



HAPPINESS *starts at* HOME

Can a life-changing resolution happen in your own living room? In her new book Happier At Home, the bestselling US self-help writer Gretchen Rubin puts it to the test

home, I have come to realise, is the foundation of happiness. It is where I walk through the door without ringing the bell; where I make a tuna and apple sandwich without worrying about the strangeness of the combination; where I rifle through the post. I have always wanted home to be a place of safety, comfort and love, but it hasn't always felt as homey as I'd like. So I spent nine months testing various tips and documenting them, to try to make

my home a happier place. I considered its different aspects – from relationships to possessions, time to neighbourhood – and looked at how I could make it a more joyful place. I realise now that an important way to boost your happiness is to address your home (and I don't mean hanging pictures or replacing that kitchen table – mindfulness and self-knowledge are more important). So consider these life-changing resolutions and see how small changes can have great effects. ►

Possessions: “Keep an empty shelf and a junk drawer”

When I know exactly where to find the things I'm looking for, I have the comforting sense of being more in control of my life generally. If that's an illusion, it's a helpful illusion. So shelf by shelf, then drawer by drawer, I slowly evaluated every possession in my home. I asked myself, “Do we use this thing? Do we love it?” If not, I got rid of it. However, more than just taking on a process of ‘de-cluttering’, I recognised the important difference between something that wasn't used and something that was useless. Junk – in its place – has significance in a real home, while an empty shelf holds the promise of space and opportunity. Both are happiness-boosting feelings, so cultivate them.

Marriage: “Kiss in the morning, kiss at night”

Experts advise parents to establish routines to provide children with a feeling of order and connection, but adults need these things, too. By kissing my husband every morning and every night, I made sure we were actually paying attention to each other. Also, by acting more loving I made myself *feel* more loving and, at the same time, made him feel more loved. Of course, there's great benefit to any ritual that reminds us to express our affection to the people we love – but it's the easiest thing to forget to do. Making something regular, rather than sporadic, will set it in stone.

“Making a joke in a tense situation can really ease the pressure”

Parenthood: “Under-react to a problem”

Be it nail polish spilled on the rug, a missing pair of glasses or a computer crash, I found that by responding to problems (big and small) in as serene a way as I could, I created a much calmer atmosphere. One of the most effective ways to help me under-react was to have a sense of humour. I'm not saying it wasn't horribly tricky (because who can smile when they're irritated?), but making a joke in a tense situation can really ease the pressure. Under-reacting to a problem was a much nicer response than yelling, for me and for my teenage daughters. Speaking calmly and hanging on to my sense of proportion made it easier for me to think clearly and certainly made it easier to be around me.

Time: “Suffer for 15 minutes”

I was haunted by the massive trove of family photos stored on my computer and in my phone. I loved them and I wanted to put them in albums, but it seemed so formidable a task that I kept putting it off. Finally, I decided to suffer for 15 minutes. Every day, for just a quarter of an hour, I'd work on my digital



photos. It took me a few months, but now I have three giant photo albums sitting on my shelf. We often overestimate what we can do in a short amount of time (say, one afternoon), and underestimate what we can do over the long term, if we do just a little bit at a time. Any dreaded task – from cleaning the oven to filing bills and receipts – can be tackled if you do it in chapters of 15 minutes.

Family: “Plan little surprises”

Intriguingly, we react more strongly to unexpected pleasures than expected ones. Whether it's a pound coin found on the street or a compliment from a boss, not only do these little boosts make us happier, but they also make us temporarily smarter, friendlier and more productive. So I made a promise to plan more little surprises for my family, from an impromptu tidy-up that I knew would make my husband smile to throwing ‘practice birthdays’ for my daughters with mini-cupcakes and candles. I also made sure I updated my parents and in-laws with snippets of news about their granddaughters more often – emailing them photos and passing on sweet remarks. They were thrilled, and so was I. These tiny out-of-the-blue surprises contributed a great deal to the happiness of our home. ●