

Healthy habits

Can people improve their lives by changing their everyday actions? Is there a relationship between habits and happiness? For Gretchen Rubin, the answer to both questions is yes.

INTERVIEW BY CASSIE MOGILNER

Sleep more. Stop procrastinating. Save. Eat right. In her new book, *Better Than Before: Mastering the Habits of our Everyday Lives*, Gretchen Rubin explains how certain changes in behaviour can help us live happier lives. The problem is that habits are just that: things people do habitually, and it's not easy to change something you've been doing for as long as you can remember. Rubin's book, however, enumerates enough methods so anyone can find the most suitable approach to kick their old habits and adopt new ones. Cassie Mogilner, a marketing professor at Wharton, recently interviewed Rubin during her visit to the business school as a guest lecturer in the series, *Authors@Wharton*.

What inspired you to write this book?

For years, while writing *The Happiness Project* and *Happier At Home*, I conducted research and talked to people about happiness. I began to notice a pattern. Very often, the journey to happiness involved changing or overcoming a certain habit. People would say, "I'm just exhausted all the time and that's what's dragging me down," which is really about the habit of not getting enough sleep. I became increasingly interested in the role that habits play in a happier, healthier and more productive life. Also in the question of how we can change those habits, something that only those who try know the difficulty of.

What is the most important step in changing your habits?

Knowing yourself. There's so much desire for a one-size-fits-all solution, or a magic potion, but there is no magic, one-size-fits-all solution. What I found when I looked at the issue is that all of us have to think about what's true for us. Even something as simple as, 'are you a morning person or a night person?' Because if you're a night person, you're not setting yourself up for success by getting up early to go for a run. That's probably not going to work for you.

Often, people just decide what they think their habits should be, or they look at what Benjamin Franklin did, or what their brother-in-law did, and try to copy it. But in fact, what you have to do is ask, 'What's true about me? What do I notice about myself? What's my nature?'

I, like many others, want to improve my eating habits. But boy, that's a hard thing to do. Are there any habit-changing techniques that you would suggest to me and others who want to eat a little better?

There are essentially two strategies: abstinence and moderation. Again, the kind of person you are will help determine which to implement. Abstinence works



Gretchen Rubin, author of
*Better Than Before: Mastering the
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really well for some people, like me, and doesn’t work at all for other people. I do better when I give up the habit entirely. I’m one of those people who can resist temptation altogether. I can eat no Thin Mints or I can eat ten Thin Mints, but I can’t eat two or three Thin Mints. If you’re an abstainer and French fries are your kryptonite, give them up altogether. That’s easier for you. It sounds harder, but it’s actually easier. This is true for food, but also for things like technology. If you can’t play a little Candy Crush, maybe you want to play no Candy Crush.

The moderators, on the other hand, do better when they do something sometimes or they have a little taste. Often, if they know they can have something, they don’t even want it.

They do better when they have that little bit that they allow themselves. Moderators will keep a bar of chocolate squirreled away somewhere in their desk, and every day they will eat one square of chocolate. As an abstainer, there’s no way I would not eat that chocolate bar in one day. It would just haunt me until I had eaten it. But for a moderator, that’s what works.

Are people abstainers across all of their domains? Or should I abstain from some things, but try moderation with others?

It’s normal to combine strategies. In the case of chocolate, for example, I’m an abstainer. But for wine, I can drink half a glass of wine. Some people, on the other hand, can’t drink any wine or they’ll finish the bottle. So, it tends to involve managing a strong temptation.

Over the course of working on this book, you have spoken to a bunch of people about the different habits they would like to implement in their lives. What are some of the things that people are looking to change?

Almost everything falls into what I call “the essential seven”: eating and drinking more healthfully; exercising more; engaging more deeply with relationships, with nature, with God; saving, spending and earning money wisely; simplifying, clearing, uncluttering, organizing; making more progress and also stopping procrastinating (those are two sides of the same coin); and resting, relaxing, and enjoying. Just about every habit that people come up with somehow fits into one of those categories.

Apart from abstinence and moderation, what other strategies do you recommend?

What I found when I was looking at how people master their habits is that there are 21 strategies that people use. That can sometimes sound terrifying to people because it’s so many. But it’s good because you can just pick and choose what works for you. Not all the strategies are available to us at all times, and they don’t all work for everyone.

One of the most helpful and familiar strategies is the strategy of monitoring. If we monitor something, we tend to do a better job. If you want to eat more healthfully, you keep a food journal. If you want to exercise more, you use a pedometer. Another method is accountability. Most people do better when someone is holding them accountable. For some people, it’s the critical piece of allowing them to change their habits.

For others, scheduling is the key. Put something on your schedule, and it's more likely to get done.

One strategy that many people love is pairing: when you pair something that you like to do with a habit that you perhaps don't enjoy as much. For example, people will pair using the treadmill or the stationery bike with watching television. If they know they can watch Game of Thrones while on the treadmill, they're suddenly much more excited about using it.

The strategy that I think is the funniest is loophole-spotting. We're such advocates for ourselves. We can come up with so many justifications for why we should be off the hook: 'Just this one, just today. Oh, I forgot. I don't have to do this right now. It's my birthday. I'm on vacation. You only live once. I have to take advantage of this or lose out forever.' We're so ingenious at coming up with strategies to argue against what we ourselves have proposed.

