

# How I made my home a *happier* place

Her year-long experiment, *The Happiness Project*, became a bestselling book about how to live a better life. Now author Gretchen Rubin has turned her attention to her home – setting out to make it a happier place for all the family. Here she shares what she learned...

It was an ordinary afternoon and I was unloading the dishwasher when I had an epiphany. Standing in my kitchen – my husband, Jamie, and my two daughters in the next room – I was hit by this sudden wave of homesickness. What was that about? I realised it was caused by my feeling that life was rushing by, and that sooner than seemed possible my two girls wouldn't live here any more. That surprising emotion got me thinking about our home and the minute I did, I realised it is the foundation of my happiness.

A couple of years earlier I'd spent 12 months test-driving different theories about happiness, and written a book about what I'd discovered called *The Happiness Project*. Now I decided I wanted to delve deeper into the space I lived in and my relationships within it. For the next nine months (the school year) I'd strive to make my home more home-y by setting myself some simple resolutions. The questions I asked myself were: What was and wasn't working for me and my family? How could I create the atmosphere I wanted in our home?

I decided to make resolutions focusing on my possessions, my marriage to Jamie, my relationship with my two girls – Eliza, then 11, and Eleanor, then five – our wider family and neighbourhood. Eventually I came up with 33 of them. I wasn't just thinking in terms of what I wanted to improve – it was also about turning the focus outward and making sure I was paying attention to, even savouring, what

*'The project was about paying attention to, even savouring, what was going on around me'*



Home is where the happiness is: Gretchen Rubin spent nine months creating a fun and loving atmosphere

was going on around me. This project would be my effort to stop the days from passing me by unnoticed.

I knew from when I was working on *The Happiness Project* that my goals needed to be tangible and measurable so I could ask myself at the end of each day, did I do it? More than anything, they needed to be manageable – almost all my resolutions were challenges that wouldn't take much time or money.

Unfortunately, while it's fun to make a resolution, it's hard to keep one. Something like 44% of people make New Year's [CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

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Now the nine months are over and I've written a book about the experience called *Happier At Home*. I'm surprised once again by how much these little changes really do transform the experience of life. I also realised I'd been learning the same lesson over and over again: my home is a reflection of me. I have to be the kind of person I want to see reflected. If I want my home to be light-hearted and calm, I have to be light-hearted and calm. A happy home isn't a place I can furnish but an attitude of mind.

## HERE'S WHAT I LEARNT

These are the resolutions that made the most difference to my life, and could help yours, too!

### Go shelf by shelf

One of the things that really surprised me is the degree that outer order contributes to inner calm. It matters more than it should – there's something about getting control of all that stuff that makes you feel more in control of your life. For me, fighting clutter is a never-ending battle. I resolved to go round our home looking at everything we owned. As I went from shelf to shelf I asked myself: Do we use it? Do we love it? As I sorted and chucked I had a great boost of energy.

### Go on an adventure

My 13-year-old daughter, Eliza, is at an age where she's more interested in her friends than when she was younger. Add to that more homework demands and I was starting to feel like we didn't have enough quiet time together any more. So we made a resolution that once a week we'd go on an excursion, just the two of us – no pressure, no errands, no nagging! Sometimes we went to a museum, others we just took a walk. It gave us time to talk about what's important to her and now we have these shared memories. It feels like we're future-proofing our relationship.

Regularly showing affection will make you feel closer



### Give warm greetings and farewells

When my daughters were little, they'd greet my husband, Jamie, and me with great excitement whenever they saw us. More recently though, they were barely looking up from their book or game and it made me a little sad. So I proposed that whenever one of us was coming or going we all paid attention to that person. To my surprise, it quickly became a habit and, as a result, we had moments of real connection every day, changing the atmosphere in our home to a more loving one.

### Celebrate special breakfasts

Family traditions mark time in a positive way and give a sense of anticipation and continuity. I love them, but I hate the fuss that big celebrations tend to call for – Christmas is a season I look forward to with anticipation and dread. But celebrating St Valentine's Day or St Patrick's Day with a special breakfast is more manageable. For Valentine's, for example, I dye the milk pink, cut the toast into heart shapes and scatter heart-shaped sweets and decorations on the table. It's festive, it's relaxed – and it's not burdensome on the person organising it!

*'I wanted to make my home more home-y'*

### Kiss in the morning, kiss at night

Unsurprisingly, research shows that kissing eases stress and helps couples feel closer, so I resolved to kiss Jamie before I got out of bed in the morning and at bedtime. It felt a bit preposterous at first to have a schedule but I found that, by acting more loving, I felt more loving. □



All together now: shared experiences build relationships