

Books on How to Lead a Meaningful Life

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This year, Greater Good's editorial staff read a wide variety of books, making it tough to narrow down our favorites. That's why this year's list is a little longer than usual.

Many of this year's choices help us to survive and thrive in a turbulent world—some on a societal level, by providing a greater understanding of human behavior, social divisions, and the difficulties that new generations face; and others on a personal level, by showing us how to have better marriages, raise happier children, stay resilient, and find meaning in life. All of the books are well-written and engaging.

Here are our picks for our favorite books of 2017.

The All-or-Nothing Marriage: How the Best Marriages Work, by Eli Finkel

Marriages today have the potential to enrich our lives more than ever, argues psychologist Eli Finkel, but they're also riskier. High aspirations can lead to mutual growth and unprecedented emotional satisfaction, or instability and deep dissatisfaction. How can we make marriage work?

In addition to surveying the history of marriage, Finkel pulls from research to offer advice to modern couples wanting a fulfilling relationship. He suggests learning to lower expectations as needed, spending more time together communicating and playing, and "love-hacking" the relationship by infusing more touch, gratitude, and joy into it. His book is full of useful tips for making your marriage a happier, longer-lasting one.

Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body, by Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson

Richard Davidson and Daniel Goleman separate the wheat from the chaff of mindfulness science in their book *Altered Traits*, making a cogent argument that meditation has the power to transform us not only in the moment but also in more profound, lasting ways.

In a grand tour of past mindfulness research, they provide evidence that meditation—particularly when practiced over time—improves our resiliency to stress, increases our compassion for others, hones our ability to focus and pay attention, and helps us to be less self-focused. In some cases, mindfulness appears to also improve biological markers of health—in particular, those related to stress and disease.

The book warns us to be skeptical of some overreaching claims about the benefits of mindfulness that have not been thoroughly tested. Still, readers come away from the book feeling more enthusiastic about meditation's potential to improve well-being.

Awakening Compassion at Work: The Quiet Power That Elevates People and Organizations, by Monica Worline and Jane Dutton

If surveys are any indication, many workers today are disengaged and unhappy on the job, which leads to suffering and reduced productivity. Organizational psychologists Jane Dutton and Monica Worline argue that businesses do best when they find ways to attend to the emotional needs of their workers and practice compassion.

A growing body of research suggests that compassionate care from employers and fellow employees improves worker performance and loyalty, and creates an atmosphere that is safe for learning, collaboration, and innovation—which all impact the bottom line. The authors outline the steps for cultivating workplace compassion: noticing suffering in another, interpreting suffering to be real and worthy, feeling empathy, and acting to relieve the suffering. They also suggest several ways to foster compassion, such as deliberately encouraging workers to share mistakes at staff meetings (not just successes) and formally recognizing and rewarding compassionate acts.

While employers might consider compassion unnecessary “fluff,” Worline and Dutton provide proof that it’s anything but—and instead show how compassion is a win for organizations.

Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst, by Robert Sapolsky

How can the same brain that gave us rhythm and blues also bring us waterboarding? Human beings seem to veer wildly from kind and helpful behavior to prejudice and violence. Deftly synthesizing research from many sources, biologist and neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky provides a fascinating look at why we behave the way we do, making connections among our brains, individual behavioral tendencies, and larger societal problems.

Sapolsky argues that our inborn propensity to notice difference in others and be wary of those we don’t recognize as part of our “tribe” is the product of brain chemistry that evolved to keep us safe from strangers. Yet this response is highly influenced by how we are raised, the people we are exposed to, and the things we are taught, showing how social factors impact us—even at the neural level.

The book helps explain power dynamics, political lying, social comparisons, and social hierarchies, among other phenomena. By uncovering the mechanisms behind them, Sapolsky also offers a way forward that includes treating people as individuals, emphasizing what we have in common, perspective taking, and fostering equality in the pursuit of shared goals. His book is a call to all of us to understand how our brains lead us astray and to use that knowledge to bring out the best in ourselves.

Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone, by Brené Brown

According to researcher Brené Brown, our political divide has led to a spiritual crisis and a downward spiral of disconnection and loneliness. To counter that, she argues, we need to move from shame and hate and toward empathy, connection, and a sense of true belonging.

Through in-depth interviews, Brown’s research has uncovered the practices that support this goal, including making contact with people who have different beliefs, sharing

collective joy and pain, and speaking up (nicely) when we disagree with someone.

With her characteristic humor and storytelling, Brown nudges us toward staying true to our moral selves, while also reaching out to others who disagree with us in a courageous and respectful way. Her key insight is this: If we're too afraid to rock the boat and stand alone—whether in our family or our political party—we won't feel like we truly belong.

iGen: How Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood, by Jean Twenge

Using large-scale surveys and other research, Jean Twenge draws a detailed portrait of the unique forces acting upon today's teens—those born between 1995 and 2012, whom Twenge dubs "iGens." Compared to previous generations, iGens have had to deal with the lure of iPhones and social media at an earlier age, a society that places higher value on individualism, greater income inequality, and more.

Social and political forces like these have led iGens to exhibit poorer emotional health than prior generations, according to Twenge, in part because of constant online demands that promote unrealistic social comparisons along with feelings of social exclusion. iGens also appear to grow up more slowly—meaning that they assume the responsibilities of adulthood at later ages. While more respectful of diversity, they have difficulty negotiating conflicts that stem from difference. On the plus side, they are less entitled and ready to work hard.

Though this is not a parenting book, the insights Twenge reveals can help parents navigate around the larger social forces affecting their teens. For example, parents can be close to their children and still foster self-reliance; allow some screen time, but prioritize in-person relationships; teach empathy and respect, but also teach teens how to engage in hard discussions with people who disagree with them. In this way, parents can help iGen teens grow up to be mature, responsible, happy adults.

The Influential Mind: What the Brain Reveals About Our Power to Change Others, by Tali Sharot

How do we influence others for good or for ill? In *The Influential Mind*, neuroscientist Tali Sharot makes the case that we're full of misconceptions about how minds get changed, which means that we often fail to influence others—our kids, our students, our co-workers, our patients, and our loved ones.

When sharing and taking in information, Sharot advises, we should be aware of our own emotional state and that of others. For example, research shows that we are less likely to act to avoid a negative consequence than to gain a positive one. (That means that threatening to take away our teen's allowance if they don't pick up their room is likely going to fail.) To motivate people to act, it's better to offer them a sense of autonomy and help them envision the positive consequences—except under stress, when people are more susceptible to believing negative information.

Interesting research findings like these provide useful food for thought throughout the book. By learning this fascinating science, we can all become better influencers—and we can also guard against manipulation from others.

The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative, by Florence Williams

Florence Williams chronicles our intricate connection to the natural world and nature's impact on our health, creativity, and happiness. She makes a strong case for incorporating more green spaces into our lives to improve personal and societal well-being.

Williams has traveled around the world to collect research findings, some of which are both fascinating and important. She takes readers on an entertaining tour of "forest bathing" in Japan, where people take medically recommended walks in forests to reduce stress. She introduces research suggesting that living near green spaces is good for our health, which has inspired the Singapore government to incorporate more greenery in their urban development. And she highlights how many schools are re-prioritizing time outside for kids, because being in nature relieves cognitive overload.

If you're looking for more scientific proof of the benefits of nature, or simply wanting some inspiration for getting outside, this might be the book for you.

Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy, by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant

Part memoir and part self-help book, Option B chronicles the journey of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, who lost her husband to a sudden traumatic brain injury in 2015. While sharing her story, Sandberg and co-author Adam Grant reveal research-based tips on how to recover and thrive after a devastating loss.

Recovery from trauma can be hard if we fall prey to the "three P's" associated with depression: "personalization—the belief we are at fault; pervasiveness—the belief that an event will affect all areas of our life; and permanence—the belief that the aftershocks of the event will last forever." While these may be common responses to the death of a loved one, studies have shown that we fare better when we avoid them.

