



Q&A with Neil Pasricha

OUR BOOK OF AWESOME: A Celebration of The Small Joys That Bring Us Together

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Who is Neil Pasricha?

Neil Pasricha is the author of ten *New York Times* and #1 international bestselling books and journals which have sold over 2 million copies including:

- The Book of Awesome – Gratitude (2010)
- Awesome Is Everywhere – Mindfulness (2015)
- The Happiness Equation – Happiness (2016)
- Two-Minute Mornings – Habits (2017)
- You Are Awesome – Resilience (2019)

What is Our Book of Awesome?

A brand new 432-page hardcover from Simon & Schuster featuring >500 awesome things like:

- When your kids don't hear you opening a bag of chips
- When the hand sanitizer isn't that extra slippery kind that never dries
- Texting your husband to do something when he's upstairs and you're downstairs
- Nailing the timing on that avocado
- Opening the dishwasher and somebody already emptied it

Why a whole book of awesome things? What does the research say?

Research from Emmons and McCullough shows that writing down 10 small things we're grateful for each week makes us not only happier – but physically healthier! The research compared those writing down gratitudes to a test group writing down 'events' and another writing down 'hassles'. (We have an amygdala in our brain which makes negative thinking much easier.)

Put another way: What dumbbell curls are to your biceps ... awesome things are to your brain.

Wow! Why? How does this work?

There's an area in our brain called our visual cortex. When we successfully carry the ice cube tray from the sink to the freezer without spilling ... area 17 in our visual cortex lights up. When we recall or write down this gratitude ... it lights up again. When we read about this gratitude... it lights up *again*.

Our Book of Awesome is the simplest trigger to getting more gratitude in your life.



Okay, so you call Our Book of Awesome a trigger to getting more gratitude in our lives. How do we do that in practice?

Let's start in the morning.

95% of us are waking up within 5 feet of our cell phones. We need to get the phones out of our bedrooms (happy to discuss why!) and start our days with a two-minute morning habit instead.

Each morning write down:

- I will let go of...
- I am grateful for...
- I will focus on...

Each of the 3 prompts is backed by research and the practices helps you 'win the morning to win your day.'

People find "I am grateful for..." toughest.

Our Book of Awesome offers 500 places to start.

Why should we care about being happy in the mornings?

The average person is awake for 1000 minutes a day and taking two-minutes to perform this research-based ritual helps the other 998 minutes be happier.

What does that lead to?

Well, according to research from Sonya Lyubomirsky, Ed Deiner, and Jane King, when we show up to work happier we have 31% higher productivity, 37% higher sales, and 300% more creativity than our peers. What does *that* lead to? Happy people are 40% more likely to get a promotion in the next 12 months and, according to the famous "Nun Study" from Deborah Danner, David Snowdon, and Wallace Friesen at the University of Kentucky, happy people live longer.

That's a great morning practice. Can people use Our Book of Awesome at night or with their families, too?

Absolutely.

A wonderful gratitude game to play around the dinner table is called Rose, Rose, Thorn, Bud.

You go around the dinner table and each person shares:



- a Rose from the day – this is a highlight or a gratitude. You can use one from Our Book of Awesome to help. It can be anything simple like the coffee shop offering a new flavor of donut, getting an assist in hockey practice, or when the boss sent you a thank you email.
- another Rose – You do that again!
- a Thorn – It's important to listen and be heard and a thorn is any lowlight, stress, or hassle that made the day challenging
- a Bud – This is something you're looking *forward* to. It could be this weekend – building a stack of pancakes that looks like the front of the box! – or it could be in 50 years – renting a villa in Tuscany when I'm 100!

The book is called OUR BOOK OF AWESOME. Why 'awesome'? Shouldn't 'awesome' be reserved for things truly awe-inspiring – like the grand canyon or your wedding day?

No!

Wide eyes on graduation stages, father-daughter dances at weddings, healthy babies screeching in delivery rooms – these big moments only ever add up to a tiny, tiny percentage of our lives. We need to train our brains to see awe in the simple and smaller joys of life.

Research from Maria Monroy and Dacher Keltner show that experiencing awe is associated with lower stress and inflammation levels and a higher sense of meaning and connection.

How do you define 'awesome things'? What are some examples?

Awesome things: simple, free, and universal small pleasures. Examples?

- Successfully carrying the ice cube tray to the freezer without spilling
- When your kids don't hear you opening a bag of chips
- That moment when you send a private message over Zoom and see your coworker look down and silently smirk
- Seeing your parents dance
- When the cake pops flawlessly out of the pan
- Finally unsubscribing from that annoying email you've been getting forever
- When the hand sanitizer isn't that extra slippery kind that never dries
- Adding a gift note to yourself in your online order
- When a human answers the phone
- Actually making the right amount of spaghetti

How do you find all these awesome things?

