



Better than Before: Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives
by Gretchen Rubin

Book Summary

How we spend our days is how we spend our lives, and when we really think about it, there are surprisingly few patterns in our daily lives (this is a good thought exercise). As habits are the invisible architecture of daily life, it is important that we develop ones that allow us to have time for everything that we value in a way that is sustainable, forever. We need to choose the strategies that work for us, and this begins with knowing our tendencies and ourselves.

The author identifies four tendencies that are based on the expectations that we set for ourselves when we form a new habit. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how we respond to expectations (inner and outer).

- (1) **Upholders:** They want to know what is expected of them, and to meet those expectations. They avoid making mistakes or letting people down (including themselves).
- (2) **Questioners:** They question all expectations, and they respond to an expectation only if they conclude that it makes sense.
- (3) **Obligers:** They meet outer expectations but struggle to meet inner expectations. They're motivated by external accountability.
- (4) **Rebels:** They resist all expectations, outer and inner.

Knowing our tendency helps us to frame our habit in a compelling way. The happiest people Gretchen finds are those who have found a way to exploit their own tendencies in the formation of the habit.

- **Monitoring** prevents us from fooling ourselves. Self-measurement brings self-awareness, and self-awareness brings self-control (food journal for example). That said, it takes time and energy to monitor, so it is imperative to choose the aspects of my life that I truly want to track. Gretchen monitors whatever is essential to her. In that way, she ensures that her life reflects her values.



- **Foundation:** She identifies sleep, movement, diet and clutter habits as the foundation from which all-good habits stem (and reinforce each other).
- **Scheduling:** In almost every case, the best time to start is now (no excuses!). I need to start entering leisure into my schedule as its own activity. I should also consider imposing a “quitting time”. An interesting point that Gretchen makes is that something that can be done at any time is often done at no time. One strategy she recommends for focusing on the task at hand is to either work on the habit or do nothing (so with write, or sit there unable to do anything else). In the coming years, I think that this could be most useful for when I am scheduling time to think and to develop the ideas for my PhD.
- **Accountability** is key and can be internal or external dependent on ones natural tendency. A thesis-writing group would be a good idea to begin to act as a strong commitment device.
- A point well made is that **habit convenience** is a wise investment. It is often wiser to change our surroundings, than ourselves (practically and pragmatically speaking). I should make my habits easy to do right and difficult to do wrong (preventing me as much as possible from excusing myself)
- Habits can comfort us in times of distress or worry, and this is why it is important to try and **shape habits mindfully**, so that we're following activities that make our situation better, not worse. Solid if-then planning can arm us for those high-risk situations.

Some Useful Nuggets

- Sometimes it might be easier to abstain than to limit yourself. It prevents poor self-control from running wild.
- Mindful exceptions of habits are permissible.
- Wait fifteen minutes - the urges or cravings will often subside.



- Identity exerts a powerful force over our habits.
- Associate with people who are likely to improve you.