Instead, the authors suggest accepting difficult feelings rather than fighting them, practicing gratitude, and using cognitive-behavioral techniques—such as questioning and counteracting irrational thoughts. In addition, self-compassion, journaling, and reaching out to others can all help get us through hard times. Their take-home message is that by "finding personal strength, gaining appreciation, forming deeper relationships, discovering more meaning in life, and seeing new possibilities," people can make sense of their experiences and not only heal but also grow from adversity.

The Power of Meaning: Finding Fulfillment in a World Obsessed with Happiness, by Emily Esfahani Smith

A life of meaningful pursuits is likely to bring us more sustained happiness and life satisfaction—even if there is some discomfort, sadness, or stress along the way—than a life of pleasure alone. But how do we seek meaning?

Journalist Emily Esfahani Smith draws from the texts of great writers and philosophers, as well as interviews with everyday people, to try to distill what's central to the pursuit of meaning. She argues that we are on the path to a meaningful life when we aim to increase our belonging within a group, find a purpose, tell stories about our lives that create a clear narrative, and seek transcendence through spirituality or awe. To this end, she provides activities that we can use to grow in each of these domains.

Raising a Secure Child: How Circle of Security Parenting Can Help You Nurture Your Child's Attachment, Emotional Resilience, and Freedom to Explore, by Kent Hoffman, Glen Cooper, and Bert Powell

Research has shown that children who have secure attachments to their parents—meaning a trust in the availability and comfort of parents—tend to be happier, kinder, more socially competent, and more trusting of others. And they also do better in school, stay physically healthier, and create more fulfilling relationships as adults.

Psychotherapists Kent Hoffman, Glen Cooper, and Bert Powell faithfully distill the wisdom of the science of attachment into an accessible and practical approach they call the Circle of Security. The “circle” is the ebb and flow of how babies and children need their caregivers—at times coming close for care and comfort, and at other times following their inspiration to explore their world. The caregiver’s role is to tune in to where on that circle their child is at the moment and respond accordingly.

The authors show parents how to “be with” their children and cultivate a sensitivity to what children are feeling in the moment. The book also helps parents to reflect upon the points on the attachment circle where they, themselves, become distressed, perhaps because of their own childhood issues with security or their worries about the future. The writers kindly and compassionately guide parents toward a clearer, freer, more emotionally connected relationship with children that will create the secure attachment that eventually helps children soar.

The Strength Switch: How the New Science of Strength-Based Parenting Can Help Your Child and Your Teen to Flourish, by Lea Waters

Parenting in the 21st century can be a fraught affair. Parents worry about the minefield of social media and the increasing pressure their kids feel to excel academically. While many parents believe pushing kids to overcome perceived weaknesses is the best way to give them a leg up, researcher (and parent) Lea Waters suggests a better way: focusing on your children’s inherent strengths.

Learning to recognize positive skills and qualities, both inherent and learned—from bravery to curiosity to attention to detail—energizes kids and contributes to their goals and development, she argues. Research shows that kids who can identify and hone their strengths are more likely to reap a plethora of benefits, including increased happiness and engagement at school, higher levels of academic achievement in high school and college, and boosted resilience.

Waters offers parents a look at real-life examples of strength-based parenting and a series of activities and exercises to help them identify their children’s strengths, along with strategies for turning on the “strength switch”—the ability to see their children through the lens of positive attributes, rather than focusing on what needs fixing.

Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dream, by Matt Walker

Sleep researcher Matt Walker draws from his own and others’ neuroscience research to explain the importance of sleep for our health and well-being. In the process, he disproves common myths around sleep—like thinking one can make up for lost sleep by sleeping in on the weekends—and offers tips for falling asleep and staying asleep for seven to eight hours a night.

Much of past research has focused on how shorter sleep is tied to dangerous diseases—like heart disease and stroke, and obesity and Alzheimer’s disease. But sleep has other purposes—like helping us to hold on to our memories and to learn facts and skills faster—making it important for everyone, from infants and students to athletes, pilots, and doctors.

Walker describes some fascinating research about dreaming and its special role in helping us manage our emotional ups and downs, improve our memory, and be more creative. After reading this book, and benefiting from Walker’s knowledge and humorous prose, you may never again take sleep lightly.