



Dr Bruce Wells
the happiness expert

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THE HAPPINESS PROJECT

What the Book is about in a Nutshell

Gretchen Rubin is a writer and former law clerk who spent a year conducting her own exploration into happiness by "test-driving the wisdom of the ages, current scientific studies, and lessons from popular culture about how to be happy" over a 12-month period. She devoted her full energies each month to exploring and living a particular happiness factor such as vitality, work, marriage, leisure, friendship, money, eternity, and attitude.

A "happiness project" is an approach to changing your life. First is the preparation stage, when you identify what brings you joy, satisfaction, and engagement, and also what brings you guilt, anger, boredom, and remorse. Second is the making of resolutions, when you identify the concrete actions that will boost your happiness. Then comes the interesting part: keeping your resolutions. This book is the story of Rubin's happiness project.

Rubin decided to devote a year to her happiness when one April day she had a sudden realization: "I was in danger of wasting my life. As I stared out the rain-spattered window of a city bus, I saw that the years were slipping by. "What do I want from life, anyway?" I asked myself. "Well... I want to be happy." But I had never thought about what made me happy or how I might be happier." She wanted to appreciate her life more and live up to it better. In response to people who believe that it is self-centred to focus on one's own happiness she researched that happy people are more altruistic, more productive, more helpful, more likable, more creative, more resilient, more interested in others, friendlier, and healthier. Happy people make better friends, colleagues, and citizens. Thus, not only would she become happier but so would others around her.

JANUARY: Boost Energy (vitality)

1. Go to sleep earlier.

Sleep deprivation impairs memory, weakens the immune system, slows metabolism, and might, some studies suggest, foster weight gain.

2. Exercise better.

People who exercise are healthier, think more clearly, sleep better, and have delayed onset of dementia. Regular exercise boosts energy levels. Just by exercising twenty minutes a day three days a week for six weeks, persistently tired people boosted their energy. People who work out with weights maintain more muscle and gain less fat as they age. Also, as a minimum of activity for good health, people should aim to take 10,000 steps a day.

3. Toss, restore, organize.

One study suggested that eliminating clutter would cut down the amount of housework in the average home by 40 percent. Rubin classified clutter into several categories: nostalgic, conservation, bargain, freebie, crutch, aspirational, and buyer's remorse.

4. Tackle a nagging task.

An important aspect of happiness is managing your moods, and studies show that one of the best ways to lift your mood is to engineer an easy success, such as tackling a long-delayed chore.

5. Act more energetic.

Although we presume that we act because of the way we feel, in fact we often feel because of the way we act. And so 'faking it till you feel it' can work.

FEBRUARY: Remember Love (marriage)

Marital satisfaction drops substantially after the first child arrives. The disruptive presence of new babies and teenagers, in particular, puts a lot of pressure on marriages. Marriage expert John Gottman calls the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" for their destructive role in relationships: stonewalling, defensiveness, criticism, and contempt. The most common sources of conflict among couples are money, work, sex, communication, religion, children, in-laws, appreciation, and leisure activities.

1. Quit nagging.

Studies show that the quality of a couple's friendship determines, in large part, whether they feel satisfied with their marriage's romance and passion, and nothing kills the feeling of friendship (and passion) more than nagging.

2. Don't expect praise or appreciation.

3. Fight right.

Research shows that how a couple fights matters more than how much they fight. Couples who fight right: tackle only one difficult topic at a time, instead of indulging in arguments that cover every grievance since the first date; they ease into arguments instead of blowing up immediately— and avoid bombs such as "You never..." and "You always..."; they know how to bring an argument to an end, instead of keeping it going for hours; they make "repair attempts" by using words or actions to keep bad feelings from escalating; they recognize other pressures imposed on a spouse.

In marriage, it's less important to have many pleasant experiences than it is to have fewer unpleasant experiences, because people have a "negativity bias" our reactions to bad events are faster, stronger, and stickier than our reactions to good events. It takes at least five positive marital actions to offset one critical or destructive action, so one way to strengthen a marriage is to make sure that the positive far outweighs the negative.