In your book you say that implementing good habits takes the thought out of behaviour so we're not constantly saddled with choices where we have to exert self-control. If the goal is to make so much of our life mindless, does that potentially come at the cost of mindfulness? If every morning I give my husband a kiss and say, "I love you," does that lose its meaning if it becomes a habit?

It's an interesting question. Habits are freeing and energizing because they eliminate decision and self-control. With the example you gave, I immediately thought of this wonderful quote by Flannery O'Connor. She was a devout Catholic, and somebody said to her, "If you're just going through these Catholic rituals by habit, don't they lose their meaning?" and she responded, "It's better to be held to the Church by habit than not [to be held] at all."

If you don't have the habit of kissing every morning, you'll just forget to do it. Habits help us ensure that the things we care about actually get done. But you're absolutely right, there's still something to be said for putting things on automatic. Habits speed time. The first month at a new job feels like it takes forever, but then the fifth year on the job goes by in a flash. As things become more familiar, the brain just speeds through them, mitigating the experience. That's the downside of habits, though sometimes that can be good. For example, if you're doing something that makes you anxious, and you do it over and over until it becomes a

habit, that will deaden those negative feelings. The downside is that if you kiss your husband every morning, you can no longer experience it as if for the first time. Like, the first couple times you had that morning cup of coffee, it was bliss. But now that you have it every day, you don't even taste it.

So, you're absolutely right. Habits – in some ways – are wonderful. I'm a big advocate for the power of habits. But on the other hand, they really do have downsides. We want to be mindful about how we use mindlessness.

I feel like I should fairly easily be able to implement positive habits around eating and exercise, but I don't manage to do it. Is it me or is that normal?

It's absolutely normal; it happens to most people. If you want to make your life work better, you have to strengthen the habits that will make self-mastery easier. With regard to food, for example, we have to make sure we eat enough; paradoxically one reason that people overeat is that they don't eat enough. They get too hungry, and then they eat all the wrong foods. With regard to exercise, maybe you don't need to go to the gym or train for a marathon, but just take a 15-20 minute walk. That makes people feel more.



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energetic, more in command of themselves. And strangely, uncluttering. For a lot of people, achieving order makes them feel more in control of themselves. Even if it's an illusion, it's a helpful illusion.

First, start with getting enough sleep. Without enough rest, you won't have the energy to form healthy habits. For many people, they don't want to give up that last couple of hours each day because that's their playtime, their goof-off time, their fun time. But it's really important to get enough sleep. I even recommend setting an alarm. Just like you have an alarm in the morning, have an alarm at night. Most adults need seven hours of sleep.

Figure out what your bedtime is. Many adults don't even really have a bedtime. Little kids have a bedtime, but we think, 'Oh, I'll go to bed when I'm tired.' Then at the last minute, you check your work email or you start watching something on TV, and – you get a second wind. You think, 'I'm not tired at all. I'll stay up,' but you should have gone to bed hours before.

It's easy enough for me to set an alarm at 9 p.m. I would love to

start going to bed at nine o'clock every night. But then what if my husband doesn't want to go to bed at nine o'clock. Are we going to bed at different times? Similarly, I want a healthy dinner but I don't want to impose that on others. Between my demanding career and trying to cultivate a loving relationship with my husband and my son, let alone my family and friends, I feel like I have little control over how I spend my time. I feel like I'm more reactive rather than proactive with respect to what I eat and when I sleep, and exercise is a thing of the past. What advice do you have for me, and others, who feel like they are trying to create positive habits, but are very much living in the context of others?

Sometimes it's easy to talk about our habits as if we were just this isolated unit going through the world alone. But as you point out, quite rightly, we live surrounded by other people. Our habits rub off on them and their habits rub off on us. You go to bed early and your husband goes to bed late, right? So, he's pulling you later and maybe you're pulling him earlier. Your habits are interacting with each other. It's important to think it through and ask: 'What do I want to be true for me?' Often, the "concern for others" loophole is nothing more than another excuse we devise. We think others will be uncomfortable if we don't drink wine at a business dinner, or we'll hurt the host's feelings if we don't eat a slice of birthday cake... Really? Part of the solution is to look very closely at what people truly care about or what is going to negatively affect someone. Sometimes there's just this assumption – 'I can't force everybody to eat the way I do' – a baseless idea, an argument formulated too quickly and cavalierly. It goes back to this idea of mindfulness. If you stop to analyse what you are thinking, you may find that it isn't necessary for everyone to eat the same thing, or that the preferences of others are not so different from yours.

A lot of times if you change, others will change, even if you're not trying to change them, but you have to start by being very clear about what you want, and what's right for you, and what you want your life to look like.

It's not easy. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying all you have to do is make up your mind, because it is very hard when you're working with other people. And

the more people, the more complicated it gets. But I think it's something that's really worth thinking about, instead of just assuming, 'Well, I can't go to bed earlier.' Maybe you can. You could think about it. There might be ways.

What message would you like people to take away from your book?

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. We're constantly told, 'If only you would do it this way or try this. This is the magic potion.' Some things work for some people, sometimes. But nothing works for everybody all the time. A lot of things that work very well for some people actually are counterproductive for others. You really have to think about yourself, even with things as simple as, 'Are you a morning person or a night person?' When you think about yourself, then you can shape the habit to suit you. That's what allows people to succeed. We get discouraged because we try and fail, but often, we haven't set ourselves up for success because we haven't shaped it in a way that's going to be in harmony with our nature, our values, our interests. When we do that, then there's a lot more that we can do that's going to allow us to succeed.

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