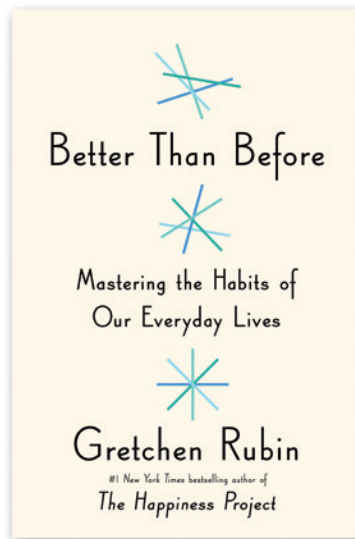


HABITS CAN BE HAPPINESS-FORMING

Author Gretchen Rubin shares wisdom from her new book, *Better Than Before*.

by Sandra Bienkowski



happiness expert Gretchen Rubin had a lightbulb moment during a conversation with a friend that took her interest in habits and spiked it into the realm of near-obsession.

Her friend wanted to exercise. She knew she'd feel more energetic and happier if she did, but she couldn't get herself to do it. "The funny thing is," said the friend, "when I was in high school, I never missed track practice, but I can't get myself to go running now." Gretchen was thunderstruck by this new perspective on behavior. "Why is that?" she thought. "Same habit, same person. At one time it was effortless, now it's impossible. What's the difference?"

"That got me really focused on this idea of habits," Gretchen says. From her

research, she knew that people with steady, productive habits are happier and healthier. As she looked more deeply into habits, she had more questions than answers. Why do some people have an easier time forming habits than others? Why do some people like habits while others dread them?

She began researching habits and testing her theories on willing friends and family members. Her findings led to her latest book, *Better Than Before: Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives*. She calls it a prequel to her best-selling *The Happiness Project* because it answers the question, "How do you start doing those things that lead to happiness?"

THE SECRET TO SETTING POSITIVE HABITS.

To understand how people are able to change, Gretchen knew she must understand how habits are formed and how they stick. "Habits are the invisible architecture of daily life. We repeat about 40 percent of our habits daily, so they shape our existence and our future. When we change our habits, we change our lives.

"I think people have a pretty good idea of the things that will make them happier, but they often can't make them happen," Gretchen says. She noticed that when people talk about something that makes them happy, they often focus on a healthy habit they finally managed to set in motion. "Most of the things people want to do, they want to do regularly," Gretchen says. "Habits allow us to go on automatic.

"The crucial thing about habits is the lack of decision-making. You are not deciding whether to brush your teeth or put on your seat belt. You are just doing it automatically."

In this way, habits can free us from stress. "Making decisions is draining. Habits free you from using self-control or willpower," Gretchen says. "Everything that is important to you—from getting enough sleep to exercising, working on a big project or even having more quality time with your family—once it's a habit, you don't have to decide."

And while you'll find lots of advice about how to set habits, from starting small to tackling a new habit first thing in the morning, Gretchen's advice is different and goes deeper. To start a new habit, she says, "we have to first know ourselves. Once we know ourselves, we can manage ourselves better." For example, if you are a night person you shouldn't try to take on the habits of a morning person. Work with who you are, building on strengths and patterns that are already in place.

WHAT'S YOUR HABIT TENDENCY?

Habits are one way we follow through on things we know will make us happier, but the same strategies don't work for everyone.

"When we form a habit, we set expectations for ourselves," Gretchen says. "How we respond to expectations—both internal (keep a resolution) and external (meet a work

deadline) is a key question for habit change.

To better explain how we fall into types when it comes to our relationships with habits, Gretchen developed a framework called The Four Tendencies.

Upholders respond readily to both internal and external expectations. "I do what others expect of me—and what I expect from myself."

Questioners challenge all expectations. They meet an expectation only if they believe it's reasonable

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(effectively making it an internal expectation). “I do what I think is best, according to my judgment. I won’t do something that doesn’t make sense.”

Obligers respond readily to outside expectations but struggle to meet their own expectations. “I don’t like to let others down, but I often let myself down.”

Rebels resist all expectations. “I want to do what I want, in my own way. If you tell me to do it, I’m less likely to do it.”

According to Gretchen’s research, if you identify your tendency, you will have a better idea of which one of her 21 identified habit-changing strategies will work for you. You can deploy multiple strategies at once or use a single strategy to master a habit. “For instance,” says Gretchen, “upholders do especially well with the strategy of scheduling, questioners with the strategy of clarity, obligers with the strategy of accountability and rebels with the strategy of identity.”

“With habits, some people should start small and others should start big. One person should keep it private and

another should go public,” Gretchen explains. “If you are going to have coffee with a friend once a week or read Scripture, it’s so much easier when there’s a habit to it. If something is really important to you, build a habit around it.”

To help tailor your habits to your nature, ask yourself questions about how you spend your time, what you value most, and what habits you currently pursue. To do this, the book includes a helpful list with questions like: At what time of day do I feel energized? What’s most satisfying to me: saving time, or money, or effort? If I could magically change one habit in my life, what would it be? The more your habits reflect your values, the happier you will be.


START WITH A FOUNDATION.

Begin with habits that strengthen self-control, what Gretchen calls The Foundation Four. These habits serve as the foundation for forming other good habits: sleep, move, eat and drink right, unclutter.

“Foundational habits protect us from getting so physically taxed or mentally

frazzled that we can’t manage ourselves. If you are a person who doesn’t get enough sleep and then you start getting enough sleep, that’s generally going to boost your sense of self-command. Foundation habits can even make profound change possible,” Gretchen explains. “A friend once told me, ‘I cleaned out my fridge, and now I feel like I can switch careers.’ I knew exactly what she meant.” Foundation habits reinforce each other. For instance, exercise helps people sleep, and sleep helps people do everything better.

“I think a lot of people are plagued by these vague notions of habits they should change, and that’s very draining and makes you feel out of control of yourself,” Gretchen says. “Ask yourself what you really want and make your life reflect that.”

Gretchen’s No. 1 rule on her Habits Manifesto: What we do every day matters more than what we do once in a while. “Harness the power of habits to create a life that makes you freer and happier.” 

HABIT HELP

USE ONE OF THESE STRATEGIES TO START A GOOD HABIT TODAY.

START WITH A CLEAN SLATE. A new situation makes it easier to change habits. Starting a new job? Moving? In a new relationship? Start a new habit.

CATCH A HABIT. Is someone around you making a positive change? Latch on.

TRY ABSTENTION INSTEAD OF MODERATION. For some people, giving up something altogether is easier than practicing moderation. For abstainers, it’s easier to eat no cookies than one cookie.

IF IT’S ESSENTIAL TO YOU, MONITOR IT. Track your food, steps, spending, sleep, bedtime, work time or whatever is important to you.

CAPITALIZE ON PAST SUCCESSES. Use your own experience to shine a spotlight on your nature. Craft a new habit around your own idiosyncrasies to set yourself up for success.



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