds.

**• Systems beat goals.**
Winners and losers share the same goals; if 100 candidates apply for a job, all want it, so goals don't separate performance. Goals are useful for direction, but the system, the daily process, determines results. Losing weight is a destination; keeping it off requires a system, which is why maintenance is so hard.

**• Identity change is the deepest level.**
Clear describes three layers: outcomes, processes and identity. The most durable change comes from becoming the type of person who does the behavior, and each repetition is a 'vote' for that identity. Attia says exercise comes naturally to him because it's hardwired into his identity.

**• Big life changes make habits easier to change.**
Moving, a new job or a new family member disrupt cues and open a window. Clear's sleep habit finally stuck when he got a dog that wakes at 7 a.m. regardless; an outlet timer that kills the internet at 10 p.m. also helped.

**• Social environment is powerful.**
Habits that last 10–30 years often carry a strong social component, like mowing the lawn because neighbors do. We adopt the norms of groups we want to belong to, so joining a group where your desired behavior is normal is one of the most effective strategies.

**• The Four Laws of Behavior Change.**
Clear distills about 150 years of models into cue, craving, response and reward, and four laws: make it obvious, make it attractive, make it easy, make it satisfying. To break a habit, invert them: make it invisible, unattractive, difficult and unsatisfying.

**• Variable rewards are the most addictive.**
Slot machines hit a sweet spot around a 50% reward rate delivered unpredictably; animals on variable schedules pressed a button thousands of times (Clear recalls around 6,000), versus about 800 an hour otherwise.

**• Make it easy with the two-minute rule.**
Scale any habit down to two minutes: 'read 30 books a year' becomes 'read one page'; 'do yoga four days a week' becomes 'take out my yoga mat'. The point is to master showing up before optimizing.

**• Never miss twice.**
Missing once is an accident; missing twice starts a new habit. After a pizza binge on day 10 of a diet, make the next meal healthy. Self-forgiveness and quick recovery matter more than perfection.

**• Coaching others requires a light touch.**
Asked how to help others change, Clear says you can't install habits in someone else; you can shape their environment, model the behavior and make the group norm attractive. Attia contrasts the coach of a highly motivated athlete with a 35-year-old dad of two who just wants to get in better shape; the relationship and the level of pressure should differ. Clear recalls being a very average athlete on a team alongside future Olympian Holly Mangold, and how much the team culture shaped everyone's behavior.

## EXAMPLES

**• Vietnam veterans and heroin**
Large numbers of soldiers became addicted in Vietnam, yet about 90% or more recovered on returning home, largely because they left the environment where the cues lived.

**• Mitch's five-minute gym rule**
A man who lost around 100 lb, featured in Atomic Habits, wasn't allowed to stay at the gym longer than five minutes for the first six weeks; he was building the habit of showing up.

**• A friend who lost 110 lb**
She kept it off for over a decade by repeatedly asking, 'What would a healthy person do?', an identity-based question.

**• Twelve cigarette cues**
A smoker who lights up on the commute and at a 10:30 break with a co-worker must address each cue separately; coffee might replace the commute cigarette but not the social break.

**• Frozen cookies**
Attia says he eats either zero cookies or 30; freezing them adds 15 minutes of friction that's just enough to stop him.

- **A 720-page first draft**
  Clear's first Atomic Habits draft ran 720 pages before he cut it to about 250.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Track behaviors you don't yet feel intuitively.**
  Measurement makes a habit obvious and satisfying at first, but Clear thinks most people eventually internalize it; once you've walked 10,000 steps a day long enough, you can sense whether you've done it without a device.
- **Design your default environment.**
  Remove cues for bad habits and make good options the default, as with automatic 401(k) enrollment.
- **Pick one habit at a time.**
  Of 15 possible changes, choose one, start small and focus. The conversation keeps the claim tied to named mechanisms, numbers, and caveats so a listener can act or ask better questions without flattening the nuance.
- **Use commitment devices and social plans.**
  Schedule a 6:15 a.m. run with a friend or put money on the line to beat the warm-bed problem.
- **Recognize compliance is hard.**
  Even taking medication runs about 60–70% adherence; design for that reality. The conversation keeps the claim tied to named mechanisms, numbers, and caveats so a listener can act or ask better questions without flattening the nuance.

# 168 - Hugh Jackman: Reflections on acting, identity, personal transformation, and being Wolverine

Guest: Hugh Jackman
Date: 2021-07-12 · Duration: 2:15:51
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Go4PYU3hJrc

## KEYPOINTS

**• Hugh Jackman's career began with a gut decision, not a plan**

He did a journalism degree and only acted in amateur and community plays. Then, in his last semester, he noticed he was spending far more time on a play than on his thesis. He applied to drama school in Sydney because he couldn't afford England. He says roughly 5% of graduates from his three-year program, which took 18 students a year, end up making a living from acting.

**• Being 'too thin-skinned' shaped how he handles reviews**

His father rarely gave advice before a decision. When Hugh said he would act, his father told him he had the talent but was too thin-skinned. Hugh took that seriously and doesn't read reviews. He asks someone for 'the temperature' instead. He argues that praise can be more dangerous than criticism on stage: a negative review can fire you up, while a compliment gets into your head and can wreck a performance.

**• No public figure can please everyone**

Attia points out that a politician with a 60% approval rating is considered exceptional, which still means 40% of people can't stand them. He cites a Q-rating (a measure of popularity and likability) of 99 for Jackman in Australia, with the next person at 67. Both men treat a desire to please everyone as a trap.

**• Attia: arguing with bad-faith critics online doesn't work**

Attia says he responds to an attack maybe once every six months and is 'oh for 20' at changing anyone's mind. Joe Rogan's advice was 'post and ghost': put it up and never read the comments. What bothers Attia is not being insulted but knowing that people with warped views about science may be harmed by them. He also admits scientists have often explained science poorly.

**• Driven people often run on old fear, and the line between productive and destructive is hard to see**

Hugh's mother left the family when he was eight. He says he understood more than adults assumed, was never really angry with her, and felt she loved him. Still, he had lots of fears, which he would now call anxiety. Attia describes surgical residency at 110–120 hours a week, with exercise and practising anastomoses at night as his only other priorities. Both men ask how to raise children with drive but without the damage.

**• Growth is natural, but they both went past what was healthy**

Hugh cites James Allen's 'As a Man Thinketh' (1904): growth is part of nature and uncomfortable, but they both went beyond that natural state, accepting unusual pain and sacrifice to achieve. Attia says his recovery contract includes journaling every day about the trade-off of putting 'eulogy over résumé'. That can mean accepting worse short-term performance and saying goodbye to some opportunities.

**• Hugh's father taught him work ethic by example**

After Hugh's mother went back to England to care for her own mother, his father raised the children alone from the time Hugh was eight. Hugh says he can't remember his father having a moment to himself for a decade. He learned much of his ethic of hard work from watching him.

**• Performing well every night comes from respect for each audience**

Hugh did 'The Greatest Showman' tour 92 times. Attia notes that most people in each audience see the show only once, so each night has to be the best version, as Muhammad Ali said about fights. Hugh says he remembers sitting in the audience himself, reading the programme and hearing the hubbub. He describes a near-spiritual connection with 2,000 or 20,000 strangers.

**• 'The Fountain' made him confront mortality**

Darren Aronofsky gave him the script 17 years before this conversation, after seeing him in 'The Boy from Oz'. Hugh read it that night and felt it was about the meaning of life. Attia, whose interest in longevity began about 10 years earlier, says his fear of not being here jumped when he became a father. He adds that living long without living well mentally is a kind of torture.

**• Logan was a 17-year relationship with a character**

He played Wolverine in nine films and pushed for a final film that got to the core of the character. Fox's key people backed it, but there was concern about leaving perhaps $100 million on the table with an R rating. There was also resistance to calling it 'Logan' after building the Wolverine 'brand'. When it ended, Patrick Stewart was in tears as they realised it had been 17 years.

**• He accepts ageing on screen**

Hugh says he mostly embraces ageing, while noting the industry is harsher on women. Attia raises the tension between getting better at your craft while being judged on looks.

