

# The Happiness Project Summary

By Gretchen Rubin

The paradox of happiness is that the more you chase it, the more elusive it becomes. However, what lawyer turned author, Gretchen Rubin proposes in *The Happiness Project*, is that instead of searching for happiness, we become more open to life's joyful moments. We may find that, as Wordsworth once wrote, we're "surprised by joy."

*The Happiness Project* shows that you don't have to give your life a complete overhaul searching for happiness. It's the culmination of an idea – a year-long "Happiness Project," where Rubin dedicated each month to a theme, to allow more happiness into her life.

This stunt-genre-style book, chronicles the twelve-month adventure of test-driving the wisdom of the ages, historical lore, cutting-edge scientific research, lessons from popular culture, and good old common-sense about *how* to be happier.

Sidonie Colette said, 'What a wonderful life if only I had realized it sooner.' These words struck our author, and made her reflect deeply on her own happiness. She wondered how, if at all possible, she could invite more happiness into her life. Rubin had an epiphany on one rainy Tuesday afternoon in the unlikeliest of places (a city bus). She then realized that 'The days are long, but the years are short.' Sitting on the bus that day, she grasped two things: she wasn't as happy as she could be, and her life wasn't going to change unless she made it change.

We might think that happiness is subjective, and that everyone's pursuit

of happiness is different. So, how might someone else's "Happiness Project," apply to our life's journey? Rubin hopes that reading an account of her Happiness Project, will inspire us to start our own. And although everyone's Happiness Project will be unique, there's great value in learning about another's idiosyncratic path towards happiness. Rubin's primary concern is less to do with the age-old question, "what is happiness?" and more to do with the pragmatics around happiness. She suggests that we focus on what we can do daily, in our busy lives, to lay a foundation for more moments of happiness.

We'll briefly cover the basic steps of Gretchen Rubin's Happiness Project. And, because we *don't have all year*, we'll just explore three key lessons from the book. We'll look at the fundamentals of happiness, focusing on our vitality, and how social ties and spirituality help boost happiness. Furthermore, we'll delve into a wide range of traditions, from the familiar to the esoteric. By doing all of this, you'll be a step closer to answering your own questions about happiness and how to begin your Happiness Project.

## **Is It Possible to Make Ourselves Happier?**

Have you ever imagined winning the lottery? Have you ever thought how happy and fulfilled you'd be, and that all your problems would simply melt into oblivion?

Did you know that studies show that interesting and perhaps unexpected things happen to lottery winners? Their happiness levels may rise temporarily, but after the initial euphoria, they tend to drift back towards their happiness equilibrium?

The set-point theory posits that a person's basic level of happiness doesn't fluctuate much. The assumption here is that our subjective well-being (happiness) is determined primarily by heredity and by personality traits ingrained in us early in life. As a result, it remains relatively constant throughout our lives.

The set-point theory then begs the question of whether it's possible to get any happier, or are we just stuck with the happiness cards we've been dealt? Will some people always be more naturally cheerful than others? While it's evident that some people are naturally more ebullient or melancholic, science shows us that we *can* still boost our happiness within our own set-point range.

According to current research, when it comes to a person's basic level of happiness, genetics account for about 50%. Life circumstances, such as our income, marital status, and health account for 20%, and the remainder is determined by how we think and act. In other words, we have an inborn happiness disposition that sits within a particular range. Still, we *can* push ourselves to the top of our happiness range, or push ourselves down to the bottom of a happiness range, depending on how we think and act.

When it comes to our happiness set-point, our thinking and actions can potentially help us set a new norm.

## **Now for the Second Question; What Is Happiness?**

This is a perennial question that we've been asking ourselves, and Rubin suggests it's for us to decide, or better yet, *experience*.

Of course there's merit to defining terms precisely. One positive psychology study identified *fifteen* different academic definitions for "happiness." However, when it came down to the wire, spending time and energy exploring the distinctions between terms such as, "positive affect," "subjective well-being," "hedonism," and the myriad of other definitions seemed pointless to our author. Rubin didn't want to get sidetracked and go down a rabbit hole of terminology.