4. No dumping.

Happiness has a particularly strong influence in marriage, because spouses pick up each other's moods so easily. A 30 percent increase in one spouse's happiness boosts the other spouse's happiness, while a drop in one spouse's happiness drags the other down.

5. Give proofs of love.

Whatever love you might feel in your heart, others will see only your actions. People are 47 percent more apt to feel close to a family member who often expresses affection than to one who rarely does. If you want to know how people would like to be treated, it's more helpful to look at how they themselves act than what they say. One way to make sure that you're paying attention to your spouse is to spend time alone together.

MARCH: Aim Higher (work)

Happy people work more hours each week— and they work more in their free time, too. They tend to be more cooperative, less self-centered, and more willing to help other people— say, by sharing information or pitching in to help a colleague— and then, because they've helped others, others tend to help them. Also, they work better with others, because people prefer to be around happier people, who are also less likely to show the counterproductive behaviors of burnout, absenteeism, counter- and nonproductive work, work disputes, and retaliatory behavior than are less happy people. Happier people also make more effective leaders. Also, work can be a source of many of the elements necessary for a happy life: the atmosphere of growth, social contact, fun, a sense of purpose, self-esteem, recognition.

1. Launch a blog.

One reason that challenge brings happiness is that it allows you to expand your self-definition. You become larger. Suddenly you can do yoga or make homemade beer or speak a decent amount of Spanish. Research shows that the more elements make up your identity, the less threatening it is when any one element is threatened.

2. Enjoy the fun of failure.

It's fun to fail. It's part of being ambitious; it's part of being creative. If something is worth doing, it's worth doing badly.

3. Ask for help.

4. Work smart.

5. Enjoy now.

The "arrival fallacy" is the belief that when you arrive at a certain destination, you'll be happy. The arrival fallacy is a fallacy because, though you may anticipate great happiness in arrival, arriving rarely makes you as happy as you anticipate. First of all, by the time you've arrived at your destination, you're expecting to reach it, so it has already been incorporated into your happiness. Also, arrival often brings more work and responsibility. The challenge, therefore, is to take pleasure in the "atmosphere of growth," in the gradual progress made toward a goal, in the present.

APRIL: Lighten Up (parenthood)

1. Sing in the morning.

While mornings set the tone for everyone's days, they also tend to be stressful as adults try to get themselves organized while also chivvying their children to get ready – act the way you want to feel.

2. Acknowledge the reality of people's feelings.

Much of children's frustration comes not from being forced to do this or that but rather from the sheer fact that they're being ignored. Strategies you can use to help show your children that you are acknowledging their feelings: write down what they say in front of them, give them a cuddle, don't say "no" or "stop" (studies show that 85 percent of adult messages to children are negative—"no," "stop," "don't"—so it's worth trying to keep that to a minimum. Instead of saying, "No, not until after lunch," I try to say, "Yes, as soon as we've finished lunch"), admit to the child that the task is difficult.

3. Be a treasure house of happy memories.

Studies show that recalling happy times helps boost happiness in the present. When people reminisce, they focus on positive memories, with the result that recalling the past amplifies the positive and minimizes the negative. However, because people remember events better when they fit with their present mood, happy people remember happy events better, and depressed people remember sad events better. Depressed people have as many nice experiences as other people—they just don't recall them as well.

Family traditions are important here as they make occasions feel special and exciting. They mark the passage of time in a happy way. They provide a sense of anticipation, security, and continuity. Studies show that family traditions support children's social development and strengthen family cohesiveness. They provide connection and predictability, which people—especially children—crave.

4. Take time for projects.

A key to happiness is squeezing out as much happiness as possible from a happy event. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross describes five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. By contrast, Rubin believes that happiness has four stages. To eke out the most happiness from an experience, we must anticipate it, savour it as it unfolds, express happiness, and recall a happy memory. Children help us relearn how to savour a happy experience.

MAY: Be Serious about Play (leisure)

"Fun" falls into three categories: challenging fun, accommodating fun, and relaxing fun.