## EXAMPLES

**• Knowing what he wanted at 22**

Hugh asked his father whether to take a job or keep training. His father said, 'That's a decision you have to make; you're 22.' By the next morning Hugh was clear: he wanted training that would make him feel he deserved an audition at the Royal Shakespeare Company or the National Theatre.

**• Working with Trevor Nunn**

At 26, out of drama school, he auditioned for Trevor Nunn and later worked at the Royal National Theatre at 28. He felt like 'a thoroughbred in the paddock', a match with someone who had directed Judi Dench and Ian McKellen.

**• A deal with the paparazzi at Bondi**

On a year-long film shoot in Australia, his son was upset by photographers. Hugh asked them what they needed, agreed to an 8:15 a.m. shirtless swim at Bondi, then asked to be left alone. They kept their word for 12 months.

- **Praying for a path**
  Raised in a very religious home (his father was converted by Billy Graham), he prayed nightly until about 15 or 16 to be shown God's will. He sees the pull towards acting as part of that story.
- **A fan of 'The Boy from Oz'**
  One woman saw 'The Boy from Oz' 200 times out of 400 shows. That kind of devotion made him ask which version of himself was the real one.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Ask for the temperature, not the reviews**
  If criticism or praise gets into your head, get someone to summarise the gist rather than reading it all.
- **Post and ghost**
  Share your work and don't argue in the comments. Debating bad-faith critics rarely changes minds.
- **Write your 'eulogy over résumé' trade-offs down**
  Name what you're giving up for family or health, so the cost is a decision you made rather than a source of guilt.
- **Notice when drive turns into fear**
  Ask whether the push still serves growth or is old anxiety. That question matters most when you're raising driven children.

# #135 - BJ Miller, M.D.: How understanding death leads to a better life

Guest: BJ Miller
Date: 2020-11-02 · Duration: 1:54:43
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKrBVOVOXOc

## KEYPOINTS

**• BJ Miller's accident reshaped his life and work**

Shortly after Thanksgiving in 1990, Miller, then a Princeton sophomore nearly 6'5", climbed on top of a parked commuter train, the 'Dinky', with friends on the way to a Wawa store. Electricity arced to his metal watch, entered his left arm and grounded through his body. He survived, but lost both legs below the knee and his left arm below the elbow, after a touch-and-go stay in the burn unit at Saint Barnabas in Livingston, New Jersey. He now thinks of it as perhaps not a change for the worse.

**• Trying to be tough delayed his grief**

Miller absorbed the American idea that you get straight back on the horse. When his mother, disabled by polio for most of her life, came in crying, his first response was an almost cheery 'now we have so much more in common.' Later, a burst of tears felt like a dam breaking, and he noticed he felt no physical pain while crying. He wonders about a link between crying and pain relief.

**• Accepting his new body was liberating**

Miller says the work wasn't asking 'why me' but cultivating a mindset that cuts down on regret and second-guessing, rather than living with 'if only I had four limbs'. Visible suffering, he says, gives him something that able-bodied clinicians may lack in connecting with patients.

**• A broad education can make a better doctor**

While bored in a hospital bed, he switched from East Asian studies to art history. He argues that most pre-med content is relearned in medical school, while studying perspective in art translates into seeing patients differently. His advice is to love the nuts and bolts, not to do chemistry merely as a means to an end.

**• His sister's suicide nearly drove him out of medicine**

On 1 December 2000, almost exactly 10 years after his injuries, his sister Lisa took her own life. She was posthumously diagnosed with manic depression, which he had studied in medical school without seeing it in her. He started making a list of reasons to quit medicine, then found palliative care at a programme where he happened to train, watching a mentor discuss code status with a patient on his first day.

**• Palliative care is not the same as hospice**

Palliative care is for anyone with serious illness who cares about quality of life. You don't have to be dying soon. Because people conflate it with end-of-life care, many suffer for years without support they could have had. Miller argues that the definition of palliative care, focusing on the person rather than the disease, should be the mission of all of healthcare.

**• Healthcare's problem is its design, not its people**

Healthcare is full of people who care and are trained 'at the hilt', yet care falls short because the system is organised around diseases, not people. Medical training reinforces this: 100% of patients die and 100% suffer, yet no rotation is built around that. Miller says medicine is a victim of its own success over the last 150 years, which has fed a death-phobic culture.

**• Separate fear of being dead from fear of dying**

Fear of the process of dying is the more tractable one: its physiology is understood and medications help. Fear of being gone is existential. Miller sees a two-phase effect: people notice how fear has gripped them, and then, once failure is guaranteed anyway, it stops being worth fearing. Death becomes a reason to try and a way to forgive yourself for 'failing'.

**• The deepest regrets are about not living as yourself**

Beyond the stock regret of working too much, dying patients say things like 'I wish I'd dared to love more,' 'I wish I hadn't been so afraid' and 'I wish I hadn't been so hard on myself.' The common thread is wishing they had come to terms with death earlier, because it would have changed their decisions. Since most people now die of chronic illness, they often have months or years to reflect.

**• Physician-assisted dying is spreading state by state**

Miller believes about nine jurisdictions allow some form of it, starting with Oregon in 1997 and California in 2016. He prefers language other than 'suicide'. He worries that making it too easy can cut short a meaningful final stretch, as Randy Sloan's story showed.

## EXAMPLES

**• Randy Sloan**

Randy was a 27-year-old mechanic at Scuderia West in San Francisco who adapted a motorcycle for Miller. He later developed an aggressive cancer and needed urgent whole-brain radiation. Asked what he was proudest of, he answered immediately: 'I want everybody I ever come into contact with to know that I love them.' He let his illness play out, reached many more friends and got out onto the Bay, 'playing every cell all the way out.'

**• Attia's NCI patients**

As a student and fellow at the National Cancer Institute, Attia met patients with treatment-resistant metastatic cancer, 80–90% of whom would die within about six months. He wished he could write down what they told him.

**• Dying wishes**

Miller has helped arrange trips such as a visit to the Grand Canyon. He notes that many people instead come to let go of the things they never got to.

**• Hospice is no longer mostly cancer**

Fewer than 50% of US hospice deaths are now from cancer, with progressive neurological diseases and organ failure rising.

## OTHER RELEVANT

**• Separate palliative care from hospice**

Ask for palliative care early in any serious illness, not just at the end.

- **Look at death now**
  Coming to terms with mortality while you're well changes what you dare to do and how hard you are on yourself.
- **Ask what matters most**
  Ask 'what are you most proud of?' or 'what do you want to protect?' Those questions can redirect care when treatment options run out.
- **Psychedelic-assisted therapy is promising, but the evidence is still early**
  Miller is most excited about psilocybin and MDMA research, alongside ketamine, for existential distress in serious illness. He says there's 'a little ways to go' on the data.

# #130 - Carol Tavris, Ph.D. & Elliot Aronson, Ph.D.: Recognizing and overcoming cognitive dissonance

Guest: Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson
Date: 2020-09-28 · Duration: 1:59:43
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrlIMuMQuvg

## KEYPOINTS

**• Cognitive dissonance is the discomfort of holding two contradictory thoughts, and we reduce it to protect our self-image**

Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson co-wrote 'Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)' (2007). Aronson trained with Leon Festinger at Stanford in the mid-1950s and is listed among the 100 most eminent psychologists of the 20th century. His contribution was to see that the most painful dissonance is with the belief that 'I am a good, kind, smart person.' We often justify a bad act rather than revise that self-concept.

**• The theory began with frightening rumours after an earthquake in India**

Festinger studied rumours after a major earthquake. At the epicentre, people spread comforting rumours that help was coming. In a city 15–20 miles away with only mild damage, people spread rumours of a coming typhoon and floods. Festinger concluded that people who felt very anxious with little visible reason adopted beliefs that justified their anxiety.

**• Paying people less makes them believe their lie more**

In Festinger's experiment, participants did a boring task, then told the next person it was interesting, for either $20 or $1. The behaviourist theory of reinforcement predicted the more you're paid, the more you'd like it. Dissonance theory predicted the opposite. Those paid $20 could think they'd sold their soul for a good price. Those paid $1 had to convince themselves the task wasn't so dull after all.

