

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
Habits of our Everyday Lives.*

“Habits help us ensure that the things we care about actually get done.”



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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