

THE 10 BEST  
**BOOKS**  
FOR  
***GENUINE***  
SELF-IMPROVEMENT

NICK WIGNALL

# The 10 Best Books for Genuine Self-Improvement

by Nick Wignall

Let's be honest: **Most self-help books are fluffy at best and downright misleading at times.**

And while some of the better ones out there offer some interesting ideas for genuine self-improvement and personal growth, rarely do they actually show how to implement those details in a helpful way.

This guide contains 10 of my favorite books on personal development and self-improvement that *actually work*. These are the books that I've found to be most helpful and transformative myself and with many of my clients.

If you're tired of self-help books that don't actually help, this guide is for you.

# DEEP

RULES FOR FOCUSED SUCCESS  
**IN A DISTRACTED WORLD**

# WORK

**CAL NEWPORT**

**AUTHOR OF *SO GOOD THEY CAN'T IGNORE YOU***

# 1. *Deep Work* by Cal Newport

*“To produce at your peak level you need to work for extended periods with full concentration on a single task free from distraction.”*

**The Big Idea:** No matter what your field or work, you can achieve consistently high-quality results by learning to train your attention for sustained periods of focused concentration and effort.

**Who It’s For:** Anyone who wants to dramatically increase their productivity and make significant strides toward starting or achieving a long-dreamed about project or goal.

What’s most impressive about Cal Newport’s *Deep Work* is how articulately and persuasively he lays out the case for deep work in the first part of the book, and then, how comprehensively he guides the reader through the steps necessary to achieve it in the second half. This combination of persuasive explanation plus detailed and practical follow through is almost non-existent in today’s self-help literature.

Whatever your profession—musician, accountant, coach, teacher, or CEO—the ability to bring your full mental powers to bear on a problem or project is a competitive advantage that’s become increasingly rare in today’s distracted and over scheduled economy.

**Read it:** [\*Deep Work\* by Cal Newport](#)



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# The Inner Game of Tennis

*The Classic Guide to the  
Mental Side of Peak Performance*

W. Timothy Gallwey

Foreword by Pete Carroll

## 2. *The Inner Game of Tennis* by W. Timothy Gallwey

*“Neither mastery nor satisfaction can be found in any game without giving some attention to the relatively neglected skills of the inner game.”*

**The Big Idea:** At the highest levels of performance, it’s not technical skill or ability that separates the truly great from everyone else. Instead, it’s the ability to master one’s own mind—the inner game—that leads both to success and enjoyment in any pursuit or situation.

**Who It’s For:** Anyone who often feels like they are their own worst critic and isn’t living up to their potential because of it.

Don’t let the title of this one fool you: While tennis is the backdrop for the ideas in this book, and is often used to illustrate specific points, *this is NOT a book about tennis*. It’s a book about psychology and how to be more skillful with our own minds in any situation or “game.”

The book begins with an observation that is well-grounded in the last few decades of research in psychology and neuroscience: We don’t really have a sense of self; we have many senses of self.

Specifically, we have two primary selves that are usually in tension with each other: Self 1, The Storyteller, and Self 2, The Doer. Self 1 is the voice in our head that's always chattering *about* things that are happening and evaluating them. Self 2 is the part of our minds that carries our our intentions and well-learned abilities.

When we find ourselves struggling—whether it's a math test, golf match, or major anxiety—it's often the result of Self 1 being dominant and overly negative. The way out involves increasing our awareness of these two selves and training Self 1 to be more trusting of Self 2.

Building a better relationship between these two aspects of our self is the key both to genuine and lasting self-confidence and high levels of performance.

**Read it:** [\*The Inner Game of Tennis\* by W. Timothy Gallwey](#)

# THE ASSERTIVENESS WORKBOOK



How to Express Your Ideas  
and Stand Up for Yourself  
at Work and in Relationships

Randy J. Paterson, Ph.D.



