

## Gretchen Rubin's Search for Happiness by Knowledge@Wharton

Are you happy? Could you be happier? Gretchen Rubin was already "pretty happy" when she asked herself these very questions. In search of the answers, she started her own pursuit of happiness, which eventually became a New York Times bestseller titled, *The Happiness Project*. She has now written a second book, *Happier at Home*, based on the idea that the home is the foundation of happiness. Knowledge@Wharton recently spoke with Rubin about why happy people work more hours each week, how to make and keep happiness resolutions, how to ward off the three happiness leeches and how to start your own Happiness Project.

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**Knowledge@Wharton:** As part of the Happiness Project that led to your book of the same name, you spent 12 months exploring your own happiness. What made you decide to embark on that adventure?

**Gretchen Rubin:** It was this very inconspicuous moment of my life. I was stuck on a city bus in the pouring rain, and I didn't have anything to distract myself with. I looked out the window and thought, "What do I want from life anyway?" I thought, "I want to be happy." But I realized I didn't spend any time thinking about whether I was happy or how I could be happier. In a flash, I thought I should have a happiness project. I saw I was going to have rules and charts and lists. I went out to the library the next day and got this huge stack of books about happiness and started researching. I wanted to find out what are the things that everybody says you should do to be happier. If I tried them, could I actually make myself happier? That's how I got the idea to do the Happiness Project.

**Knowledge@Wharton:** How did you deal with skepticism about the project -- from your husband to people at cocktail parties?

**Rubin:** Well, it's funny; I got a lot of pushback. Some people argued that I was so ordinary and boring that no one would be interested in what I had to say. Other people argued that I was so idiosyncratic that no one would ever be able to identify with me. Some people denied that happiness exists at all. My husband was bracing himself for what he could tell was going to be this giant, all-consuming project. He's sort of a martyr to happiness, I would say.

But it was actually very helpful because whenever people would argue against me, it

really helped me clarify what I thought. Why did I think it was important to work on happiness? Or why did I think that happiness even existed? Or why did I think that what I experienced in trying to be happier would be helpful to anyone else? Why did I think that anyone else would be interested in the kinds of things that I undertook for my own Happiness Project? It was actually very helpful, although I did often respond with a lot of belligerence to that opposition.

Knowledge@Wharton: And you were pretty happy to start with. Was it worthwhile to make yourself even happier?

Rubin: Yeah, I think that's one of the reasons that a lot of people identify with me. Because most people say that they are pretty happy or very happy. All around the world, most people say that. I was pretty happy when I started. I was struck by how possible it was, even for someone who was pretty happy, to make myself happier by just doing very ordinary, manageable, simple things that didn't take a lot of time, energy or money. There was really a lot of low-hanging fruit -- things that once I thought about it, I could do pretty easily and added a lot to my happiness. Just things like starting a children's literature reading group or going to bed on time. Very small things ended up having a very powerful effect.

Knowledge@Wharton: Your sister actually teased you that you were approaching the question of happiness in such a dogged, systematic way. What was your approach?

Rubin: I divided the elements of happiness that I felt like I needed to work on for my Happiness Project into 11 categories -- things like friendship, marriage, parenthood, leisure and spirituality. I then spent a month focusing on each one. I started in January and went to December, and each month I would turn my attention to this new element. I always had three, four or five very concrete resolutions that I was going to follow that I thought would help me achieve more happiness in that element. For example, I started with energy because I thought, well, if I have more energy, everything else will be easier. For energy, I focused on things like sleeping, getting exercise and getting rid of clutter because it turns out that clutter and nagging tasks really drain your energy. Each month I would add a new set of resolutions.

By the end of the year I was following all the resolutions all the time. And it was great. It really did add a lot to my happiness. But it was surprisingly difficult to break it down into those elements. It's a very productive thing to try to do because happiness can seem all tangled together. It's very abstract. Everything's interlocked with everything else. By teasing it apart like that, I think it really clarified my thinking.

Knowledge@Wharton: In March, you looked at aiming higher in your work. You reported that happy people work more hours each week and they work more in their free time, too. I think that may seem like a paradox to some. How can that be?

