

The Best Podcasts for Self-Improvement

By Joshua Fruhlinger in the Wall Street Times
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Looking for a painless path to a better you? Tune in to one of these inspiring and life-enhancing podcasts

DAILY AFFIRMATIONS, gratitude journals and self-help manuals are all well and good. But what should you do if you're committed to creating a new and improved you but don't have much time to devote to the pursuit?

Try a podcast. The best are filled with accessible wisdom that you can listen to anywhere, even while multitasking. Here, seven that offer everything from brisk efficiency tips to profound discussions that will help you grapple with life's bigger questions.

'The Tim Ferriss Show'

Tim Ferriss is an entrepreneur, "life-hacker" and author of the best seller "The 4-Hour Work Week." In his popular podcast, he reveals the daily rituals of what he calls "world-class performers." (For example, Mr. Ferriss recommends making your bed right when you wake up, since one completed task, even a simple one, is sure to lead to others.) Whether he's interviewing self-help guru Tony Robbins, actor and comedian B.J. Novak or physicist Lisa Randall, Mr. Ferriss unpacks the tools and tactics of the successful. Compared with other podcasts, episodes of "The Tim Ferriss Show" can run long (many are over 2 hours), but they're consistently engaging and worth the commitment.

Pearl of wisdom: When you're struggling with writer's block or having a hard time coming up with ideas for a project, just put something—anything—down on paper, according to author Seth Godin. It's like running: That first mile is painful, but before you know it, you're on mile five.

Must-hear episode: An insightful 2½-hour interview with Jamie Foxx, in which the actor suggests that, when you're feeling fearful about something, ask, "What's on the other side?"

'Tara Brach'

Some episodes of this podcast by clinical psychologist and Buddhist teacher Tara Brach include 15- to 30-minute guided meditations—but even if meditation is not your thing, don't let that deter you from listening. Ms. Brach's accessible talks are filled with humorous anecdotes and mental exercises you can apply in the real world to overcome anxiety, stress or tough times. (For example, if you're annoyed with someone, try pausing and being aware of your annoyance, recommends Ms. Brach.) It could be Ms. Brach's sanguine voice, but she has a way of lulling you into a meditative state without your even knowing it.

Pearl of wisdom: We spend most of our lives in a reactive trance, not really thinking about why we do what we do. Simply knowing this can snap you out of that.

Must-hear episode: "Awakening Consciousness in Shadowy Times," an episode that explains how to stop fixating on failure.

'How to be Amazing with Michael Ian Black'

A comedian, actor, writer and director, Michael Ian Black has a knack for getting the world's most accomplished figures (astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, writer/director Miranda July, and singer/actress Audra McDonald, to name a few recent guests) to open up about their deepest doubts and anxieties—and to discuss how they overcame those obstacles. Despite covering sometimes-serious topics, the show never feels heavy. Mr. Black always keeps the conversation light yet intimate and meaningful.

Pearl of wisdom: Perseverance makes perfect (or at least best-sellers). Essayist David Sedaris never studied writing; he plugged away at it until he eventually found his voice.

Must-hear episode: A conversation with comic Jim Gaffigan on how he overcame his nerves when he was chosen to perform for the pope.

'On Being With Krista Tippett'

A former journalist, diplomat and divinity student, Krista Tippett explores some pretty big questions via this podcast, among them: "What does it mean to be human, and how do we want to live?" While some episodes are sweeping in scope ("Search Inside Yourself: Contemplation in Life and Work"), the podcast can also be down-to-earth (e.g. "Running as Spiritual Practice"). "On Being" is refreshingly straightforward, giving the world's top thinkers, religious figures and artists a chance to share their perspective and to self-reflect.

Pearl of wisdom: "One serves one's self best by serving others first." This came from actor Martin Sheen, who said he lives by this saying.

Must-hear episode: "Listening to the World," a conversation with Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mary Oliver, in which she explains why any creative act is an act of giving.

'WTF With Marc Maron'

This well-known podcast isn't usually classified as "self-help," but there are life lessons to be gleaned here. Host Marc Maron is a whip-smart, anxious comic who, after almost destroying himself through addiction, found his way to the other side and started podcasting from his garage. It's a very funny and often sweet and terrifying journey through redemption and second chances. Mr. Maron's candor and his bleeding heart may turn some off, but "WTF" is a roller-coaster ride that could inspire you to follow your dreams, even if things didn't work the first time.

Pearl of wisdom: Adversity can lead to inspiration. Dana Carvey's "Church Lady" character sprang from his efforts to deal with his emotionally abusive father.

Must-hear episode: The famous interview with Barack Obama, in which the president talks about being an awkward teenager, pimples and all, and how he found his love for social justice.

'Waking Up with Sam Harris'

Sam Harris is a neuroscientist and philosopher, and on his podcast, he deconstructs a political, social or religious issue, looking at it through the lens of statistics, psychology and science. Each episode is an attempt to understand the most confounding topics in a rigorous, academic manner. The podcast can help

you make sense of controversies and current events that keep you up at night—or, at the very least, open your mind to new ways of thinking.

Pearl of wisdom: When considering the suffering of other people, strive for compassion rather than empathy; the latter inherently diminishes those you are trying to help.

Must-hear episode: “Racism and Violence in America: A Conversation with Glenn C. Loury” is a candid and sometimes raw talk with the Brown University professor about race and includes tools for discussing the topic constructively.

‘Good Life Project’

Host Jonathan Fields is the author of “How to Live a Good Life,” a book based on his interviews with people who have followed their dreams. In this podcast, you’ll hear from everyday people like Emily McDowell, who left a career in advertising to create a line of greeting cards, as well as authors like Gabrielle Bernstein, who wrote the best seller “The Universe Has Your Back.” Mr. Fields’s episodes list is also peppered with his short soliloquies, with titles such as “Are you measuring your success with the wrong metric?” and “Before you can choose joy, you have to choose you.” As should be obvious from that title, it can be a bit cringe-inducingly New Agey, but it’s still worth a listen.

Pearl of wisdom: The pursuit of happiness can actually make you miserable because you’re constantly asking yourself why you’re not happy.

Must-hear episode: His conversation with “Eat, Pray, Love” author Elizabeth Gilbert, who makes the case that curiosity, rather than passion, should be your primary motivator.