

## How Good Habits Can Make You Happier by Cassie Mogilner

Get more sleep. Stop procrastinating. Save more. Eat more healthfully. Many of us aspire to change our habits, but we often find current habits hard to break and new ones a challenge to make. In bestselling author Gretchen Rubin's new book, *Better Than Before: Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives*, she explains why habits can make us happier. Wharton marketing professor Cassie Mogilner recently interviewed Rubin when she visited campus as a guest lecturer in the Authors@Wharton series.

An edited transcript of the conversation follows.

Cassie Mogilner: What drove you to write this book?

Gretchen Rubin: I wrote *The Happiness Project* and *Happier At Home*. For years I had been researching and writing and talking to people about happiness. I began to notice a pattern. When I was talking to people about some big happiness boost that they had achieved, or more often a big happiness challenge that they were facing, very often they were pointing to something that, at its core, involved a habit. Somebody would say, "Oh, I'm just exhausted all the time. That's what's dragging me down," which is really about the habit of getting enough sleep.

I became increasingly interested in the role that habits play in a happier, healthier and more productive life. Also the question of how we can change our habits, because sometimes we can and sometimes we can't....

Mogilner: You emphasize that an important step in changing your habits is knowing yourself. Why is that?

Rubin: There's so much of a desire for a one-size-fits-all solution. Do it first thing in the morning. Start small. Do it for 30 days. Have a cheat day. But there is no magic, one-size-fits-all solution. What I found when I looked at it 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? If you're a night person, you're not setting yourself up for success [to get] up early to go for a run. That's probably not going to work for you. But often, people just decide what they think their habit 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?"

Mogilner: I, like many others, want to improve my eating habits. But boy, that is 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?

Rubin: One thing is the strategy of abstaining. Again, this is a strategy where you have to know yourself. Because it works really well for some people, like me, and doesn't work at all for other people. Abstainers are people who do better when they give up something altogether. I can eat no Thin Mints or I can eat ten Thin Mints, but I can't eat two Thin Mints. I'm an abstainer ... resisting temptation altogether. If French fries are your Kryptonite — whatever it is — just give it up altogether. That's easier for you. It sounds harder, but it's actually easier. The moderators do better when they have something sometimes or they have a little bit. Often, if they know they can have something, they don't even want it. They do better when they do have a little bit that they allow themselves. 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.

But abstaining is a strategy that, when you know yourself, can be enormously powerful. But it may not work for you, so you really have to know what kind of person you are.

Mogilner: Is someone an abstainer across all of their domains? Or should I abstain in some things, but try moderating in others?

Rubin: No, almost everybody's a mix. It really has to do with how you deal with a strong temptation. For chocolate, I'm an abstainer. But for wine, I can drink half a glass of wine. Some people are like, "I can have no wine, or I can have four glasses of wine. I can't have one glass of wine." So, it tends to involve managing a strong temptation. Moderators were a mystery to me. Moderators often keep a bar of fine chocolate squirreled away somewhere in their desk. Every day, they will have one square of fine 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.

Mogilner: Over the course of working on this book, you have spoken to a bunch of different 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/.

Rubin: 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, which I'm sure is something you're very interested in. That is, how do people experience the moment? How do they have leisure? How can they rest? A lot of people feel like they are just never at rest. Just about every habit that people come up with somehow fits into one of those areas.

Mogilner: In the context of eating more healthfully, you mentioned these strategies of abstaining versus moderating. Across those different changes that people are looking to make in their lives, what are some other strategies that seem to produce the best results?

Rubin: 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 step counter.

Another one is accountability. Most people do better when someone is holding them accountable.... For some people, it's essential. It's the critical piece of allowing them to change their habits. [Another is] the strategy of scheduling. Put something on your schedule, and it's more likely to get done.