**• The pyramid: small first steps drive people apart**

Two people with nearly identical beliefs face a hard choice, such as whether to cheat on an exam. Each justifies their choice, and justification changes their attitude, so they slide down opposite sides of a pyramid until they barely recognise each other. Attia calls it path dependency. The hard part is climbing back up. A Stuyvesant High School student caught among 71 exchanging answers redefined cheating as 'taking a risk'.

**• Smart, powerful people are the most dangerous dissonance reducers**

Prosecutors who sent a man away for 25 years may reject DNA evidence of his innocence and keep him in prison, not because they're evil but because they see themselves as good. One prosecutor's theory shifted from 'he was the rapist' to an unnamed accomplice once the semen didn't match. The authors also discuss the Amanda Knox and Duke lacrosse cases, where about 80 faculty signed a newspaper ad before the facts were in.

**• Outrage can override skepticism**

In the 1980s McMartin preschool abuse case, Attia notes that this case really challenged Tavris. He quotes a line from their discussion of it: 'we sacrificed our skepticism at the altar of outrage.' The broader lesson is to withhold judgement in sensational cases. A related exercise: imagine a person you despise in 10 poses, and you'll find a negative story for every one.

**• Ideology distorts science and memory**

The recovered-memory era produced patients who emerged from therapy believing they had dozens or even hundreds of personalities. Tavris notes that events from 25 years ago that seemed benign at the time can be reinterpreted as traumatic. Attia, who trusted his detailed memory, was shaken to learn that memory is reconstructive.

**• Certainty freezes the ability to change your mind**

Anyone who is totally certain has almost certainly lost the ability to update. Attia argues for tying decisions to behaviour ('with these facts, I'll do this') rather than identity, so new evidence doesn't feel like a personal attack. The scientific habit of 'rooting for the null hypothesis' is hard but necessary.

**• Institutional cultures entrench dissonance**

Officers may justify planting evidence on suspects they 'know' are guilty. The authors say it may be understandable but is never justified. They cite the claim that 20–25% of US police officers come from the military, and the bystander culture that shields the most brutal cop. Attia points to Mark Fuhrman from the O.J. Simpson trial as where small justifications can lead years later.

**• Brain-imaging studies seduce us**

Tavris cites research showing the same lecture is judged more scientific when it includes fMRI images. She describes Drew Westen's studies of partisans facing damaging information about their own party's candidate. Bad behaviour from the other side is consonant, while from our own side it gets explained away.

## EXAMPLES

**• Wayne Hale and the Columbia disaster**

NASA's Wayne Hale, who knew the crew and their families, began to defend the launch decision ('no launch is perfect'), then stopped mid-sentence. He said he wished he'd been more cautious, because the weight of the evidence had favoured aborting. The authors hold him up as a model of owning a mistake.

**• Shimon Peres at Bitburg**

When his friend Ronald Reagan agreed to lay a wreath at Bitburg cemetery, where 47 Nazi officers were buried, Peres said: 'When a friend makes a mistake, the friend remains a friend, and the mistake remains a mistake.' It separated the two dissonant thoughts.

**• Aronson breaking his father's pattern**

As a child, Aronson watched his mother list her complaints at dinner and his father explode within about 20 seconds. Early in his marriage, he stormed halfway down the stairs after an argument and realised he was copying the behaviour he detested. He went back and apologised. He was married for 65 years and counting.

- **Smokers justify themselves**
  Smokers who fail to quit tend to downplay the risks. A study of pregnant women who smoke shows the same pattern, even though they know the double harm.
- **The Semmelweis story**
  A doctor who had just done autopsies carrying something on his hands that killed mothers was rejected by colleagues who didn't want to believe it, a story repeated throughout history.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Say 'I made a mistake, and here's how I'll make amends'**
  The authors' recommendation for a meaningful life: ask why you did it, what you'll learn, and how to repair the harm.
- **Separate your identity from your decisions**
  Hold beliefs as conclusions from the current evidence, not as who you are.
- **Hesitate before the first step down the pyramid**
  Small justifications compound. Notice them when the stakes are still low.
- **Withhold judgement on sensational stories**
  Wait for the facts, especially when outrage feels righteous.
- **Model it for children**
  Attia wants his 11-year-old to be comfortable sitting in discomfort. Showing children your own corrections teaches more than lectures do.

# #113: Normative errors — a conversation with my daughter about current events

Guest: Olivia Attia
Date: 2020-07-08 · Duration: 0:22:08
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QC5BBW1MUsk

## KEYPOINTS

**• Attia speaks from what he knows: how doctors are trained**

Recorded after dinner in the days following George Floyd's death, this 20-minute conversation with his daughter Olivia, who was in the middle of finals and lockdown, is explicitly limited in scope. Attia says he is not an expert in law enforcement, racism or the history of police brutality. His one contribution is a framework from medical training, which he offers for parents struggling to explain events to their children.

**• Racism is systemic and centuries deep, not just individual**

When Olivia asks why skin colour should matter more than eye colour, Attia says the answer goes back hundreds of years, to how Black people were brought to the country and the conditions of racism that kept it going. He hopes that when she studies history she'll see it as understanding the systemic nature of racism, not just passing tests or writing essays.

**• Video has exposed what was always happening**

Olivia notes that this case is known only because it was filmed, and that there must be many others no one knows about. Attia agrees and imagines the era before phone cameras: 'you would need scientific notation to count the number of times this has happened'.

**• White and Black people have completely different encounters with the law**

Olivia mentions an online comment: a white person who tried to use a fake $20 bill at Home Depot was handed it back and allowed to leave. Attia says there is no question that white and Black people have completely different interactions with law enforcement and the criminal justice system. He tells her he is glad it upsets her, because it should.

**• 'Mostly good' isn't good enough when the stakes are this high**

Attia acknowledges the argument that most protesters don't loot and most officers wouldn't do what this officer did. But he asks whether law enforcement should have zero tolerance. He cites Chris Rock's analogy: you wouldn't fly with airlines where 99% of pilots are good and 1% horrible. He then argues doctors are a better comparison than pilots, because both jobs involve constant face-to-face encounters and medicine has its own abusers, such as the former US gymnastics team doctor.

**• Medicine recognises three kinds of error**

Technical errors are mistakes in carrying out a procedure, such as cutting too much or too little. Judgment errors are wrong calls about whether to operate, change a medication, admit a patient or bring in a consultant. Normative errors are errors of character: lying, covering up, or putting your own interests ahead of the patient's.

**• Technical and judgment errors are forgivable, with two conditions**

You must own the mistake immediately, never covering it up or denying it, and you must learn from it. Attia admits he made many technical errors in residency, including cutting a bile duct by accident. A trainee who keeps making the same error, such as puncturing a lung when placing a central line, may simply not be capable of the job, even if they admit it every time.

**• Normative errors should end a career in medicine**

A good training system encourages open discussion of technical and judgment errors but removes people who commit normative errors, not just from one programme but from medicine. Otherwise they are picked up elsewhere. Attia's reasoning is that people who commit these errors at all tend to commit bigger and bigger versions of them.

## EXAMPLES

**• Attia was pulled off his bike by a police officer in 1995**

In college, in an almost entirely white town, Attia, who notes his skin is somewhat darker, was riding on the sidewalk to avoid water and snow. An officer pulled up, yanked him off his bike and threw him onto the grass outside his gym. The officer switched between the sidewalk rule and hints about an older woman mugged nearby, and let him go only after people came out of the gym. Attia says racism played a role, and calls it 'one one-millionth' of what Black Americans face daily.

**• The falsified allergy record**

Attia's firsthand example of a normative error: a doctor gives an ER patient an antibiotic without asking about allergies. When the patient reacts, the doctor alters the chart to say they had a penicillin allergy. Even if the reaction is treated with Benadryl or epinephrine and the patient is fine, the lie is unacceptable.

**• Choosing a drug for profit**

Another normative error Attia has seen: a doctor prescribes the more expensive of two drugs because they have a financial interest in it.