Challenging fun is the most rewarding but also the most demanding. It can create frustration, anxiety, and hard work. It often requires errands. It takes time and energy.

Usually less challenging, but still requiring a fair bit of effort, is accommodating fun. A family trip to the playground is accommodating fun. Yes, it's fun, but I'm really there because my children want to go. It strengthens relationships, it builds memories, it's fun—but it takes a lot of effort, organization, coordination with other people, and, well, accommodation.

Relaxing fun is easy. I don't have to hone skills or take action. There's very little coordination with other people or preparation involved. Watching TV—the largest consumer of the world's time after sleeping and work—is relaxing fun. Research shows that challenging fun and accommodating fun, over the long term, bring more happiness, because they're sources of the elements that make people happiest: strong personal bonds, mastery, an atmosphere of growth. Relaxing fun tends to be passive—by design.

1. Find more fun.

One way to feel good is to make time for play—which researchers define as an activity that's very satisfying, has no economic significance, doesn't create social harm, and doesn't necessarily lead to praise or recognition. Research shows that regularly having fun is a key factor in having a happy life; people who have fun are twenty times as likely to feel happy. Studies show that each common interest between people boosts the chances of a lasting relationship and also brings about a 2 percent increase in life satisfaction.

2. Take time to be silly.

Preoccupied with work, distracted by running mental to-do lists, we often become more humourless than we used to be when we were younger. Look for opportunities to see the ridiculous side of things.

3. Go off the path.

“Go off the path” was meant to push Rubin to encounter the unexpected thoughts, unfamiliar scenes, new people, and unconventional juxtapositions that are key sources of creative energy— and happiness. Instead of always worrying about being efficient, she wanted to spend time on exploration, experimentation, digression, and failed attempts that didn’t always look productive. To go off the path she: skimmed newspaper sections that she usually skipped; disciplined herself to look into the windows of stores instead of walking by, oblivious; she started carrying a camera everywhere, to sharpen her eye; she bought random magazines.

4. Start a collection.

A collection provides a mission, a reason to visit new places, the excitement of the chase, a field of expertise (no matter how trivial), and, often, a bond with other people.

JUNE: Make Time for Friends (friendship)

Having strong social bonds is probably the most meaningful contributor to happiness. The positive-psychologists Ed Diener and Martin Seligman cite studies demonstrating that “of 24 character strengths, those that best predict life satisfaction are the interpersonal ones.” Studies show that if you have five or more friends with whom to discuss an important matter, you’re far more likely to describe yourself as “very happy.” Not only does having strong relationships make it far more likely that you take joy in life, but studies show that it also lengthens life, boosts immunity, and cuts the risk of depression.

1. Remember birthdays.

2. Be generous.

Generous acts strengthen the bonds of friendship, and what’s more, studies show that your happiness is often boosted more by providing support to other people than from receiving support yourself. Strategies for being more generous: “Help people think big,” “Bring people together,” “Contribute in my way,” and “Cut people slack.”

3. Show up.

Unless you make consistent efforts, your friendships aren’t going to survive.

4. Don’t gossip.

Studies show that because of “spontaneous trait transference” people unintentionally transfer to me the traits I ascribe to other people. So if I tell Jean that Pat is arrogant, unconsciously Jean associates that quality with me. On the other hand, if I say that Pat is brilliant or hilarious, I’m linked to those qualities. What I say about other people sticks to me— even when I talk to someone who already knows me. So I do well to say only good things.

5. Make three new friends.

New friends expand your world by providing an entrance to new interests, opportunities, and activities and can be an invaluable source of support and information— and, just as happiness-inducing, you can play the same role for them. It is very energising too. Strategies for making new friends: smile more frequently, invite others to join a conversation, create a positive mood, open a conversation, try to look accessible and warm, laugh at yourself, show a readiness to be pleased, and ask questions.

