



A conversation with Gretchen Rubin, author of
Better Than Before:
Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives
(Crown, On Sale March 17, 2015)

Q) You call habits the “invisible architecture of our everyday lives.” Can you explain what you mean by that?

A) Studies suggest that we repeat about 40 percent of our behavior almost daily. So if we change our habits, we change our lives. But of course, that just raises the question: okay, then, how do we change our habits? That’s the absolutely fascinating question that I address in BETTER THAN BEFORE.

Q) Unlike most habit-formation experts, you emphasize that the most important step in changing a habit is to know *yourself*. Why is this so important?

A) There’s no shortage of expert advice about how to change your habits. Start small! Do it first thing in the morning! Reward yourself! Be moderate! But while it would be terrific to discover some magic answer, the fact is—as we all know from tough experience—there’s no one-size-fits-all solution.

I studied the many strategies we can use to change our habits, and I uncovered the *secret* to changing our habits: *To change our habits, we first have to know ourselves*. When we identify key aspects of our nature, we can tailor a habit to suit our particular idiosyncrasies, and that way, we set ourselves up for success. In BETTER THAN BEFORE, I talk about the many strategies for habit change, and show how various strategies work better or worse for different people, given their diverse natures.

Q) How is this book different from other books about habit change?

A) There are so many fascinating books about habits! Many habit experts focus on one approach to habit change; I concluded that many different strategies exist.

I wanted to come up with a unified framework that included every single strategy that I saw that worked. I identified *twenty-one*! That’s a lot—which is good. Because there are so many strategies, each of us can choose the ones that appeal most to us. One person does better by starting small; someone else, by starting big. One person does better going public with his habit; someone else, by keeping her habit private.

Along the same lines, I developed a vocabulary that we can share to talk about our habits. I’m a big believer in the idea that once we have a term for something, it’s easier to think and act on it. So if you know that you’re using the strategy of Pairing to keep a habit, or that you’re invoking the Lack-of-control Loophole in order to break it, it’s easier to spot such behavior in yourself.

The ideas I cover will be familiar to anyone interested in habits. I’ve pulled a lot of disparate strands together, to show how they interrelate. Also, in my study of happiness, I’d made a long list of questions about habits, and I set out to answer them all:

- Perhaps it’s understandable why it’s hard to form a habit we *don’t* enjoy, but why is it hard to form a habit we *do* enjoy?
- Sometimes people acquire habits overnight, and sometimes they drop longtime habits just as abruptly. Why?
- Why do some people dread and resist habits, while others adopt them eagerly?
- Why do so many successful dieters regain their lost weight, plus more?
- Why are people so often unmoved by the consequences of their habits? For instance, one-third to one-half of U.S. patients don’t take medicine prescribed for a chronic illness.

- Do the same strategies work for changing simple habits (wearing a seat belt) and for complex habits (drinking less)?
- Why is it that sometimes, though we're very anxious—even desperate—to change a habit, we can't? A friend told me, "I have health issues, and I feel lousy when I eat certain foods. But I eat them anyway."

I was determined to figure out the answers.

Q) You've concluded that the way that people respond to expectations is a key question for habit change. And according to your Four Tendencies framework, people generally fall into one of four groups: Upholders, Questioners, Obligers, and Rebels. Why is it important that we know which group we're in?

A) When we try to form a new habit, we set an expectation for ourselves. Therefore, *it's crucial to understand how we respond to expectations*. We face two kinds of expectations: *outer expectations* (meet work deadlines, observe traffic regulations) and *inner expectations* (stop napping, keep a New Year's resolution).

Upholders respond readily to both outer expectations and inner expectations. "I do what others expect of me—and what I expect from myself."

Questioners question all expectations. They meet an expectation only if they believe it's reasonable (effectively, making it an inner expectation). "I do what I think is best, according to my judgment. I won't do something that doesn't make sense."

Obligers respond readily to outer expectations but struggle to meet inner expectations. "I don't like to let others down, but I often let myself down."

Rebels resist all expectations, outer and inner alike. "I want to do what I want, in my own way. If you tell me to do it, I'm *less* likely to do it."

