



happiness

RULES

Rediscover the fun side of life by learning to play again.

Gretchen Rubin did not set aside a year in pursuit of happiness because she was unhappy. She says she simply realized one day, riding a city bus, “Time is passing, and I’m not focusing on the things that really matter.”

The result: her memoir, a *New York Times* best seller titled *The Happiness Project: Or, Why I Spent a Year Trying to Sing in the Morning, Clean My Closets, Fight Right, Read Aristotle, and Generally Have More Fun* (Harper; 2009). Rubin also chronicled her progress in an Internet journal, or blog, where she writes about the science and study of happiness, reveals her monthly resolutions and recounts the stories of others who follow her happiness journey.

In an interview with *Aetna Healthful*, Rubin shares her insights on how readers can reap the rewards that come from rediscovering play, even if they are restricted by time, health or money.

▼ **Test-drive.** Every month for a year, Gretchen Rubin tested a principal on life satisfaction.



AH: How do adults play?

GR: The word “play” has the negative connotation of something childlike or a waste of time. You don’t think of doing a crossword puzzle as play, but it is.

A lot of adults do not know what to do for fun. But dilemmas like this can be overcome by asking yourself a simple question: “What did I do for fun as a 10-year-old?” Maybe it was baking, walking through the woods with your dog or making things with your hands. Reconnect with play by looking at your past.

AH: What should adults keep in mind when adding play back into their lives?

GR: You really have to focus on the idea that just because it’s fun for someone else doesn’t mean it will be fun for you. Look for hints. Ask yourself, “What gives me energy?” Skim your calendar and consider, “What am I really looking forward to?” Learning to play golf might be challenging, but if it restores your zest for life, then you know it’s fun. If you find golf to be a hassle, then reconsider. Feeling guilty about doing something or not doing something means



◀ **Share the joy.** A 2010 article (Johnson) shows that in a condition called “emotional contagion,” we unconsciously “catch” the emotions of another person. By being silly we’re infecting one another with good cheer.

GR: Lots of people think play should be spontaneous or happen only during free time. If play is important to you, you have to plan for it. Put it on your calendar, not at the bottom of your to-do list.

AH: In your chapter “Be Serious About Play,” you write about starting a collection, but you’re not a collector. You started a happiness box.

GR: I don’t have the collector’s gene, but I do keep memorabilia. If you are downsizing to a smaller home, it’s a good time to curate your collections. The box of your child’s finger paintings? Pick one and frame it. You’ll treasure it. A pleasure of downsizing is that you throw away what’s extraneous.

it’s not fun. The same is true if it feels like a lot of work.

Play doesn’t always look like play, but you’ll know it, feel it. One of my blog readers commented: “My understanding of fun is definitely not the same as other people’s. I enjoy solitary, quiet things. Even the sports I enjoy are quiet ones. Reading is fun. Diving and mountain climbing are fun. Yoga is fun. Shopping, on the other hand, is definitely NOT fun.”

AH: What if a person has a busy schedule or many obligations?

Regularly having fun is a key factor in having a happy life. According to researchers, people who have fun are 20 times as likely to feel happy.

—Gretchen Rubin

5 Everyday Ways to Have More Fun

The absence of feeling bad isn’t enough to make a person happy, Rubin learned. And having fun doesn’t just flow naturally—you need to plan ways to make it happen. Here are some lessons from her experiment.

1

IDENTIFY AN INTEREST YOU CAN SHARE WITH OTHERS. A 1990 study (Chand) indicates that each common interest between two people brings a 2 percent increase in life satisfaction.

2

TREAT YOURSELF TO BEING A TOURIST IN YOUR OWN TOWN. Explore places you bypass because you’re too busy or caught up in your daily routine. It’s like a vacation—minus the cost and stress.

3

START A HAPPINESS BOX. Store small items and trinkets that reawaken happy memories every time you see and touch them.

4

DEVELOP A NEW AREA OF MINI-EXPERTISE. Identify something you’ve always wanted to explore, and go for it. The right challenge can be fun and rewarding, even though it may take some effort.

5

SEIZE OPPORTUNITIES TO BE SILLY AND SEE THE ABSURDITIES IN LIFE. Goof around every time you can. “People who enjoy silliness,” Rubin writes, “are one-third more likely to be happy.”

What you have left are your favorite, most meaningful possessions.

AH: What are your options when you can’t do what was once fun?

GR: Don’t let money, freedom, time or health get in the way of play. Say to yourself, “Given that I can’t do this, what can I do instead?” Take control. Rather than say, “Well, I can’t go running anymore,” pick a pleasurable walking route.

If you’re a caregiver and can’t get out, invite a friend to your home for coffee. Having people over is a great way to deepen existing relationships, and my new mantra for entertaining is: “Lower the bar.” My standards aren’t what they used to be. I invite people for dinner but order takeout because I don’t have time to cook.

Happy people make people happier. You will be better capable of being responsive to other people.

Another of my blog readers commented: “It’s important to recognize those happy moments when they are happening. As one who has struggled with chronic

pain, I think it’s a good day if I can get out and have that lunch with a friend or meet a deadline or notice the sunshine. Recognizing happy moments keeps me from being overwhelmed when the pain is too much.” ●



▲ **Get satisfied.** Play, a 2006 study reports (Vailant, DiRago and Mukamal), is an activity that’s satisfying, has no economic weight or social harm and doesn’t necessarily lead to recognition.