# 3. *The Assertiveness Workbook* by Randy Paterson

*“Assertiveness isn’t about building a good disguise. It’s about developing the courage to take the disguise off.”*

**The Big Idea:** Many of us have been taught to avoid conflict and criticism and to believe, deep down, that our job is to adhere to the standards and values of other people rather than our own. Learning to become more assertive means cultivating the strength in both speech and action to follow what’s meaningful and valuable to you.

**Who It’s For:** This book is especially useful for anyone who has an exaggerated sense of responsibility and tends to always put other people’s needs and wishes before their own.

*The Assertiveness Workbook* is a practical, straightforward guide to understanding why we have trouble asking for and acting on what we really want and learning how to change that habit.

It covered specific topics from giving and receiving feedback well, nonverbal behaviors, saying no and setting boundaries, constructive confrontation, and expressing opinions directly and respectfully.

While the book is especially useful to those who struggle significantly with issues of self-confidence, nearly everyone could benefit from its lessons in some area of their lives, since assertiveness is far more context-specific than most of us realize. For example, being assertive about what you want in a business negotiation can be much different than being assertive about how you like to receive physical affection from your spouse.

Ultimately, assertiveness is about values—clarifying what is truly important to us and cultivating the courage and strength to go after it, regardless of the situation or our own insecurities and fears.

**Read it:** [\*The Assertiveness Workbook\* by Randy Paterson](#)

“Everyone should own this book.”

—CHIP HEATH & DAN HEATH, authors of *Made to Stick* and *Switch*

# mindset

## THE NEW PSYCHOLOGY OF SUCCESS

HOW WE CAN  
LEARN TO FULFILL  
OUR POTENTIAL

\* *parenting*  
\* *business*  
\* *school*  
\* *relationships*

“Will prove to be one of the most influential books ever about motivation.”

—PO BRONSON,  
author of  
*NurtureShock*

CAROL S. DWECK, Ph.D.

# 4. *Mindset* by Carol Dweck

*“The growth mindset is based on the belief in change... Nothing is better than seeing people find their way to things they value.”*

**The Big Idea:** The beliefs we hold about ourselves, especially the degree to which we see our abilities as fixed or fluid, is a key component for both our self-worth and performance. Learning to cultivate a growth mindset rather than a fixed one is a powerful way to make positive changes in any aspect of our lives.

**Who It’s For:** Anyone one who tends to believe that most personal traits are fixed and largely unmoving, as well as anyone who is regularly in a position of leadership, such as teaching, coaching, consulting, parenting, etc.

Far more substantial than the usual self-help call to think positive or love ourselves more, *Mindset* is concise summary of decades of scientific research on personality, development and well-being. The author, Carol Dweck, is a well-respected psychologist and researcher at Stanford University who’s spent her career studying optimal approaches to learning and development.

And what she’s found is that regardless of the particular pattern of strengths and weaknesses dealt to us by nature, our beliefs about how fixed or trainable these traits are is key.

Specifically, when we adopt a *fixed mindset* about ourselves, it creates a need to prove ourselves continually since we're basically stuck with what we've got. Whereas when we adopt a *growth mindset*, we can detach our performance from our identities, which frees us up to focus on personal learning and development rather than external validation and other markers of success.

**Read it:** [Mindset by Carol Dweck](#)



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# **SIT LIKE A BUDDHA**

## A POCKET GUIDE TO MEDITATION

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**LODRO RINZLER**

AUTHOR OF *THE BUDDHA WALKS INTO A BAR...*

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# 5. *Sit Like a Buddha* by Lordro Rinzler

*"Over time you will get to see yourself more clearly. You will become a connoisseur of your own thought process. That is what a meditator is; someone who appreciates the many flavors of their own mind and is able to be present with all of them."*

**The Big Idea:** Meditation is the best way to train our attention to remain focused on the present moment, so that we can be intentional and deliberate with our actions, and ultimately, our lives.

**Who It's For:** While everyone would benefit from meditating regularly, it can be especially useful if you find yourself stuck ruminating about the past or worrying about the future.