Once we know our Tendency, we have a better idea of what habit-change strategy will work for us. For instance, Upholders do especially well with the Strategy of Scheduling, Questioners with the Strategy of Clarity, Obligers with the Strategy of Accountability, and Rebels with the Strategy of Identity.

Q) Most of us would like to improve our eating habits but it can be really tough! What are some habit-changing strategies you'd recommend for those seeking to make a change?

A) There are many strategies to try.

1. **Clean Slate.** A new situation makes it much easier to change habits. If you move to a new city, change jobs or schools, or have a new routine, take advantage of the clean slate. New job? Start taking your lunch to work.
2. **Abstaining.** For some people—but not everyone—moderation is too tough; it's *easier* to give up something altogether. For Abstainers, it's far easier to eat *no* cookies than *one* cookie.
3. **Convenience and Inconvenience.** Make it easy to eat right and hard to eat wrong. Keep healthy snacks in your desk so you don't use the vending machine. Store the crackers on a high shelf.
4. **Monitoring.** Keep track of what you eat: how many cups of cereal, how many slices of pizza. Don't eat out of a container. Decide how much you want to eat, and put it on your plate—and no seconds. I eat almonds out of pre-measured bags.

5. **Safeguards.** Anticipate temptation and decide *in advance* how to handle it. What will you eat at the birthday party? On vacation? If Aunt Bertha serves her famous mac and cheese?
6. **Pairing.** Only eat X when you're doing Y. Only eat when sitting at a table. Only eat a croissant after you finish an exam.

Q) Why does it matter if you tailor a habit to suit your own nature?

A) Say you're a person who wants to exercise more. We've all heard the advice to exercise first thing in the morning: mornings are predictable, cross it off the to-do list, get the mood and energy boost all day. No problem, right? Wrong. That advice works for Larks, people who wake up with energy, but not for Owls, who barely manage to get up in time for school or work. My Owl sister runs on a treadmill after she puts her four-year-old to bed at night. If she tried to get up at 6:00 a.m. to run, she'd never do it. If you try to change a habit in a way that's incompatible with your nature, you won't succeed for long.

Q) What is the most surprising thing you found in your research?

A) I've been very surprised by how accurate my Four Tendencies framework has turned out to be. It really is useful in figuring out how to communicate with someone effectively about changing a habit.

It's particularly helpful for Obligers. *The key for Obligers is external accountability.* They need deadlines, late fees, a friend who'll be disappointed if they don't show up, a teacher who will notice if they skip class, their own duty to be a good role model for someone else. With external accountability, Obligers do a terrific job of keeping their habits; without it, they struggle. Over and over, people have said to me, "Now that I know I'm an Obliger, I've figured out how to give myself external accountability, and for the first time, I'm managing to go to the gym/paint regularly/take my medication." For instance, one Obliger said, "I love to read, but I could never take time for myself; other people's needs always come first. For years, I tried to work on my self-esteem and sticking to my own priorities, and it never worked. Once I realized I need accountability from other people, I joined a book club where I'm *really* expected to read the book. So now I read, and I love it."

Q) Do any strategies seem to produce particularly dramatic results?

A) One strategy that has proved hugely helpful to some people is the Strategy of Abstaining. Some people are Abstainers, some are Moderators. Abstainers find it easier to give something up altogether than to indulge in moderation. Moderators do better when they indulge in moderation. Because our culture holds up moderation as the ideal, people often persist in trying to act like Moderators, even when it doesn't work for them. It was a huge relief to me to discover that I'm an Abstainer. I've written about it often on my blog, and I've heard from so many people who say, "Once I read that you're an Abstainer, I realized that I'm one, too, and I've had so much better success." Forty pounds, sixty pounds . . . people have seen huge results.

For Abstainers, this approach works for anything where we feel like we're out of control. Food and technology seem to be common things to tackle. A friend had to quit the word-game app Ruzzle altogether. She couldn't play it a little bit.

Q) You've talked to so many people about the habits they want to change. Which habits do people want to tackle most often?