One that I took for granted — it seems so obvious to me but many people really loved it — is the strategy of pairing: when you pair something that you like to do with a habit that you perhaps don't enjoy as much. Very often people will pair going on the treadmill or the stationery bike with watching television. If they can only watch Game of Thrones when they're on the treadmill, then they're suddenly much more excited about going on the treadmill. Or, maybe you're cleaning in the morning, and you're listening to podcasts. I just started a podcast with my sister, "Happier with Gretchen Rubin," and a lot of people have said, "Oh, I'm pairing that with something else that I don't like to do."

The one that I think is the funniest strategy is loophole-spotting because 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 right now. Oh, oh, I forgot. There's an excuse. I don't have to do this right now. I forgot, 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 of justification. Those are just a few.

Mogilner: You say that through implementing good habits, it takes the thought out of behavior, so we're not constantly saddled with these 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? Maybe we stop noticing the joys in life or savoring the joys. For instance, as my husband and I are saying goodbye on our way to work, if I implement a habit [where] we give each other a kiss and say, "I love you," does that lose its meaning if it becomes a habit? Similarly, if every Saturday morning, my family and I sit down for a pancake breakfast, does it lose its specialness if it's now a habit?

Rubin: That's a super-important question. Habits are freeing and energizing because they eliminate decision and self-control. But they often also have downsides. Now, with the examples that you give, I immediately thought of this wonderful quotation by Flannery O'Connor. She was a very devout Catholic, and somebody said, "Well, but if you're just going through these Catholic rituals by habit, don't they lose their meaning?" She said, "It is better to be held to the Church by habit than not [to be held] at all. The Church is mighty realistic about human nature."

If you don't have the habit of kissing every morning, you just forget to do it. Part of it is that habit does help us ensure that the things that are really important to us actually get done. In that way, there's still something to be said for putting it on automatic. But you're absolutely right. Habits speed time. The first month on a job feels like it takes forever. But then the fifth year on the job goes in a flash. Because as things become more familiar, the brain just speeds through them. To do something novel and challenging slows time. Most of us enjoy experiencing slow, rich time. So, that's a negative of habit.

The other thing is, as you say, they deaden experience. Now, sometimes that can be good. Like, 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. But also, if you're kissing every morning, maybe you're not going to experience it. It's going to deaden your

feelings. Or, 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. You're frantic if you don't get it. But you don't even taste it.

So, you're absolutely right. Habits — in some ways, they're 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....

Mogilner: As an upholder, I loved your scheduling advice — not to mention it nicely captures some of my own research on happiness, where shifting people's attention toward time leads them to behave in ways that are more fulfilling and makes them happier. You made a really nice point that scheduling is a strategy that makes sure that you will spend time on things that are most important to you. How do you manage your schedule? Do you have a paper planner that you write things down in? Is it in Outlook? Is it in your head? And also, not only how do you maintain your schedule, but what are those things that you ensure are in your day-to-day, that you are sure to schedule in?

Rubin: Well, I use Ye Olde Filofax ... the same one I've had for a very long time. Then I have certain rules that I follow. For instance, if I'm writing a book, then I try to do three hours of original writing in a day. It doesn't sound like that much, unless you've written a book, and then it sounds like a lot.

Day to day, I use a paper calendar to help schedule what I need to, and then put in exercise and fit that in in between the appointments. I wish my days could unfold very regularly, but they don't. I have a very irregular schedule, which drives me crazy. But one of the things that I've found is that sometimes you feel like these very high transcendent values, like quality time with your family or reading for fun, can't be monitored or can't be scheduled. What I've found is that if I've put it on my calendar, I'm much more likely to stick to it. I actually need to sometimes put that in.

For instance, when my older daughter became a teenager and I wasn't spending as much time with her, I wanted to have special time, just the two of us, where we weren't talking about homework or there was no nagging or chores or errands involved. We set aside an afternoon a week so that we would have that time together. I just made sure that there was a place on my calendar for it. Then it was such a relief because I didn't worry, "Oh, I'm not spending any time with her." I [also] love to read. Yet, I feel like I don't have enough time to read. On the weekends, I set aside time for different kinds of reading to make sure that I have the time that I want.