I meditate a lot. I also write about meditation a lot, usually as an attempt to show why meditation is so important and valuable. And I read a lot about meditation, so I'm always on the lookout for good resources to help people get started with meditation.

I believe this book is the best introduction to meditation for most people.

It's short, concise, friendly, and practical. In 10 brief steps, it will walk the complete meditation beginner through the basics of what meditation actually looks like, how to do it, and what to expect.

The quality of our lives largely depends on the quality of our attention. And meditation is the best way I know to learn how to more skillfully and effectively manage our attention.

This friendly little book is a great way to get started.

**Read it:** [\*Sit Like a Buddha\* by Lodro Rinzler](#)



THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

# THE **CHECKLIST** MANIFESTO

HOW TO GET THINGS RIGHT

PICADOR

# ATUL GAWANDE

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BETTER* AND *COMPLICATIONS*

# 6. *The Checklist Manifesto* by Atul Gawande

*“Knowledge has both saved us and burdened us.”*

**The Big Idea:** All self-improvement requires discipline, and checklists are the surprising secret to being more disciplined.

**Who It’s For:** Anyone looking for a practical way to improve their ability to be disciplined and consistent with their goals.

Nearly every aspect of our lives is becoming more and more complicated. From education and careers to parenting and health, the sheer quantity and complexity of information in our daily lives can be stressful & overwhelming. Which makes sticking with our goals and intentions more and more difficult. With increased complexity in our lives comes an increased need for self-discipline.

*The Checklist Manifesto* makes the case for how the humble checklist, with a little sprucing up, can become the surprising hero of modern life as a powerful technique for increasing discipline, combatting complexity and overwhelm, and helping us stay on track with our goals and aspirations.

**Read it:** [\*The Checklist Manifesto\* by Atul Gawande](#)

"This delightful, clear, and utterly helpful book is for anyone who wants to understand or change the behavior of an animal—whether the animal in question is a barking dog, a nosy neighbor, a hostile cat, or you and your own bad habits."—Carol Tavis, Ph.D., author of *Anger*

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# **DON'T SHOOT THE DOG!**

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## **THE NEW ART OF TEACHING AND TRAINING**

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**REVISED EDITION**

**KAREN PRYOR**

# ***7. Don't Shoot The Dog: The New Art of Teaching and Training by Karen Pryor***

*"I have noticed that most dolphin trainers...  
have surprisingly agreeable children."*

**The Big Idea:** Use the fundamental principles of learning to effectively shape behavior, either in ourselves or someone else.

**Who It's For:** Anyone who would like to make significant changes to their own habits and behaviors—or those of people around them—in an effective and lasting way.

Behavior change can seem mysterious and frustratingly out of reach much of the time: *Why can't I just sit down and do my work?! Why can't I make myself go to the gym more often? Why can't he just learn put his damn clothes in the laundry hamper? It's not rocket science!*

But it turns out that large chunks of human behavior—even the really frustrating parts—are governed by pretty well-established rules. And not only are these rules learnable, but with a little practice, they can be applied to wonderful effect.

*Don't Shoot The Dog* walks through how to implement a range of behavioral strategies—from positive reinforcement to differential reinforcement—in order to more easily and effectively shape our behavior that that of those around us.

**Read it:** [\*Don't Shoot The Dog: The New Art of Teaching and Training\* by Karen Pryor](#)

*goodnight*  
**mind**

turn off your noisy  
thoughts & get a  
good night's sleep



colleen e. carney, phd  
rachel manber, phd

## 8. *Goodnight Mind* by Colleen Carney and Rachel Manber

*“No matter what initially caused your sleep problems—stress, medication, or something else—the way you think or behave can have a negative effect on your sleep and become the primary factor in sustaining your sleep problems.”*

**The Big Idea:** Fundamentally, the problem most bad sleepers have is that they try too hard to sleep.

**Who It’s For:** Anyone who struggles to consistently get a good night’s sleep.

It’s difficult to think of something that, for better or worse, affects more aspects of our life than sleep. When we sleep well, everything from our motivation to work out and eat well to our overall outlook on life is improved. But when we sleep poorly, especially on a regular basis, the world seems darker, less hopeful, and even the smallest task can feel like a crushing burden.