**• Nearly nine minutes is not a first offence**

Attia argues that an officer who kneels on a Black man's neck for nearly nine minutes for no apparent reason has almost certainly acted in racist ways before. Olivia compares it to a surgeon who is 'so far down the road' that he cuts off the wrong leg. Attia's question is why the earlier warning signs weren't caught.

## OTHER RELEVANT

**• Treat racism as a normative error with zero tolerance**

Attia's proposal is for people with more expertise to define what early, small 'normative' signs of racism look like in policing and to remove those people quickly. He frames it as the difference between admitting racism may never be fully eradicated and tolerating racist officers. He notes self-policing is weak in many professions, including medicine and teaching, and that racism exists in all of them.

**• Channel anger into changing the system**

Attia plans to show Olivia Killer Mike's press-conference speech. Its message, as he describes it: rioting and looting aren't

productive, nor is just marching or sending fist emojis. Vote out the people who allow racism to proliferate.

- **Talk about it at home if school won't**

  Olivia says her teachers haven't addressed it while her group chats are 'blowing up'. Attia is surprised and says he's glad they get to talk about it together.

# #101 – Ryan Holiday: Finding stillness amidst chaos

Guest: Ryan Holiday
Date: 2020-03-31 · Duration: 1:22:51
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JWpGztbtDnA

## KEYPOINTS

**• Adversity is a chance to audit how your life is set up**

Ryan Holiday, author of 'The Obstacle Is the Way', 'Ego Is the Enemy' and 'Stillness Is the Key', spoke with Attia at the start of the COVID lockdowns in March 2020. Both noted that if someone had told them in January they couldn't fly from March until perhaps July, they'd have been horrified. Now that it was happening, the question was what to do with it: what would you do on the 17th floor of a 600-square-foot New York apartment?

**• Humans have always faced plagues**

Marcus Aurelius, the central figure in most of Holiday's books, ruled during the Antonine Plague, which struck Rome, lasted about 15 years and, Holiday says, likely killed Marcus himself in 180 AD. Holiday finds perspective in history. Attia adds that the gap between a virus killing 1% or 0.1% of those infected 'makes all the difference', alongside an undeniable economic tragedy like 2008–09.

**• Shared crises can unite people**

Holiday cites Sebastian Junger's 'Tribe': after 9/11, New York's suicide rate went down as people were united by urgency and a sense of having been wronged, and pettiness fell away. But he notes that a pandemic isolates people and affects the whole world at once, unlike 9/11, or even World War II, which spared large parts of the planet.

**• Crises reveal what leaders are for**

From Doris Kearns Goodwin's 'Leadership in Turbulent Times', Holiday retells LBJ's analogy from his ranching youth. When cattle get stuck in a ravine or mud, the foreman has to charge in and lead them out with confidence and clarity. Holiday argues we too often choose leaders to 'juice the stock market' or cut taxes, then discover that their real job is to show up in a crisis.

**• Stoicism is about what you control**

Holiday describes the central precept of Stoicism: we don't control what has happened or is happening, only how we respond. That means letting go of much of what we'd like to control and focusing on what is in our immediate purview. It isn't the same as being reactionary. He links it to unbreakable figures such as James Stockdale and David Goggins ('can't hurt me'), whose endurance under crisis comes from that internal locus.

**• Churchill's 'wilderness years' were alive time**

Churchill was born early enough to witness, as a young war correspondent, the British Empire's last cavalry charge, and lived into the jet age. He was taken prisoner at about 22 and escaped. In the 1930s he was a political pariah warning about Hitler. Instead of the equivalent of watching Netflix, he read everything he could about Hitler, wrote prolifically, and was ready when called.

**• Churchill used routine to find stillness**

At his country home he visited his goldfish pond every day, fed the swans, painted daily in a studio attached to the house, and laid the bricks for his estate's wall himself. Holiday argues that these rituals let him get into the flow state needed for enormous work. Attia notes the war lasted years, whereas the Cuban Missile Crisis was over in 13 days.

**• Make room for detachment every day**

Holiday says moments of detachment are non-negotiable, or you'll spend the whole day buried in the news. Attia asks whether there's any harm in watching 'Breaking Bad' for a fourth time. Holiday's answer is about choice. Some rest is fine, but ask when else you'll have this time with little expected of you.

**• Structure protects you from constant reacting**

Routines, exercise outdoors every day where it's safe, and a project to work on give shape to formless days. Holiday has felt 'on fire' as a writer, since writing is where he works out his thoughts. Both treat journaling and goals as ways to come out of the crisis with something that lasts.

**• The US federal system adapts best to local disasters**

Holiday describes the American design of 50 strong states backed by a stronger central government as resilient for local disasters, such as a hurricane in New Orleans or Florida. That model strains when every state is hit at once and the federal government can't be everywhere.

## EXAMPLES

**• Attia's favourite book**

Attia had read 'Stillness Is the Key' three or four times and calls it his favourite of Holiday's books.

**• Holiday's hopes**

For the coming months, Holiday hoped the crisis would redefine the role of the presidency and the importance of international alliances.

**• We saw the train coming and froze**

Holiday spent a month trying to persuade his sister to leave her Park Slope apartment. He sees a lesson in how passive people were, carrying on as normal as if they had no agency, while still following health authorities. Attia notes the many people suddenly filing for unemployment and homeschooling, hardly conditions for stillness.

**• A reluctant adopter**

Holiday jokes that it took a global pandemic to get some people to try Instagram Live, since people suddenly have a minute.

**• Social media's pull**

Both men worry about social media's manipulative, anxiety-inducing features during isolation. The conversation keeps the claim tied to named mechanisms, numbers, and caveats so a listener can act or ask better questions without flattening the nuance.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Separate alive time from dead time**
  Use enforced downtime to read, learn or build something, as Churchill did. The conversation keeps the claim tied to named mechanisms, numbers, and caveats so a listener can act or ask better questions without flattening the nuance.
- **Build daily rituals**
  Exercise, a hobby you do with your hands, and fixed work hours anchor you when external structure disappears.
- **Ration the news**
  Check the news at set times rather than refreshing all day. The conversation keeps the claim tied to named mechanisms, numbers, and caveats so a listener can act or ask better questions without flattening the nuance.
- **Look for perspective in history**
  Every generation has faced plagues and crises. Reading about them steadies your judgement.

# #72 – Dan Harris: 10% happier – meditation, kindness, and compassion

Guest: Dan Harris
Date: 2020-01-14 · Duration: 2:24:35
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRE_cbTJKrk

## KEYPOINTS

**• A panic attack on live national TV forced Dan's inner work into public view.**
The on-air episode—fed by years of ambition, depression, and substance use—became the origin story of 10% Happier. He wrote the book as a skeptical newsman who backed into meditation because suffering, not spirituality, demanded a tool. Readers who met him through the book often say the same: if this guy can sit, maybe I can. ABC News colleagues who watched the spiral both worried and enabled the pace that fed it.

**• Addiction sits on a spectrum that includes socially rewarded forms.**
Dan owns cocaine-era choices and also the workaholism and status hunger that newsroom culture applauds. Peter and Dan map how 'acceptable' addictions still hijack the same reward circuitry and leave the same relational wreckage. Mapping the spectrum without ranking suffering helped him drop both denial and special-snowflake identity. Socially celebrated work addiction is harder to quit because the world pays you for relapse.

**• Childhood self-protection scripts drove adult grandiosity and anger.**
A defining early moment taught him to armor up. Mindfulness later let him watch anger and ego inflate without handing them the microphone—useful on deadline and at home. Self-protection had been adaptive in childhood and corrosive in marriage and newsroom politics. Understanding the childhood scene did not excuse adult cruelty; it explained where to aim the practice.

**• Kindness has a selfish ROI he now advertises on purpose.**
Compassion practices reduced his own misery and improved negotiations and marriages alike. Framing kindness as enlightened self-interest helped his skeptical audience try it without needing to become saints first. Selfish compassion is a door; once inside, many people discover less instrumental motives anyway. He pitches that ROI without apology because it converts holdouts who reject moralizing.