JULY: Buy Some Happiness (money)

Studies show that people in wealthier countries do report being happier than people in poorer countries, and within a particular country, people with more money do tend to be happier than those with less. Also, as countries become richer, their citizens become less focused on physical and economic security and more concerned with goals such as happiness and self-realization. Also, it turns out that while the absolute level of wealth matters, relative ranking matters as well. For instance, people measure themselves against their age peers, and making more money than others in their age group tends to make people happier. "Can money help buy happiness?" The answer: yes, used wisely, it can.

1. Indulge in a modest splurge.

So, category by category, Rubin looked for ways to spend money to support her happiness goals (health and energy, relationships, work, for others, happy memories).

2. Buy needful things.

There are satisficers (those who make a decision or take action once their criteria are met - as soon as they find the hotel, the pasta sauce, or the business card that has the qualities they want, they're satisfied) and there are maximizers (they can't make a decision until after they've examined every option, so they can make the best possible choice). Studies suggest that satisficers tend to be happier than maximizers. Maximizers spend a lot more time and energy to reach a decision, and they're often anxious about whether they did in fact make the best choice.

3. Spend out.

As part of Rubin's happiness project she wanted to stop hoarding, to trust in abundance, so that she could use things up, give things away, throw things away.

4. Give something up.

Worried about the amount of stuff we accumulate try giving something up – Netflix, processed sugar, eBay shopping, etc.

AUGUST: Contemplate the Heavens (eternity)

Rubin wanted to cultivate a contented and thankful spirit. She wanted to appreciate the glories of the present moment and her ordinary life. She wanted to put the happiness of others before her own happiness. Studies show that spiritual people are relatively happier; they're more mentally and physically healthy, deal better with stress, have better marriages, and live longer.

1. Read memoirs of catastrophe.

A common theme in religion and philosophy, as well as in catastrophe memoirs, is the admonition to live fully and thankfully in the present. So often, it's only after some calamity strikes that we appreciate what we had. She kept a one-sentence daily journal to record the fleeting moments that make life sweet but that so easily vanish from memory.

2. Keep a gratitude notebook.

Studies show that consistently grateful people are happier and more satisfied with their lives; they even feel more physically healthy and spend more time exercising. Gratitude brings freedom from envy, because when you're grateful for what you have, you're not consumed with wanting something different or something more. That, in turn, makes it easier to live within your means and also to be generous to others. Each day, I noted three things for which I was grateful in a notebook.

3. Imitate a spiritual master.

People often read biographies for spiritual reasons: they want to study and learn from the example of great lives, whether those of Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Oprah Winfrey, the Dalai Lama, or Viktor Frankl. Knowing what you admire in others is a wonderful mirror into your deepest, as yet unborn, self.

SEPTEMBER: Pursue a Passion (books)

Happiness research predicts that making time for a passion and treating it as a real priority instead of an “extra” to be fitted in at a free moment (which many people practically never have) will bring a tremendous happiness boost. What you enjoyed doing as a ten-year-old, or choose to do on a free Saturday afternoon, is a strong indication of your passion.

1. Write a novel.
2. Make time.
3. Forget about results.

One thing that makes a passion enjoyable is that you don’t have to worry about results.

4. Master a new technology.

OCTOBER: Pay Attention (mindfulness)

Rubin says: “I have several tendencies that run counter to mindfulness. I constantly multitask in ways that pull me away from my present experience. I often run on automatic pilot— arriving home with no recollection of having gone from point A to point B. I tend to dwell on anxieties or hopes for the future, instead of staying fully aware in the present moment. I often break or spill things because I’m not paying attention. When I’m introduced to someone in a social situation, I often forget the person’s name as soon as I hear it. I finish eating before I’ve even registered the taste of my food.

Mindfulness brings many benefits: scientists point out that it calms the mind and elevates brain function, it gives clarity and vividness to present experience, it may help people break unhealthy habits, and it can soothe troubled spirits and lift people’s moods. It reduces stress and chronic pain. It makes people happier, less defensive, and more engaged with others.

1. Meditate on koans.

A koan is a question or a statement that can’t be understood logically. Zen Buddhist monks meditate on koans. The most famous koan is “Two hands clap and there is a sound. What is the sound of one hand?”

