Breaking BAD HABITS

If anyone can help us stop procrastinating, start exercising or get organized, it's Gretchen Rubin.

The happiness guru takes a sledgehammer to old-fashioned notions about change.

PLUS
Trendy Toast Toppers
The Ultimate '80s Binge-Watch
Snacking late at night, skimping on sleep, nail biting, binging on House of Cards—nearly everyone has vices. That’s because, try as we might, bad habits are maddeningly hard to break. On the flip side, good habits, such as eating more healthfully or exercising regularly, never seem to stick. The upshot: Most people throw up their hands and surrender.


"It would be so great if there was a magic answer that would do it for all of us, but it doesn't exist," says Rubin, 47. "We know that because we'd all have great habits if there was one thing we could all do. You have to take it back to yourself."

Rubin, whose fascination with habits evolved during her exhaustive research on happiness—which resulted in two blockbuster books, The Happiness Project (2009) and Happier at Home (2012)—found that our inability to master unwanted behaviors was a major
downer. So, after guiding millions of readers down the path of true contentedness, New York City-based Rubin, a former law clerk for Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, turned her investigative skills towards habits.

Her most revealing find? Change is possible if we do some soul searching and identify how we respond to expectations. And, just about everybody falls into one of four personality categories: Questioners, Obligers, Rebels and Upholders.

“It was like discovering the periodic table of elements,” says Rubin, who developed the Four Tendencies personality framework to help those in search of habit change determine their type.

Rubin believes herself to be a classic Upholder, someone who forms habits relatively easily because she responds well to both other people’s deadlines and her own.

As to the other types, Questioners will only form a habit if it makes sense to them; Obligers work hard to meet other people’s expectations but often let themselves down. And Rebels resent—and resist—habits.

The trick, says Rubin, is to “tailor your habits to suit yourself.”

PERSONALITY + PAIRING = SUCCESS

After acquainting readers with tendencies, Rubin poses questions in the book to help tease out more nuanced personality puzzle pieces. Are you a lark or an owl, a lover of simplicity or abundance, an underbuyer or an overbuyer, an abstainer or a moderator, a sprinter or a marathoner?

“Think about the habit that you want to form and then think, What’s everything I could do to set myself up for success?” says Rubin. For example, if you want to exercise more and you’re an Obliger and a lark, call your friend who lives across the street to meet at 6:30 every morning for a walk.

One common pitfall, says Rubin, especially when it comes to changing your diet, is lack of clarity. “You can’t make a habit out of eating more healthfully,” she says. Instead, your habit should be specific, something like: “I’m going to pack a lunch every day and bring it to work instead of eating out.” Other helpful diet strategies include practicing distraction (a friend of Rubin’s files her nails when the urge to snack strikes) and monitoring intake (Rubin uses the MyFitnessPal app to track food).

As for exercise, Rubin recommends a strategy called pairing—coupling two activities, one that you need or want to do and one that you don’t particularly want to do. Rubin, for example, only allows herself to read magazines while on cardio machines at the gym.

When her younger sister, Elizabeth Craft, 43, complained that she had no time for exercise. Rubin gave her the ultimate pairing device for her 40th birthday: a treadmill desk.

“It’s so satisfying to leave work and say, ‘Not only did I work today, but I walked five miles,’” says Craft, a Los Angeles–based television writer and producer.

It is this same deeper understanding of self that helped Maria Giacchino, 53, a music and film producer in New York, cut down on drinking. Through conversations with Rubin, a longtime friend, Giacchino came to see how much her drinking was tied to her identity as a wine-loving Italian.

“I felt like I wasn’t necessarily making a choice before, and now I know I can,” says Giacchino, who is part Rebel and more likely to succeed when she feels in control of her decisions.

Now, when the sun is setting and dinner prep begins—cues that would typically inspire Giacchino to pour a glass of wine—she waits 15 minutes, distracted herself with the newspaper or Facebook and then reevaluates.

While en route to becoming the Habit Change Guru, Rubin also looked to make changes closer to home. Through “some combination of proselytization, harassing and explaining why something is the right thing,” in the words of her husband, Jamie Rubin, 47, she has encouraged him to adopt better eating habits and is currently working on getting him to go to bed earlier.

“She tries to convince me,” says Jamie,
GOOD HABITS = HAPPINESS
Because making and keeping habits requires a tremendous amount of hard work, Rubin encourages treats.

"Think about the habit that you want to form and then think, What's everything I could do to set myself up for success?"

"If you are constantly pushing out and nothing is coming in, then you're not going to be able to stick to these habits when they're a little challenging," she says. "Treats are a way to give yourself that energy you need to keep going."

continued on page 11

MARCH 22, 2015 | 9
Rubin's treat of choice? Her favorite perfume.

Of course, the ultimate treat is the freedom that comes from shedding bad habits. As much effort as it takes to make lasting changes, Rubin believes that it is more than worth it because, at the end of

Better habits pave the way for growth—and growth leads to greater happiness.

day, good habits free us from making decisions after decisions and from exerting self-control.

"The more [things] you can make into a habit, then the less you have to drain yourself using your willpower," she says.

As Rubin sees it, better habits pave the way for growth—and growth leads to greater happiness.

And, after all, isn't that what it's all about?