A) From what I've observed, people want to change the habits that fall into the Essential Seven:

1. Eat and drink more healthfully (give up sugar, eat more vegetables, drink less alcohol).
2. Exercise regularly.
3. Save, spend, and earn wisely (save regularly, pay down debt, donate to worthy causes, stick to a budget).

4. Rest, relax, and enjoy (stop watching TV in bed, turn off a cell phone, spend time in nature, cultivate silence, get enough sleep, spend less time in the car).
5. Accomplish more, stop procrastinating (practice an instrument, work without interruption, learn a language, maintain a blog).
6. Simplify, clear, clean, and organize (make the bed, file regularly, put keys away in the same place, recycle).
7. Engage more deeply in relationships—with other people, with God, with the world (call friends, volunteer, have more sex, spend more time with family, attend religious services).

Of course, the same habit can satisfy different needs. A morning walk in the park might be a form of exercise (#2), a way to rest and enjoy (#4), or, in the company of a friend, a way to engage more deeply in a relationship (#7). The list of the Essential Seven shows the values that people most want to bring into their lives. Changing habits isn't about crossing items off our to-do list. It's about creating the life that makes us feel freer and happier.

Q) You say that strategies can help us change our habits and that there are four that tower about the others: Monitoring, Foundation, Scheduling, and Accountability. Can you briefly explain each strategy and how they help set us up for success?

A) **Monitoring:** Monitoring has an almost uncanny power. We do better with just about every kind of behavior when we monitor it. Wear a pedometer, walk more. Keep count of how many cookies you're eating, you'll stop eating sooner.

Foundation: Some habits strengthen the foundation of all our habits, because they protect us from getting so physically taxed or mentally frazzled that we can't manage ourselves. So it's helpful to give special attention to habits that help us to:

1. sleep
2. move
3. eat and drink right
4. unclutter

Foundation habits tend to reinforce each other—for instance, exercise helps people sleep, and sleep helps people do everything better—so they're a good place to start for any kind of habit change. And weirdly, Foundation habits sometimes make profound change possible. A friend once told me, "I cleaned out my fridge, and now I feel like I can switch careers." I knew *exactly* what she meant.

Scheduling: Setting a specific, regular time for an activity to recur is one of the most familiar and powerful strategies of habit formation. Scheduling makes us far more likely to convert an activity into a habit, so for that reason, I schedule even some slightly ridiculous habits, such as "Kiss my husband every morning and every night."

Habits grow strongest and fastest when they're repeated in predictable ways, and for most of us, putting an activity on the schedule tends to lock us into doing it. However, Scheduling does *not* work for Rebels! They hate to feel caged by a schedule. They will keep a habit-like behavior more successfully if it's *not* on the schedule.

Accountability: Accountability means that we face consequences for what we're doing—even if that consequence is merely the fact that someone else is monitoring us.

If we believe that someone's watching, we behave differently. Deadlines help us keep the habit of working. Late fees help us pay our bills on time. Grades help us study. Attendance records help us get our children to school on time. When we believe that we may be held accountable for our actions—even when we're accountable only to *ourselves*—we show more self-command.

Q) What is the best piece of advice you'd offer someone who's tried to change a habit before and failed?

A) Think about *yourself*, what you're like, what appeals to you, when you've succeeded in the

past. When you craft a habit to suit your particular idiosyncrasies, you set yourself up for success.

Also, look for opportunity. BETTER THAN BEFORE helps you notice when you're in a good spot to try to change a habit. For instance, if you move or start a new job or new relationship, that's a great time to start a habit. If someone around you is making a positive change, try to latch on. If an idea catches your imagination, allow your habits to follow. People think that habits are very hard to change, and they are. But they can also be oddly *easy* to change if you're on the watch for opportunities!

Q) What do you hope readers will take away from BETTER THAN BEFORE?

A) Most of us have one or two habits that, if changed, would make a big difference in our lives. In many cases, we've already tried and failed to change that habit.

My hope is that readers will get lots of ideas about how to tackle those key habits, and feel excited to make the change—because it will really seem *possible*. When we change our habits, we change our lives.

* * * * *

To schedule an interview with Gretchen Rubin contact:
Sarah Breivogel; sbreivogel@penguinrandomhouse.com; 212-572-2722