This tiny little book, written by two of the most prominent insomnia researchers in the world, gives you everything you need to know about getting your sleep back on track in a friendly, straightforward way.

It does an especially good job explaining why 98% of the sleep advice we hear out there in the form of sleep hygiene tips or ads for sleep meds, actually make our sleep

worse by encouraging us to think about and try harder to sleep. When in reality, our bodies know perfectly well how to sleep on their own; we just have to get out of the way.

Good sleep improves every aspect of our life. And this book is the best way to get there for most people.

**Read it:** [\*Goodnight Mind\* by Colleen Carney and Rachel Manber](#)



**NATIONAL BESTSELLER**

**More than 3 million copies sold!**

**How  
To Talk  
So Kids  
Will  
Listen**

With a New Afterword:  
"The Next Generation"  
by Joanna Faber

**& Listen  
So Kids  
Will Talk**

"The parenting bible."  
—*The Boston Globe*

**Adele Faber &  
Elaine Mazlish**

Authors of the #1 *New York Times* Bestseller *Siblings Without Rivalry*

# 9. *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish

*“The language of empathy does not come naturally to us. It’s not part of our ‘mother tongue.’”*

**The Big Idea:** Effective communication—whether it’s with children, spouses, or bosses—requires learning how to use the “language of empathy.”

**Who It’s For:** Anyone who want to learn how to communicate more effectively, regardless of the audience and goal.

I can’t decide if it’s frustratingly ironic or surprisingly cool that the best book I’ve ever read on effective communication *in general* is a book about communicating effectively with *children*.

Either way, here’s my elevator pitch for why every single person should read this book:

- We human beings are social creatures and to a large extent—no matter how introverted or extroverted we are—our happiness and success in life depends on the quality of our relationships.
- A pretty strong case can be made that the quality of our relationships largely depends on our ability to communicate well with each other.

- Consequently, learning to communicate more effectively is essential for our success and happiness.