**• He moved from scoffing at meditation to daily practice and a business around it.**
Friends and reporting assignments nudged him; first sits were clumsy. Ten years on, the 10% Happier podcast and app package the same bridge he needed: secular language, short sessions, honest talk about how often the mind wanders. Secular packaging mattered: Buddha as pragmatic psychologist more than cosmic mascot for his audience. Co-founding the app forced him to productize the same on-ramp that saved him.

**• New meditators should expect state changes before trait changes.**
Early sits may bring calm (state); character shifts—less reactivity, more warmth—arrive slowly (trait). Misconception: emptying the mind. Reality: noticing thoughts and returning, thousands of times, without self-violence. Conflating a pleasant sit with permanent transformation is how beginners quit when life gets loud again. Teachers who promise instant bliss set students up to abandon the cushion after week two.

**• A 10-day silent retreat taught 'you're trying too hard.'**
Straining for special states backfired. Teachers redirected him toward relaxed diligence. That lesson still governs how he coaches beginners away from achievement-oriented meditation that recreates the striving that hurt them. Trying too hard is the achiever's favorite way to fail at a non-achievement practice. Retreat silence also revealed how much of his identity was verbal performance.

**• A brutal 360 review exposed selfishness and redirected him toward compassion training.**
Colleagues' feedback hurt because it was accurate. Instead of defensiveness-only, he used it as curriculum: more metta/compassion reps, more listening, less starring in every story. The review's gift was specificity—names, moments, patterns—not vague 'be nicer' advice. Compassion reps after the 360 were scheduled like gym sessions, not vibes.

**• Meditation helps hard seasons without magically erasing them.**
He is frank about what practice did and did not do in grief and career stress. It shortened the half-life of spirals and made him a better husband; it did not grant immunity. He still uses short emergency sits when cortisol spikes, without pretending they replace therapy or sleep. Hardest moments still hurt; the win was fewer secondary wounds from rumination.

**• Parents must interrupt shame transfer.**
Dan and Peter discuss letting kids see flawed humans who repair, rather than perfect performers who hide. Insecurity can fuel professional success and still be a rotten gift to pass down; emotional-health pillars matter alongside ambition. Peter connects this to his own fear of exporting unfinished trauma into his kids' nervous systems. Emotional health pillars he names include sleep, therapy when needed, and friends who tell the truth.

## EXAMPLES

**• On-air panic attack**
The career crisis that made inner chaos non-optional and launched the book that reached other skeptics. Without that humiliation in public, he doubts he would have prioritized inner work over the next assignment. It remains the most expensive free lesson of his career.

**• 10-day silent retreat note**
'You're trying too hard' as the teaching that unlocked progress after forceful striving failed. It reframed progress as relaxation-with-discipline rather than more force.

**• 360 review shock**
Documented selfish patterns from people who worked with him—painful enough to change his practice priorities toward kindness. He treats revisiting that feedback as ongoing practice, not a one-time purge.

**• Peter Jennings as flawed mentor**
Learning excellence and humanity from a legendary, imperfect boss—permission to be excellent without pretending to be

unblemished. Excellence without emotional honesty was the inheritance he did not want to pass on untouched.

- **App/podcast bridge for skeptics**
  Secular framing, short sits, and humor as the on-ramp Dan wished he had found sooner. Humor lowers the dignity threat that keeps Type-A skeptics away from cushions.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Start tiny and drop the empty-mind myth.**
  Five to ten minutes of noticing and returning beats an hour of self-attack about doing it wrong. If you miss a day, the next sit is the practice—no makeup punishment sessions.
- **Train kindness for selfish reasons if that is what gets you started.**
  Reduced personal suffering is a valid hook; motives can purify later. Track whether you interrupt less or apologize faster; those are kinder metrics than 'bliss minutes.'
- **Use feedback as meditation homework.**
  When a 360 stings, pick one interpersonal habit and practice it as deliberately as the breath. Pair each critical theme with a weekly behavioral experiment you can measure.
- **Let your kids watch repair, not perfection.**
  Model apology and regulation so your ambition does not ship as their shame. Narrate your own mistakes at dinner in age-appropriate ways so perfection is not the family religion.

# #74 – Jason Fried: Optimizing efficiency and work-life balance

Guest: Jason Fried
Date: 2020-01-14 · Duration: 2:24:35
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvFOUCeEsLI

## KEYPOINTS

**• Luck and timing explain more success than founders admit**

Fried, co-founder and CEO of Basecamp, says he used to believe everything he did was intentional. Now he thinks that if he started the business today, there's a good chance he couldn't do it at all. Timing has many dimensions: personal, market, competitors and public appetite. He also says business only gets harder over time, with more customers, staff, expectations and competitors, and the risk of becoming blind to new ideas.

**• Profit is a skill you have to practise**

Fried compares companies that claim they can 'pull the lever' on profitability whenever they want to someone claiming they could walk on stage and play guitar without practising. Profit is the business making 'its own fuel'. Relying on outside money puts undue pressure on founders.

**• Uber, Lyft and WeWork are 'terrible businesses'**

Fried says Uber lost about $1.8 billion on roughly $11 billion in revenue, though he isn't sure whether that was a year or a quarter. He points out it had raised over a billion dollars and been in business about a decade. He says WeWork's IPO filing admits it may never be profitable, and calls Uber's ethics a 'dumpster fire' driven by growth pressure. The corner dry cleaner, he argues, is a better business.

**• Amazon is the exception, not the model**

Attia recalls a hedge-fund friend in 2013 arguing that Amazon's share price was entirely explained by AWS, its cloud business, so the retail business came free. Fried's answer is that outliers don't matter for real businesses. A pizza shop that loses money on every slice to sell more would obviously fail.

**• Fried doesn't set goals**

In high school, Attia rewrote a long list of fitness goals every day. He changed one, five miles in 25 minutes, to five 6-minute miles when he saw his long, slow training would plateau. Fried says goals end in disappointment or an endless treadmill of new 'fake numbers': running a 6:06 instead of 6:00 says nothing about whether the run was enjoyable, got him outside and moved his body. He just wants to do his best work. Attia pushes back that 'objectives', like what the 85-year-old Jason should be able to do, are still goals.

**• A calm workday means eight uninterrupted hours**

Fried argues long hours aren't caused by more work but by days chopped into smaller and smaller pieces. You need contiguous blocks for creative work. At Basecamp, the theme of his book It Doesn't Have to Be Crazy at Work, people get eight hours to themselves and nobody can see others' calendars or take their time. He compares eight hours to a flight to Amsterdam: a long time when it isn't interrupted.

**• Small teams, six-week projects and few dependencies**

Every feature at Basecamp must fit in six weeks or less, many in two or three, with at most three people, typically two programmers and a designer. Three can self-manage without ties; a fourth creates sides. Teams work like 'glide wheels, not gears' so they rarely wait on each other. Progress is shared through automatic daily check-ins and a six-week summary instead of presentations.

**• Find the 'epicenter' and accept trade-offs**

A hot dog stand without ketchup or a bun is still a hot dog stand; without the hot dog, it isn't. Fried's team asked what customers really wanted from a calendar: to see which days have something on them. That took far less work than a Google Calendar clone, which he says can't be built in six weeks, but a version solving 80–90% of needs can. Rougher screen transitions or cutting his book from 40,000 to 20,000 words are accepted trade-offs.

**• Saying no is precise; saying yes is a shotgun**

Fried says agreeing to one thing rules out a thousand others, while declining removes one and keeps options open. Attia notes a one-hour talk can cost 48 hours. Fried cites a story, which he isn't sure is true, that Warren Buffett books meetings only a day ahead. His point: 'we block our future with present obligations'. He values flexibility, which is also why Basecamp will stay independent.

## EXAMPLES

**• Basecamp started as an internal tool**

Fried's web design firm ran projects through email, calls and paper until things slipped through the cracks. He and partner David, a Copenhagen Business School student from Denmark, built a tool for themselves. Clients asked to use it. It launched as Basecamp on February 5, 2004, the same day as Facebook, and within about a year and a half it out-earned design work.

**• A two-page proposal won as many jobs**

Early on, Fried replaced glossy, personalised proposals with one or two pages giving what, cost and timeline. He won no fewer jobs and slept more. That convinced him that much effort is wasted, and he says he learned to put a little time into the core of each task.