Mogilner: I love that idea. I need to become more deliberate with my schedule. Now, another question I had was, again, as an upholder, I feel like I should fairly easily be able to implement wonderfully positive habits around eating, exercise, and sleep. However, between my demanding career and also trying to cultivate my 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. Exercise is a thing of the past.... What advice do you have for me, as well as others, who feel like they are trying to create positive habits, but are very much living in the context of others?

Rubin: So many people face that problem. There's one strategy that's called the strategy of foundation.... If you wanted to make your life work better, you want to strengthen the habits that ... are going to make all self-mastery easier.

It's mainly ones you listed. It's eating and drinking, making sure that you're eating enough. Paradoxically, one reason that people overeat is that they don't eat enough, and then they get too hungry, and then they just eat all the wrong foods because they don't have any self-mastery. Drinking lowers their inhibitions. Getting enough sleep. If you're not getting enough sleep, you're drained. It's very hard to use your good habits. Exercise. Maybe not going to the gym or training for the marathon, but just going for a 15 or 20 minute walk. That makes people feel more energetic, more in self-command. And strangely, uncluttering. For a lot of people, getting [external] order makes them feel more in control of themselves. Even if it's an illusion, it's a helpful illusion....

Those are the areas you're struggling with. First, start with getting enough sleep. For many people, they don't want to give up that last couple of hours because that's their play time, their goof-off time, their fun time. But it's really important to get enough sleep. For a lot of people, I think it's helpful even to set an alarm. Just like you have an alarm in the morning, have an alarm at night. Most adults need seven hours. Figure out what your bedtime is. A lot of 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 e-mail 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.

This doesn't work for everybody, but if you're trying to eat more healthfully, if you give up sugar, you get out of a lot of cravings. There's a lot of stuff that just falls off the list of temptations. But again, I say that as a pretty hard-core abstainer. So, it's not for everyone, but it's something to think about.

Mogilner: Part of my question was about creating those habits and following those rules in the context of coordinating with my husband and son. 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 there's the question of, well, my husband doesn't want to go to bed at nine o'clock at night. Are we going to bed at different times?... Similarly, coming up with what I want to eat for dinner to be healthy.... I don't want to impose the things that I want to do for myself onto others. But how do you coordinate?

Rubin: Sometimes it's easy to talk about our habits as if we were just this isolated unit going through. But as you point out quite rightly, we're in the context of other people. Also, our habits rub off on them, and their habits are rubbing off on us. You might go to bed at nine o'clock, except your husband goes to bed at midnight, right? So, he's pulling you later and maybe you're pulling him earlier. Your habits are interacting with each other.

It's very important to think it through and to [ask], "What do I want to be true for me?" Often, one loophole ... is the "concern for others" loophole: Others will be uncomfortable if I don't have a drink at this business dinner. It's a birthday. I have to have a piece of your birthday cake or it's going to hurt your feelings. Really? Is it going to? Part of it is to really look very closely at what people care about or what is going to negatively affect someone. Can you make a different decision for yourself from what other people choose?

Sometimes there's just this assumption, "I can't force everybody to eat the way I do." Does everybody have to eat the way you do? Can you eat differently from them? Can they eat more like you? It's back to this idea of mindfulness that you raised a while ago. Sometimes we skate over these questions too quickly, and we don't focus in on: "What would I like to do? What can they do, and what would they do, and do we all have to do the same thing?"...

We do have this engagement. But if you're very clear about what you want, and what's right for you, and what you want your life to look like, a lot of times if you change, others will change — even if you're not trying to change them. But it's not easy. I don't want to make it sound like all you 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 could. You could think about it. There might be ways....

Mogilner: What would you most like people to take away from reading your book?

Rubin: 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 solution." 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 some. You really have to think about yourself. Even 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.