2. Examine True Rules.
3. Stimulate the mind in new ways.

“As I looked for ways to become more mindful, I realized that using my brain in unfamiliar ways would enhance my experience of the present moment and my awareness of myself. I came up with several strategies: I posted sticky notes around the apartment to remind me of the frame of mind I wished to cultivate; I tried hypnosis as a different route to cultivate my mind; laughter yoga; drawing; and music.”

4. Keep a food diary.

Studies show that merely being conscious of eating makes people eat more healthfully, and one way to encourage yourself to eat more mindfully, experts agree, is to keep a food diary. In one study, dieters who kept a food diary lost twice as much weight as dieters who didn’t bother.

NOVEMBER: Keep a Contented Heart (attitude)

It’s easier to complain than to laugh, easier to yell than to joke around, easier to be demanding than to be satisfied.

1. Laugh out loud.

A small child typically laughs more than four hundred times each day, and an adult— seventeen times. Rubin says: “Also, I wanted to stop being so critical, so judgmental and finicky. I also resolved to discipline myself to direct my thoughts away from subjects that made me angry or irritable.”

Laughter can boost immunity and lower blood pressure and cortisol levels. It increases people's tolerance for pain. It's a source of social bonding, and it helps to reduce conflicts and cushion social stress within relationships— at work, in marriage, among strangers. When people laugh together, they tend to talk and touch more and to make eye contact more frequently.

2. Use good manners.

Rubin realised that: "The minute someone made a statement, I looked for ways to contradict it."

3. Give positive reviews.

"Why was it so deliciously satisfying to criticize? Being critical made me feel more sophisticated and intelligent— and in fact, studies show that people who are critical are often perceived to be more discerning. Being critical has its advantages, and what's more, it's much easier to be hard to please. Although enthusiasm seems easy and indiscriminating, in fact, it's much harder to embrace something than to disdain it. It's riskier."

4. Find an area of refuge.

One fact of human nature is that people have a "negativity bias": we react to the bad more strongly and persistently than to the comparable good. One consequence of the negativity bias is that when people's minds are unoccupied, they tend to drift to anxious or angry thoughts. And rumination— dwelling on slights, unpleasant encounters, and sad events— leads to bad feelings. Rubin decided that "if I found myself dwelling on bad feelings, I'd seek a mental "area of refuge"."

DECEMBER: Boot Camp Perfect

1. "My First Splendid Truth: If I want to be happier, I need to look at my life and think about feeling good, feeling bad, and feeling right, in an atmosphere of growth."

"My biggest happiness boosts had come from eliminating the bad feelings generated by my snapping, nagging, gossiping, being surrounded by clutter, eating fake food, drinking, and all the rest. In particular, it made me happier to be in better control of my sharp tongue. At the same time, I was having more feeling good— more laughing with my family, talking about children's literature with my book group, listening to music I liked. I'd learned a lot of ways to get more bang for my happiness buck."

2. "The Second Splendid Truth was more important to my understanding of the nature of happiness: One of the best ways to make myself happy is to make other people happy. One of the best ways to make other people happy is to be happy myself."

3. "The Third Splendid Truth: 'The days are long, but the years are short' reminded me to stay in the moment, to appreciate the seasons, and to revel in this time of life."

4. "The Fourth Splendid Truth: If I think I'm happier, I am happier."

FINALLY, "So what's the secret to happiness?...The single most effective step for me had been to keep my Resolutions Chart."



Dr Bruce Wells is a happiness expert and professional speaker with a PhD in psychology and degrees in health promotion and physical education.

He has over 20 years' experience in the health and wellness industry in Australia, Asia, and the Middle East. He is a former school teacher, university professor, international tour guide, personal fitness trainer, and is the author of *Happiness Anywhere Anytime*.

Bruce regularly appears on Channel 9's Today show, various radio programs and regularly contributes articles to syndicated papers across the country. He is also a professional speaker delivering presentations to corporate and community health groups. For further details of his programs go to www.brucewells.com.au