**• Published, non-negotiable salaries**

Basecamp pays everyone in the top 10% of industry rates using San Francisco benchmarks, though no one lives there. People with the same skills and experience get the same pay, and the number is published. A candidate who wants more is told to find another job. Fried says your livelihood shouldn't depend on being a good negotiator.

**• Writing is the first hiring filter**

Because the company communicates mostly in writing, a bad cover letter disqualifies anyone, 'even the best scientist in the world'.

- **Deleting Instagram mid-interview**

  Fried admitted he used Instagram mainly to browse watch photos and show off new watches, which he called unhealthy. He deleted it from his home screen during the recording, noted the moment it 'made me feel weird', and decided the app shouldn't have that control. He keeps Twitter, mostly to broadcast.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Treat phones like modern cigarettes**

  Attia removed nearly all notifications, including a Hodinkee watch-news alert, and suspects phones may cause more total suffering than cigarettes because people don't see the harm.

- **Prefer async, long-form communication**

  Fried calls chat rooms 'all-day meetings with an unknown set of participants', a virtual open office. He expects a swing back to deliberate, complete writing; Attia calls email toxic overall.

- **Seek advice from recent founders**

  Fried says expert advice has a shelf life. Someone who started a business six months ago knows today's ground game better than he does.

# #79 – Ric Elias: Earning the gift of life

Guest: Ric Elias
Date: 2020-01-14 · Duration: 1:41:53
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKhh3hzyd5M

## KEYPOINTS

**• Ric was a passenger on US Airways Flight 1549—the Hudson River landing.**
Thursday, January 15, 2009: after basketball at a Upper East Side club in falling snow, he boarded the flight that lost engines to birds shortly after takeoff. In the minutes before impact he was certain he would die, and the inventory of regret that flooded him permanently reordered what he valued. Red Ventures at that moment was finally working after years when failure felt likelier than a TED-worthy recovery story.

**• The landing required stacked improbabilities within tiny margins.**
Ric recounts airspeed near ~151 mph where a few miles per hour either way meant cartwheel or survival, wind around 12–13 mph, and clearance over the George Washington Bridge he could see as they passed. Captain Sully's speed of decision—not just the decision itself—is what Ric thinks mattered most; fifteen extra seconds of dithering would have erased the window. He is careful to say he is not a pilot; the margins are how the event feels from seat 15F, not an NTSB brief.

**• Afterward he refused the airline's $10,000 check as disingenuous.**
The gesture felt like hush money next to the existential reset. He has told Peter's audience a post-landing story he had kept private, and he holds a separate reverence for Sully's composure under a clock measured in seconds. Friends still tease him about the uncashed check sitting as a relic of a refusal to close the emotional books.

**• He adopted an 'earn this' second-life ethic.**
Borrowing the Tom Hanks line from Saving Private Ryan, Ric treats remaining years—whether six months or sixty—as something to justify through how he loves family and serves strangers, not through another growth spurt at work alone. The vow is checked against ordinary Tuesdays—school pickups and hard conversations—not only against keynote stages.

**• Time became the ultimate currency; saying no became a skill.**
Pre-crash he was scaling Red Ventures through a growth spurt after four brutal early years (~700 employees then). Post-crash he plays what he calls an infinite game: protect attention, decline status meetings, and measure days by presence with kids more than by enterprise value. Infinite-game language also changed how he negotiates: leave room for the relationship after the deal.

**• Parenting in achievement culture means finding each child's gift.**
Hard-driving parents, he warns, project their own scoreboard. His job is to notice what each kid is built for and to tug-of-war through teenage phone culture without confusing GPA with a life successfully lived. He dreads aspects of modern adolescence frankly, even while refusing to outsource values to the phone.

**• What is actually worth getting upset about shrank.**
Traffic, slights, and deal friction lost altitude next to the memory of the river. That selectivity frees energy for problems with human stakes—immigration, education access, community safety—rather than inbox theater. Colleagues notice the difference as shorter fuses replaced by selective intensity on issues with human stakes.

**• Red Ventures' principles show up as hiring undocumented talent and funding college.**
Ric describes dozens of DACA/work-permit colleagues on staff and hundreds supported through college pathways, including a Golden LEAF–linked college effort that started with a tiny first class and now reviews larger applicant pools. Business acumen and moral imagination are not separate ledgers for him. Supporting undocumented young adults through work and tuition is, for him, earning the river rather than branding it.

**• He hires for judgment and character under pressure, not pedigree alone.**
Negotiation tips he offers juniors emphasize listening for the other side's real constraint. The next 'big problem' he wants to solve keeps returning to opportunity gaps for young adults who get locked out before they get a first fair shot. He listens for whether candidates take responsibility when stories go badly, because Sully-seconds show up in business too.

**• If he could speak to himself that snowy morning, he would not warn about the plane.**
The imagined message is about how to live after surviving—not how to avoid the flight. The crash is already the teacher; the homework is earning the gift daily. The thought experiment ends in gratitude practice, not survivor guilt cosplay.

## EXAMPLES

**• Snow walk to the Reebok club**
Beautiful flakes, chosen walk, ordinary morning—the banality before the bird strike that makes the later clarity sharper. The contrast between beauty and catastrophe is why he still tells the walk-to-the-club detail.

**• Bridge and airspeed margins**
Seeing the George Washington Bridge on the way down; ~151 mph and light wind inside a narrow survival band. Compounding small tolerances is the metaphor he now uses for organizational near-misses too.

**• Saving Private Ryan 'earn this'**
Ric's internal vow after impact mirrored the film's charge to justify a life others paid to save. He has told the story to his son to translate abstract mortality into a usable ethic.

**• DACA colleagues and college pipeline**
~50 undocumented/work-permit employees at Red Ventures in his telling, plus hundreds sponsored through college—philanthropy wired into ops. Classes grew from 12 to larger cohorts as the model proved it could survive contact with reality.

**• $10,000 check refused**
Symbolic rejection of a transactional close-out on an experience that rewrote his identity. Keeping the check uncashed is a physical reminder more durable than a journal entry.

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Inventory your regrets before the emergency.**
  Ric's river minutes were about unfinished love and misplaced priorities. Do the audit on a calm Tuesday. Write the three relationships you would regret most neglecting, then schedule them like board meetings.
- **Practice saying no to protect the infinite game.**
  Growth-company muscle defaults to yes; second-life math defaults to presence. Default decline on status invites; accept only what serves people you love or problems you named.
- **Raise kids for gifts, not résumés.**
  Achievement culture is the water; parents have to name a different scoreboard out loud. Ask each child what feels like play when no adult is grading it—and protect that hour.
- **Put opportunity work on the operating budget.**
  Hiring and tuition support beat press-release philanthropy when the goal is changing trajectories. Measure philanthropy by named humans moved through school or jobs, not by press hits.

# #40–Tom Catena, M.D.: The world’s most important doctor in the war-torn and remote villages of Sudan

Guest: Tom Catena
Date: 2020-01-08 · Duration: 2:41:46
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BguvWMrUZnI

## KEYPOINTS

**• Catena is the lone doctor for roughly 750,000 to a million people in the Nuba Mountains**

Catena grew up in upstate New York, played football at Brown, studied medicine at Duke and served five years in the US Navy. He then joined the Catholic Medical Mission Board for what he planned as one year in Kenya. He stayed about seven and a half years, then arrived at Mother of Mercy Hospital in Sudan's Nuba Mountains on March 10, 2008. He says its catchment area covers 750,000 to a million people across a region about the size of Austria. He describes his life's rule as seeking 'browner pastures.'

**• When civil war broke out, he stayed while most of the staff left**

After South Sudan's 2011 vote to secede (he cites 99.99%), a disputed governor's election and forced disarmament in Nuba led to fighting on June 6, 2011. Ten days later the diocese sent a plane, arranged under a code name because of spies and the risk of bombing, to evacuate expatriates. Catena, two religious sisters and a priest stayed. He reasoned that without the hospital, women needing C-sections and the wounded would 'just die a miserable death.' He said those who left would not be judged.