Instead, our author decided to settle for the familiar catchphrase, 'I'll know it when I see it.' The great Jazz artist Louis Armstrong said, 'if you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never know.' Don't ask, listen! Language has its limitations, especially when it hopes to capture the essence of such a highly personal experience like happiness. Rubin believes that there are no startling secrets to happiness that we don't already know. The great truths about happiness have already been laid out by the most brilliant minds, both past, and present. After all, as Alfred Whitehead said, 'Everything important has been said before.'

It's also worth noting that, according to our author, the opposite of happiness isn't depression. Depression is a grave condition that deserves urgent attention and occupies its own category, separate from happiness and unhappiness. However, addressing the causes and remedies of depression is beyond the scope of this particular book.

Rubin began her project by figuring out exactly how to make herself happy. This process is where she likens the pursuit of happiness to dieting. Intuitively we all know the secrets of dieting, "eat less and exercise more," but it's the practice of these "truths" and consistency that becomes the ultimate challenge.

Hence, the challenge is *how* to put happiness ideas into practice in our everyday life.

## **The Wisdom of a Chart-Keeping Approach**

How many resolutions do you set each year, and which do you actually stick to?

If you're like our author, and 44% of Americans, you make New Year's resolutions and don't keep them for long.

If we want to follow through with our good intentions, we need to set concrete goals, keep a "resolution chart," and track our progress. Just stipulating something abstract like, "be healthier," isn't going to cut it. Here's where virtuous leaders like Benjamin Franklin, and the latest scientific research on goal setting and happiness, can help us with our Happiness Project resolutions. Franklin used to identify virtues he wanted to cultivate, and each day would write up his "virtues chart," rating himself as to how well he had performed that day on each criterion. Research shows that we perform better when we separate our goals into measurable and visible actions.

### **'On Your Charts, Get Set, Go!'**

Research taught Rubin that an essential element of happiness is social connection. Therefore she resolved to tackle "Marriage," "Parenthood," and "Friends." Work and leisure are also crucial to happiness, so she included the categories "Work," "Play," and "Passion." Then she added "Money" to the list. Although we've been told that we can't buy

happiness, managing finances effectively, and investing in experiences or material things, can bring us bouts of joy. She also learned that happiness depends a great deal on our perspective, so she added "Eternity" and "Attitude" to her list. Finally, central to our happiness is "Health," so Rubin dedicated January to the month of "Vitality."

However, it's all well and good writing down a list of goals; the difficulty is sticking to them. Hence, Rubin got specific and charted precisely what it was that she'd be expecting from herself. After she identified areas to work on, she then came up with happiness-boosting resolutions that were concrete and measurable. So for January, "get more sleep" was one of her vitality action items.

Inspired by the Benjamin Franklin "chart-keeping method," Ruben designed her version of a scoring chart system. She created a calendar where she could record all her happiness-related "action-items" and gave herself a daily tick for good, or a cross for bad, next to each resolution.

Now that we're up to date with the why and how, behind starting a happiness project, let's dive into some key insights around what we might want to do to invite a little more happiness into our lives.

## **Do You Need an Energy Boost?**

Rubin kick-started her year by dedicating the month of January to boosting her vitality. Health and energy are essential elements of life satisfaction. Being happy energizes us, and at the same time, having more energy makes it easier for us to engage in activities. As we know from *Eat Move Sleep*, sleep, exercise and diet are the basic requirements

for energy.

So on January's "to-do" list, Rubin's action items included: "go to sleep earlier" and "exercise better." While these may seem to be common sense, they're not always "common practice."

How often do we tell ourselves that we'll go for a run, only to *run* out of energy when the time comes to put on our running shoes?

Rather than set strenuous targets, setting smaller targets like a daily ten-minute walk can boost energy levels. If you want to take it "one-step" further, getting in 10 thousand steps a day has been shown to increase energy levels effectively. To that end, Rubin got herself a pedometer and started keeping track of her daily steps, which helped her to feel more energized, motivated, and conscious of moving throughout the day.

Just as it's crucial to turn the dial up on what might boost energy, we also need to turn our attention to what depletes energy. For Rubin, outer clutter caused her to feel mentally cluttered. So "toss, restore and organize" became a significant part of her January routine.

How many "to-do" tasks have you yet to tick off? Just the thought of one uncompleted item can create stress. Did you know that our brains tend to remember unfinished or interrupted tasks better than completed tasks? The scientific term for this is called the "Zeigarnik effect." Owing to the Zeigarnik effect, our brains nag us about those unfinished tasks, even the ones we wanted to start years ago, which can drain our mental energy reserves.