Rubin: One of the reasons people are happy is that they like their work. If you like your work, you're more inclined to [do] it. I always think that a great sign of a person who's happy at work is talking shop. People who love their work love to talk shop. A lot of times people think that that's a negative and say, "Oh, you shouldn't be talking shop all the time." But the desire to talk shop shows that you're really very satisfied, you're really still engaged and even in your free time you want to talk about it. When I was in law, I never wanted to talk shop. Now I'm in writing, and I want to talk shop all the time. It's my favorite subject to talk about: writing or anything related to writing or publishing or books.

Happy people bring that enthusiasm with them. When we're unhappy, it's very easy to become self-focused. You become isolated and defensive, and you're preoccupied with your own problems because you're unhappy. When you're happy, you can turn out work. You have more emotional wherewithal to think about other things. Happy people naturally find it easier to focus on things outside themselves, like work or helping other people. Happy people are also more altruistic. They volunteer more time and give away more money. Part of that is because they feel they have the reserves so they can afford to turn outward and to think about other people and other people's problems.

Knowledge@Wharton: Tell us about how you made those resolutions and how you went through the process of sticking to them.

Rubin: I was very inspired by Benjamin Franklin who is one of the patron saints of the Happiness Project because he was this extraordinarily productive genius. He had this chart that he [created] with 13 virtues that he wanted to cultivate. They are very founding father-y virtues, like temperance and frugality. Every day, he would check off whether he had observed that virtue or not. I thought that seemed like a good system. I wanted some way to hold myself accountable and to keep reminding myself what my resolutions were. I have a resolutions chart, and I write down all my resolutions. Every night I check off whether I observed that resolution. At times, there's not an occasion for a resolution to be kept, so then I just leave it blank. Like "no gossip." Maybe I didn't have an occasion to gossip, so it wasn't that I gossiped or didn't gossip; I just spent the day alone.

I found this was a really helpful system. First of all, I held myself accountable, and I could see whether I was making progress. If I was consistently not making progress, then I would know it wasn't working. It also kept them uppermost in my mind. Sometimes with a resolution -- and I'm sure we've all experienced this -- you make a New Year's resolution and then you just forget about it. Every once in a while you're like, "Oh yeah, I was going to try to go to that yoga class; -- but you forget. This kept them very awake in my mind. It also helped me reward myself because, when you do something right, you want to feel like you're giving yourself a gold star. I am a total junkie for gold stars, so feeling like I am really making progress, I really am holding myself accountable and I'm making that forward progress is very reinforcing. Those are really helpful things about the resolution charts.

Knowledge@Wharton: In your next book, *Happier at Home*, you look at how to make a home a happier place. What made you embark on this particular Happiness Project?

Rubin: As with all my books, there's this crazy moment of epiphany when the lightning bolt comes out of the sky and hits me on the head. This time I was standing in my own kitchen unloading the dishwasher. My husband was in the next room watching golf on television, and my daughters were in there playing restaurant. I was hit by an intense wave of homesickness. I felt the way I did when I went away to summer camp for the first time, which was such a puzzling feeling, because why was I feeling homesick if I was just standing in the middle of my own kitchen? It was almost as if I had flashed forward 30 years and, from the future, was looking back with yearning at what I have right now, right here.

That got me to focus for the first time on home. With the Happiness Project, I had been doing all this research and writing, and I divided my happiness into these elements. But

somehow I had never focused on this idea of home. The minute I focused on it, because of this feeling of homesickness, I became overwhelmed with thinking, "Well, this is really the foundation." For me, and I think for so many people, so many of the essential elements of happiness come together in home. I really wanted to go deeper into this area and understand it better. Like what is wrapped up in our idea of home? You could be single, you could be married, you could be young, you could be old, you can be in so many different life circumstances, but this is something that is practically universal -- this idea of home. How could you be happier at home? I'm a big Laura Ingalls Wilder fan. I love children's literature. There's this wonderful line in one of the books where Carrie doesn't want to go home because she and Laura are in trouble. The writer observes, "There is no comfort anywhere for anyone who dreads to go home."

Knowledge@Wharton: You note that there are many happiness paradoxes. One, for example, is you accomplish more by working less.

Rubin: Yes.