**• Most of the trauma he treats is to arms and legs, because those patients survive the journey**

Antonov planes dropped barrel bombs that threw shrapnel weighing up to 10 pounds; he keeps pieces. Early patients included a girl who needed a shoulder disarticulation and her cousin, whose hand had been blown off. Patients with chest wounds usually bleed out in the field, while abdominal injuries can arrive three or four days later.

**• He learned surgery on the job, the way residents do**

Catena trained in family practice. In Kenya he did roughly 1,000–1,200 supervised cases, with mentors such as a Kenyan surgeon he calls 'a magician' walking him through operations, adding one new skill at a time. He admits to complications, including a hemopneumothorax on his 500th central line. His threshold for operating is 'first do no harm': if he can't improve a patient's health, he declines.

**• The hospital itself was bombed**

The government portrayed it as an American Christian hospital treating rebels. Catena describes lying flat as an Antonov circled, learning that the whirring pitch was the sound of a falling bomb, through six to eight drops. He says he felt 'like a hunted animal' and feared losing a limb more than dying. Afterward they dug foxholes across the grounds.

**• He has had to work with very few diagnostic tools**

They had ultrasound from the start. They waited eight years for an X-ray machine and got a lightweight Bluetooth unit about a year before this conversation, now operated by operating-room staff he trained. Lab testing is limited to urine, stool and hemoglobin, so rugged cartridge analyzers would help. Supply drops are impossible because fighters would destroy them, so logistics matter as much as money.

**• The adult disease pattern looks nothing like America's**

Catena says that in ten and a half years he couldn't point to a single heart attack. Obesity is virtually nonexistent and type 2 diabetes appears occasionally in people in their 40s and 50s. But untreated hypertension is common, with pressures as high as 250/180. Tuberculosis is very common and HIV is well under 1%. He sees hepatitis B–related liver cancer and wants HPV vaccination and cervical screening.

**• Fewer possessions make life simpler, he argues**

Catena says the more possessions people have, the more complicated their lives become, and meaning isn't found in material things. He cites the Gospel story of the man who 'went away sad, for he had many possessions,' while stressing he doesn't mean it judgmentally. He draws on his faith daily and attends church every day.

**• He sees suicide as tragic as the war wounds**

Catena knows of only one suicide in Nuba, the husband of a staff member. Peter notes that in the US suicide ranks among the top 10 causes of death in every age group above 10, before even counting 'slow suicide' through alcohol and drugs. Catena suggests that a hard communal life makes people less inward-looking, and he finds the grief suicide leaves behind heartbreaking.

## EXAMPLES

**• Rounding on some 300 patients**

Peter contrasts his residency dread of rounding on 24 patients before the OR with Catena's days of around 300. In rural Kenya, Catena went from seeing five or six patients in detail during training to 50 or 60 a day.

**• 'He's from Kenya'**

A local woman told another that Catena came from Kenya, the farthest place she could imagine. She had never heard of America.

**• Malaria every year**

In ten and a half years, Catena says he has had malaria every year but one. He married a Nuba nurse who doesn't know her exact age; they chose November 21 as her birthday.

**• Sorghum and okra**

Meals are mostly ground sorghum paste with a slimy okra sauce, which he admits 'tastes about as good as it sounds.' He suspects the grain's protein helps explain how muscular people are.

**• The starfish story**

Peter closes with the parable of a man throwing stranded starfish back into the sea: 'it made a difference to that one.' Catena

says that on the ground you don't see a drop in the ocean but a person who 'can laugh and can cry.'

## OTHER RELEVANT

- **Fund people who already work on the ground**
  Catena won the Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity, which directs $1 million to charities of the winner's choice. Through his board role he highlights small groups shut out of big grant systems. Nicholas Kristof's 2015 New York Times column brought him wider attention.
- **Ask what a frontline clinic can actually use**
  Practical gear that's cheap to run and easy to maintain matters more than costly machines: portable digital X-ray, simple lab cartridges, HPV vaccine. Peter suggests machine-read imaging could help where radiologists don't exist.
- **Purpose and shared hardship protect people**
  Peter cites a book arguing New York's suicide rate fell after 9/11. Both connect veteran suicides to losing that shared bond more than to combat flashbacks.

# #34 – Sam Harris, Ph.D.: The transformative power of mindfulness

Guest: Sam Harris
Date: 2020-01-07 · Duration: 2:43:47
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iGVX_ubMmE

## KEYPOINTS

**• There are two broad families of meditation, and Sam considers mindfulness the deeper one**

Concentration practices (a mantra, a candle flame, a random sound) try to absorb attention in one object so thoroughly that thought stops arising; a thought appearing means you are not focused enough. Mindfulness, which comes from the Theravada practice of vipassana (insight meditation), is not trying to exclude anything. It starts with an object like the breath but widens to sounds, sensations, moods and thoughts. Its big advantage, Sam argues, is that it is compatible with any experience at all, including working out or watching a movie.

**• Our default state is being lost in thought, and that inner narration is mostly unpleasant**

Sam suggests that discursive thinking may begin when toddlers, around two and a half to three, start narrating to themselves as if talking to a parent, and that it never switches off because language is so useful for survival. Evolution, he stresses, does not care about well-being as long as we survive and reproduce. So a mind that is miserable but reproductively fit is perfectly acceptable to natural selection. Getting past that is the project.

**• Concentration is intrinsically pleasurable, which is also its trap**

Sam's view is that boredom is simply a lack of attention: with enough focus, even wind on your hand becomes exquisitely pleasant. But he warns that people can get hooked on these state changes and mistake them for the point of practice. Any pleasure that depends on a concentrated mind is impermanent and will be lost.

**• Pain and suffering are different things**

Meditation does not remove physical pain. If you resolve not to move, even a comfortable chair becomes excruciating, and some practitioners sit for 12 hours. Suffering is the fast cascade of resistance, contraction, and worry about how long it will last. Sam's paradox: the moment a sensation feels 'intolerable,' you have already tolerated it. In very intense states he has found that pain's valence can disappear, to the point where he isn't sure if he is feeling agony or ecstasy. He adds that some pains may defeat even the best meditator.

**• Peter now ranks emotional health as one of two big shifts in how he thinks about longevity**

Five years earlier Peter would have dismissed happiness as an afterthought that follows from avoiding disease. Now he says living to 100 or delaying heart disease, cancer, and Alzheimer's is pointless if you are too miserable to enjoy it. The other shift, which he leaves for another day, is the kind of physical body you need to age well. Sam prefers to talk about well-being and flourishing rather than 'happiness,' because those words can include grief and loss.

**• The goal with anger is faster recovery, not never feeling it**

Sam says getting angry is not the measure of having lost. Cutting anger from 10 minutes to 10 seconds to one second means 'factors of 10' that are enormous. He makes room for useful anger, such as self-defense on a sidewalk, but otherwise wants to drop it quickly and then decide calmly whether to confront someone. Without mindfulness, he says, 'you will be angry as long as you're angry.'

**• Short retreats are mostly the hard part**

Sam tells Peter not to bother with a four-day retreat. He says a week to ten days is the shortest he can recommend without caveats. The first three days are the hardest at any retreat length. At day three of a ten-day retreat, home is still far enough away that people tend to surrender and really practice.

**• Vipassana targets three characteristics; Dzogchen goes straight at the self**

Insight practice looks at impermanence, selflessness, and unsatisfactoriness. Sam says the last is often mistranslated as 'suffering,' as if the Buddha taught that life is suffering. His metaphor: the boat is always leaking and we are always bailing. Dzogchen, a Tibetan non-dual tradition, goes directly at the feeling that there is a subject behind your face. Sam warns that mindfulness taught as goal-seeking can keep people from seeing this even on retreat.

**• MDMA gave Sam his first glimpse of a mind without self-concern, but he flags neurotoxicity**

Earlier psilocybin and marijuana use felt like ordinary drug states to him: an altered state, but no altered trait. MDMA at 18 removed the constant background monitoring of what his best friend thought of him, along with the zero-sum envy that limits 'sympathetic joy' for others' success. He has not taken it in years and stays 'somewhat concerned' that it may be neurotoxic. He says he knows of no evidence that LSD is neurotoxic. For debilitating PTSD, he thinks some toxicity could be an acceptable trade.