Why not dedicate a month to clear up mental space to declutter the

physical and digital spaces we inhabit? Begin by sorting through household junk and emails, then complete those nagging but necessary to-do tasks. Finally, accept that there are tasks that we might never complete. Cross those off the list and say goodbye to them. This way, we clear up mental energy for things that really matter, like time with loved ones.

This brings us to the next lesson, the importance of relationships.

## **Harmonious Relationships Are Key to Happiness**

The following month, Rubin's goals revolved around a more loving mindset. Diving into research on relationships, Rubin realized two key insights. The first is, 'you can't change your partner, you can only change yourself,' and secondly, 'what you do every day matters more than what you do once in a while.'

So February's action items included things such as "quit nagging," "fight right," and "give proofs of love."

The "no nagging" rule might sound simple. However, it took a considerable amount of focus for Rubin to be more intentional, and aware of how her words and actions affected her relationships. But it worked. For example, rather than force her husband to take out the trash with a rude, accusatory tone, she simply uttered a neutral, one-word reminder like, "garbage." This instantly lifted her mood and reduced unnecessary stress that came from nagging.

In terms of "fight right," Rubin made a conscious effort to see the "light in a fight." Fights with our significant other are often charged with negative



energy, but Rubin wanted to change that. If an argument was brewing, she decided to fight with an intention that would benefit both her and her husband. She chose to compromise where she could, and when possible, even laughed. Research shows that our brains cling to negative experiences and feelings more easily and deeply than positive ones. In any relationship, it takes about five positive actions to correct one negative one. Bearing this in mind, trying to reduce unnecessary negative actions and feelings, and make room for positive experiences, helps strengthen our relationships.

Rubin wanted to show her appreciation for her husband through random acts of kindness to create room for more positive experiences. These were small and simple, and came without expecting anything in return. According to our author, "everyday niceties" matter more than big gifts once a year.

On the note of buying gifts, this brings us to whether money can buy happiness?

## **Spending Money Thoughtfully, and in the Right Way, Can Boost Happiness**

One of Rubin's revelations from her Happiness Project, is that most people don't spend *enough* time thinking about how money can buy them some happiness. The idea that money can buy happiness is a controversial one, but worth unpacking.

She says, 'When money or health is a problem, you think of little else; when it's not a problem, you don't think much about it.' Some of our

biggest worries include financial anxiety and job insecurity. But what if, alongside our financial fears, we developed a proactive approach to how we spend our money? Rubin believes, whether rich or poor, the choices we make about how we spend money, can either boost or undermine our happiness.

Sometimes we might need to spend small sums of money in order to achieve our desired happiness outcomes. For example, Rubin spent money on a party for her sister, to foster sisterly bonds. On another occasion, she unashamedly purchased a pricey food processor, which she has happily used ever since to make healthy fruit shakes for herself and her family.

Knowing what not to buy is just as important as knowing what to buy. Ever heard of the "gym-membership effect?" It's how most gyms make money. People purchase expensive gym memberships hoping that this financial incentive will get them to work out more. But this doesn't always *work out*. Often people lose motivation and feel guilty, not just about *not* exercising, but due to having paid so much for a gym membership in the first place.

So it's essential to be mindful of how we spend our money. The thrill of impulsive, meaningless purchases is often short-lived. But a wise purchase that aligns with a larger, more meaningful goal, might just make us happier in the long-run.

## **In Conclusion**

The core message behind Rubin's book is that happiness might be different for all of us, but we're all capable of boosting our own happiness.

As with all projects, happiness takes time, effort, and attention to detail. We begin the project by choosing to get started. Then we learn to recognize what makes us happy. This is where we write a list and reflect on what truly matters to us. Once we've done this, we can begin to take concrete steps towards making those things happen. Rubin covers a variety of areas, and related happiness action plans that offer us a blueprint to chart our own happiness project.

As you decide what happiness-boosting tasks to undertake, remember the cliché about life being a journey, and not the final destination. The journey is what really counts.

So why not get out those magic markers and glitter, and add some much-needed sparkle to your very own Happiness Project?