Knowledge@Wharton: Or being very accessible sometimes makes it harder to connect with people.

Rubin: Yes.

Knowledge@Wharton: Can you talk a little bit about how you came to one or two of these paradoxes?

Rubin: I love aphorisms. I love the great essayists of the past where everybody could say something very concisely. The unpredictability of paradoxes helps people think and makes them more fun to try to puzzle through. One of my favorite ones -- and this is something that I can get away with because I'm not a scientist; a scientist could never use this paradox -- is "happiness doesn't always make you feel happy." Of course, a scientist couldn't say that because how could happiness not make you feel happy? How can subjective well-being not make you feel subjectively well being? But for someone like me, I can say that because I think we've all had the experience where we do something that we know makes us happy but at the same time doesn't make us happy.

For instance, I am a person who's very afraid to drive. I grew up driving because I grew up in Kansas City, Mo., and I've driven many times in my life. But now I live in New York City, and I could basically quit driving. For many years, I didn't drive. It eventually started to weigh on my mind, and I started feeling like I'm really becoming very afraid to drive. It was making me feel bad and feel constrained. I took driving lessons to make myself feel more confident. Now I drive once a week, and I do not like driving. I'm fine once I'm driving, but I really do not look forward to it. In a way, driving doesn't make me happy. But on the other hand, driving does make me happy.

Knowledge@Wharton: In writing about what takes away from our happiness, you identify three happiness leeches. Tell us about those.

Rubin: The three happiness leeches are the grouches, the slackers and the jerks. The grouches are the people who are persistently negative, who always see the dark side, who are pessimistic. I think that's the most common kind of happiness leech. Then there are the slackers. The slackers are the people who just don't pull their weight.

They make people unhappy because people feel it's not fair or they can't get their own work done because somebody else is asking: Can you give me a hand? Can I have just a minute? Can you answer just one more question? Those are the slackers.

I think more destructive to happiness is the jerk. The jerks are the people who are undermining, who take credit for other people's work, who are backstabbing, who are cruel, who gossip in an unkind way, who tease in a mean way. These are the people who really spread intense unhappiness. It's kind of helpful to have these categories in mind because you can say, well, when I'm around somebody, I seem to feel unhappy. Sometimes you don't even really understand why. When you [can identify a] grouch, slacker or jerk, then it kind of clarifies the situation.

Knowledge@Wharton: How would you recommend that others start their own Happiness Projects?

Rubin: There's no wrong way to do a Happiness Project. I think the thing to do if people want to start their own Happiness Project is to pick a few things. But they need to be concrete and manageable -- and by concrete, [I mean] something that you can actually measure and that you know whether you've done it or not. Sometimes people will make a resolution such as, "I want to get more fun out of life," or "I want to have more quality time with my family" or "I want to be more optimistic." Those are very abstract. It's hard to know if you're getting more fun out of life. It's hard to know if you're having more quality time with your family. What does that mean day to day? How do you measure it?

Think to yourself, what would it mean if I got more fun out of life? If I got more fun out of life, I would go to the park once a week with my dog and throw a Frisbee. Or I would sign up for a painting class, or I would read for fun for an hour every day after work. Think what would give you more fun out of life. Then, in a measurable way that you can see on your schedule, check off whether you did it or not. Same thing with quality time with your family. One thing we just started doing in our family, which is so fun, is we have game time. Every Saturday afternoon, we play games for an hour and drink cocoa. It's a very simple thing. My seven-year-old is the complete enforcer and marches around the house until we all have game time. But it's really nice. I know that I'm going to have an hour sitting and playing a board game with my family. For me, that's quality time.

When it's very measurable like that, it's easier to stick to it. I especially think it's helpful to start with your body. That may sound very basic, but so many people are chronically sleep deprived. So many people just don't get any exercise. When you don't get any exercise, you don't get enough sleep and it's hard to just have the energy to get through life. If you feel irritable, you feel exhausted, you feel indecisive, you get sick more easily. If you're thinking, where should I start, I don't know where to start, going to sleep on time and getting a 15- or 20-minute walk -- even if you can't do anything more -- is a great place to start. Beyond that, whatever it is you want to work on in your life, make it concrete and manageable.

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