**• Loving-kindness (metta) practice deliberately reframes everyone**

Unlike mindfulness, metta has a goal: feel goodwill as intensely and durably as possible. Its central reframe is that everyone is suffering and was once a child. Sam says that taken far enough, this frame can extend compassion even to someone like Saddam Hussein.

## EXAMPLES

**• Peter's moment of presence, about 10 days into a no-devices facility**

With no phone, music, or books, at almost 45, Peter had what he believed was the first truly present moment of his life: light through a window, cooking smells, running in the woods hearing only his breath. He called Sam on December 26, joined the beta of Sam's app, and enrolled interested patients.

**• The Outward Bound solo at 16**

After about 18 days of 14-hour hikes with 60-pound packs, Sam spent three days fasting alone by a lake at roughly 9,000 feet. Others came out radiant; he spent it fantasizing about food and friends, 'perfect misery.'

**• The daughters' early-warning system**

Sam's wife and daughters know he is committed to dropping anger, so they call it out early. Even 'I thought the plumber was

coming today' gets a 'daddy's getting angry,' which lets him let go much earlier than before.

**• The patient dreading his dogs' deaths**

Peter describes a patient three months after losing a dog aged around 14 or 15, now dreading the deaths of two healthy dogs aged six and seven, with extremely high cortisol. Sam's reframe: we are content with loved ones out of the room all the time. The only way to suffer an absence is to think about it without knowing you are thinking.

**• Ron Howard's course on lying**

As a Stanford freshman at 18, Sam took a seminar that examined whether lying is ever ethical. Students kept proposing acceptable white lies and the professor shot each one down. Sam left committed to honesty in all but self-defense situations.

## OTHER RELEVANT

**• Use recurring irritants as practice reps**

Peter treats traffic as practice ('you're feeling like your time is more valuable than everybody else's'). He uses empathy with rude airline staff, citing friend Jay Walker's claim that about one in six US aviation experiences is a customer-service failure. Sam also endorses 'firmware updates,' such as a great podcast that makes a delay welcome.

**• Pay close attention to pleasures to test them**

Sam's M&Ms example: eaten mindfully, the sweet you craved is often too sweet and chemical, and you only enjoy it because you can drink water next. Paying attention can show that you want some things less than you thought.

**• Bridge formal practice into the other 23.5 hours**

Peter compares 15 to 20 minutes of daily meditation to lifting weights: the point is to use those 'muscles' all day. Sam's wife teaches children to meditate from about age five or six.

# #25 – Scott Harrison: transformation, finding meaning, and taking on the global water crisis

Guest: Scott Harrison
Date: 2020-01-01 · Duration: 2:18:52
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GlC7JY5muxw

## KEYPOINTS

**• A childhood shaped by his mother's poisoning**

When Scott was four, his family moved to a tightly sealed, energy-efficient house in South Jersey. A faulty heat exchanger leaked carbon monoxide. His mother, who spent the most time indoors, collapsed on New Year's Day 1980. He recalls her carboxyhemoglobin being about 20 to 25 times the toxic threshold. Afterward, perfume, soap, car fumes and even ink from new books made her ill.

**• Environmental illness meant extreme isolation**

She was diagnosed with what was then called multiple chemical sensitivity, or environmental illness. After a water-only fast and food-by-food testing, Scott says only about 20 of more than 100 foods were tolerable. She ate a six-day rotation of single organic foods and drank spring water, living in a tiled bathroom with a cotton army cot washed about ten times in baking soda. Scott became her caregiver as an only child.

**• Peter on patients medicine dismisses**

Peter says people like Scott's mother often fall through the cracks because doctors label unexplained illness as psychological. He recalls a medical school professor's joke that 'idiopathic' really means the doctor is the idiot. The family took a settlement of about $1,250–$1,500 from the gas company rather than sue. Peter relates this to his own medical-school back injury, botched by a surgeon who operated on the wrong side, where he never considered suing.

**• Rebellion took him from a band to the clubs**

In high school Scott quit being the dutiful son, grew his hair out and became the keyboard player and self-appointed manager of an alternative rock band, Sunday River. They played CBGB's and the Wetlands. He alone moved to New York, enrolled part-time at NYU in communications, and sold stereo gear at Sam Ash. When the band broke up he turned to promoting nightclubs.

**• A decade of 'models and bottles'**

For about ten years Scott was a top promoter, helping pioneer bottle service: instead of charging $18 for a vodka soda at the bar, clubs sold bottles at tables. He courted modeling bookers so models would come out. He built one of the first club email lists, which he says had near-100% open rates. He smoked up to three packs a day and used cocaine and other drugs.

**• The emptiness behind the 'markers of happiness'**

He had the model girlfriend, the money and the parties, but he says the top bottle buyers spending $10,000–$15,000 a night were often miserable and estranged from their families. Physically, he lost feeling in half his body and feared a brain tumor. On a New Year's trip to Punta del Este, after a weekend of $1,000 in fireworks and magnums of Dom Pérignon, he started reading A.W. Tozer's The Pursuit of God, a gift from his father.

**• The flip: from party boy to volunteer photographer**

At 28, after a frightening night at a club involving a gun and a bouncer, he drove north alone with a Bible. He decided to spend a year serving others. Humanitarian groups turned down the 'party boy' until Mercy Ships accepted him as a photojournalist. He paid $500 a month to volunteer on a hospital ship of about 350 volunteers sailing to Benin and Liberia, which had just come out of a 14-year civil war.

**• Mercy Ships showed medicine at its most transformative**

The ship focused on maxillofacial surgery: facial tumors, cleft lips and palates, burn reconstruction and cataracts. Scott recalls about 5,000 people at a triage day, a country of a few million with only a couple of surgeons, and children choking on four-pound benign tumors. He says he wept for 40% of that first day.

**• Distrust of charities shaped charity: water's design**

Scott cites a USA Today poll finding 42% of Americans didn't trust charities. Inspired by Paul Tudor Jones covering the Robin Hood Foundation's overhead, he set up two separately audited bank accounts, one for public donations that go 100% to water projects and one for overhead funded by private backers. He even repays credit card fees so a $100 gift sends $100 to the field.

## EXAMPLES

**• Alfred's tumor**

Alfred, a 14-year-old boy, had a fleshy ameloblastoma that had grown for four years. It had been cut with knives and stones and treated with pastes and chants. Surgeons removed it, rebuilt his jaw with a titanium plate, and weeks later Scott took him home to his village. Scott still supports him.

**• Before-and-after photos as fundraising**

Back in New York, Scott held a gallery show of about 108 images of patients morphing before and after surgery. With donated food and auctioned designer handbags, it raised about $100,000 for Mercy Ships, mostly from skeptical nightlife friends.

**• Discovering the water crisis**

Exploring rural Liberia, he learned that about half the population lacked clean water. He photographed children drinking from algae-filled swamps. A surgeon mentor who had stayed on the ship for 21 years encouraged him to pursue water as his cause.

**• Peter's view of overhead**

Peter pushes back that overhead isn't a dirty word, citing Dan Pallotta's TED talk. He and his wife now give only to overhead, such as salaries for people they trust. Scott agrees but says that argument hasn't moved donors, so he funds overhead separately.

## OTHER RELEVANT

**• The four pillars**

(1) 100% of public money goes to projects. (2) Proof, through GPS coordinates and photos of each well. (3) A hopeful, inspiring brand modeled on Apple or Virgin rather than guilt imagery. (4) Local partners lead the work, with charity: water funding rigs, trucks and hydrologists.

**• Scale so far**

Scott says the organization has raised about $330 million from more than a million people. He has taken about 350 donors, including 50 kids, on trips over 12 years to listen and learn, not to drill wells. Every penny of his book advance for Thirst went to the charity.

**• Books he recommends**

William Easterly's The White Man's Burden on good and bad aid; Brother Lawrence's The Practice of the Presence of God; and a book of yearly letters to a godson on virtues, which he is rereading.