I have a few secret ingredients to source awesome things:

- I take a long late-night walk at least once a week – It’s an incredible tool to combat stress and anxiety and fuel creativity. Plus, trees release a chemical called phytoncides which lower cortisol and adrenalin levels. As Thoreau said “Nothing can befall me in life – no disgrace, no calamity – which nature cannot repair.”
- I take deep cell phone breaks – I keep my charger in the basement so I create free space for my brain before I sleep and when I wake up. Research from Australia shows that exposure to bright light within 2 hours of bedtime reduces our melatonin production. And I also give my wife my phone on Fridays so I don’t have it on weekends.
- I schedule 1 Untouchable day per week to give myself writing space and I encourage everyone to do the same. These are days when I am untethered to the Internet and unreachable by anyone so I can do deep work. Awesome things bubble up.
- I don’t believe in retirement – I believe retirement is a false prophet and is based on assumptions that are no longer true – that we want to do nothing, that we can afford to do nothing, that we can afford to pay others to do nothing. There’s a reason the healthiest societies in the world – folks living over 100 in Okinawa, Japan, for example -- have no word for retirement. Instead they have a word called ‘ikigai’ which means ‘the reason you get up in the morning. My ikigai is helping people live happy lives.

Additional long form Q&A”s:

What is your ‘origin story’?

In my late twenties my wife left me and my best friend took his own life. I couldn’t eat, I couldn’t sleep, and I lost forty pounds due to stress. I started going to therapy twice a week, and began a blog to try and cheer myself up. The blog was called 1000 Awesome Things and for the next 1000 straight weekdays I posted a short essay about one small joy in life.

My mind was dark and many of my attempts were duds—my first awesome thing was broccoflower, the ‘strange mutant hybrid child of nature’s ugliest vegetables’—but some posts started finding a nerve. Warm underwear out of the dryer, the smell of bakery air, when cashiers open new checkout lanes at the grocery store, getting called up to the dinner buffet first at a wedding, and playing on old, dangerous playground equipment.

Still, nobody read the blog except for my mom. Although, one day, she forwarded it to my dad and my traffic doubled. And then one day I started getting tens of hits. And then one day I started getting hundreds. And then thousands. And then ... millions. It just got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger and then I got a phone call and the voice on the other end of the line said, “You just won the Best Blog in the world award!”

And I said, “That sounds totally fake.”



But turns out it was real. It was The International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences and they flew me down to New York City to parade me down a red carpet before handing me the award for “Best Blog”. When I got home to Toronto I found ten literary agents waiting for me in my inbox, eager to turn 1000 Awesome Things into . . . The Book of Awesome.

The Book of Awesome came out in 2010 and landed on the New York Times bestseller list and stayed on international bestseller lists for over two hundred weeks. Over the next two years a litany of sequels and spin-offs followed: The Book of (Even More) Awesome, The Book of (Holiday) Awesome, The Calendar of Awesome, The Journal of Awesome, The App of Awesome, and on it went.

Over a million copies of the books were sold and it spawned a pre-social media movement of people mailing in photos of themselves with the book in front of famous landmarks and hundreds of elementary and high schools creating plays, projects, and homemade Books of Awesome based on the concept.

I got invited to give a TED Talk, got asked to “teach America to be happy” on the Today show, and was flown to Abu Dhabi to speak to the royal family.

That’s where this all started.

It’s been 10 years of Awesome with you, Neil! Tell us why Americans have such a desire and need for a more positive mindset.

We are experiencing the highest ever rates of anxiety, loneliness, depression, and suicide than ever before in our history. (Anxiety reports from Dr. Jean Twenge / Jonathan Haidt, depression from National Institute of Mental Health, loneliness from Surgeon General Vivek Murthy HBR cover story, and suicide rates from CDC which reports we’re at highest levels since WWII.)

And, on a personal level, I’ve found myself feeling overwhelmed by a world that seems messed up with algorithm-infused addictions, widening wealth gaps, destabilizing senses of reality, reductions in privacy and freedoms -- all against a backdrop of environmental, political, and mental health turmoil. I have felt raw, fried, chewed up, and spit out, and so I have turned to the medicine that works for me. Finding small pleasures. Writing them down. Focusing on gratitude. Soaking into the endless simple joys we’re surrounded by every day.

Why is this book called “Our” book of awesome?

As Daniel Gilbert wrote in *Stumbling on Happiness* “If I knew everything about you – your race, your income, your health, your nationality – none of it would compare to the strength of your relationships with your friends and family.” I believe the collective ‘we’ is being lost in society today. You can see it in any public space where, instead of interacting, we all have our heads down in our phones.



Our Book of Awesome is the first book of awesome where you can hear voices from people all over the world. (I took out my face, bio, and even the dedication and acknowledgements, so it could feel like *our* book – not mine.)

You'll hear the story of a couple using awesome things to connect on a brief Christmas layover between military stints, a cancer patient using awesome things with her young children, teachers teaching lessons on awesome things to students, and lots of incredible entries from people around the world like:

- Wheelchair accessible nature trails
- Cooking for a loved one whose just been released from 27 years of incarceration
- A steaming bald head after a satisfying winter run
- When you go out for lunch and your daughter is your server
- Hearing the little boys playing upstairs from my basement apartment

From soccer moms to preachers to teachers, who is this book for?

Our Book of Awesome is a gift for anybody awesome in your life.

Stressed spouses, anxious friends, overworked teachers, or just somebody who needs a little boost – Our Book of Awesome serves as a recipe book, a north star, or a big treasure chest full of awesome things to help turn a bad day into a good one.

What else do you want to share with us, Neil?

We live in overwhelming times. Highest ever rates of anxiety, loneliness, depression, suicide.

Nothing is more important – and vital! – today than cultivating the habit of positive thinking.

Being happy *first* is the lead domino to becoming a better spouse, parent, son, daughter, brother, or sister...

Our Book of Awesome is a tool to cultivate a positive mindset.

I hope it's helpful for everyone. I know it has been for me.