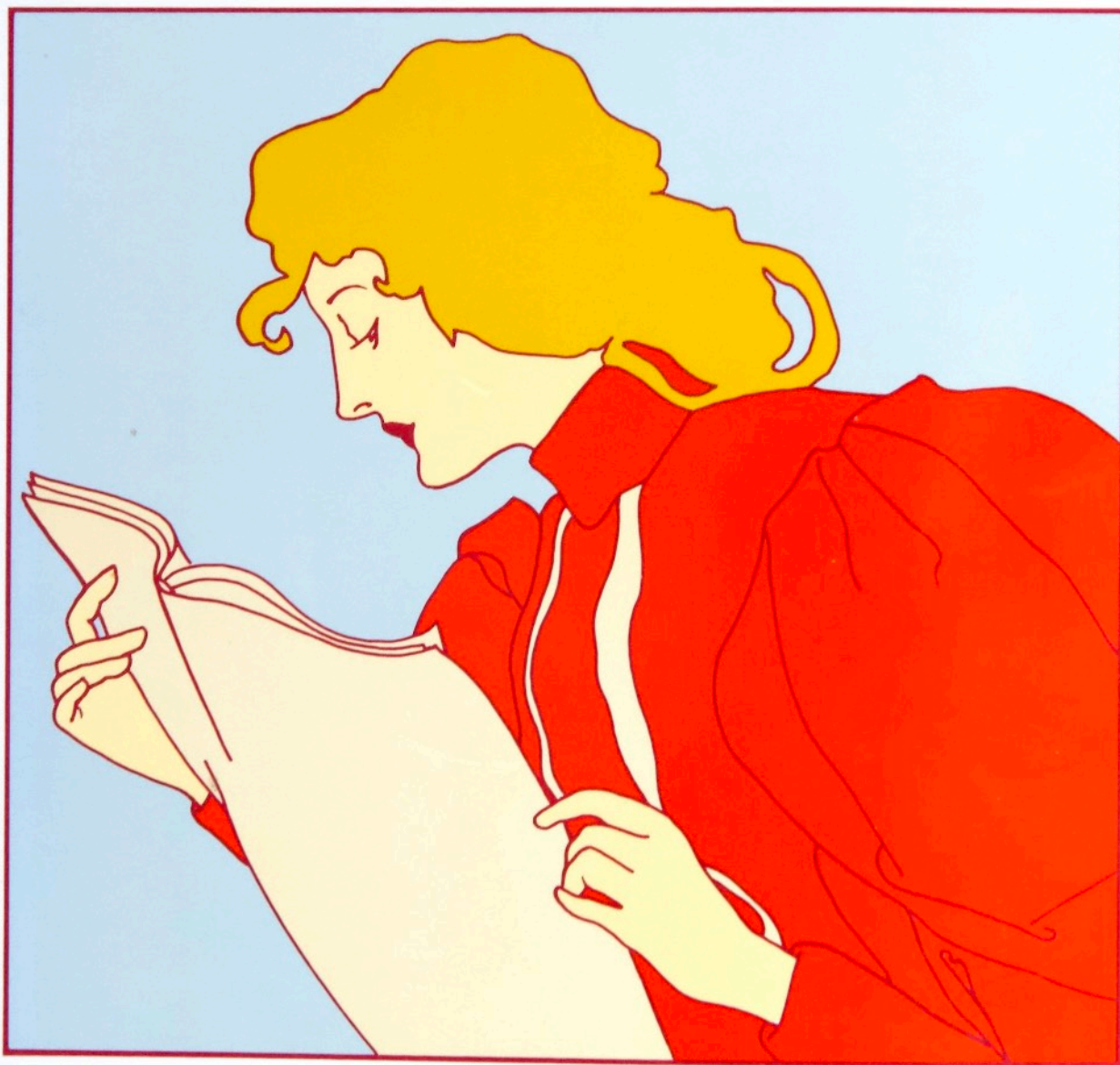
Whether or not you buy that completely, it's hard to argue with the importance of communication. And it just so happens that the best book on how to communicate well is framed from the perspective of parents communicating with children.

**Read it:** [\*How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk\* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish](#)

—COMPLETELY REVISED AND UPDATED—

# HOW TO READ ~ A BOOK ~

The CLASSIC GUIDE to INTELLIGENT READING



MORTIMER J. ADLER  
& CHARLES VAN DOREN

# 10. *How to Read a Book* by Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren

*“If we are disposed to go on learning and discovering, we must know how  
to make books teach us well.”*

**The Big Idea:** We can extract and retain exponentially more from what we read by learning the art of active reading.

**Who It’s For:** Anyone who wants to accelerate their learning and personal growth by learning the best of what’s already been discovered.

The collective wisdom of all of humanity is contained in books. If we want to be able to benefit from that wisdom ourselves, we must learn how to read well.

*How to Read a Book* illustrates and argues convincingly for why reading well means learning how to be an active reader. Along the way, it shows us how to systematically and skillfully engage with a book so as to absorb and retain as much as we can as efficiently and quickly as possible.

It covers all sorts of interesting and useful topics, including:

- How to “X-Ray” a book, quickly grasping the main argument and big ideas

- How to argue productively with the author in order to remember more
- When to give up on a book
- The different types of books and how to read them most effectively
- How to criticize a book fairly
- The 4 Levels of Reading

I think a sneaky superpower of highly successful and happy people is that they read. A lot. But more importantly, I think, they read well.

This book is the single best resources for learning how to do just that, especially if reading is not something that comes naturally to you.

**Read it:** [\*How to Read a Book\* by Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren](#)

# About the Author



Nick Wignall is a clinical psychologist and author who helps busy people use psychology and behavioral science to achieve their goals.

You can find more of Nick's work at his website [NickWignall.com](http://NickWignall.com) where writes about everything from mindfulness and productivity to stress and emotional fitness.