

# interview Gretchen Rubin: Happier with Gretchen Rubin

Best-selling author Gretchen Rubin and her sister Elizabeth Craft share strategies for and personal experiences with living a happier life. Part of the Panoply network, Happier is listened to by millions of people each week, including all of us at Podster. We were therefore very happy to talk to Gretchen.



**GRETCHEN RUBIN:** I was clerking, and it's very typical of me that I get kind of obsessed with something and will do a ton of research just for fun—that happens to me all the time. So I was out on my lunch hour and I was looking at the Capitol Dome and I thought, what am I interested in that everyone else in the world is interested in? I thought, well, power, money, fame, and sex, and then it hit me like a lightning bolt that these four things were connected. I immediately started doing this giant research project, working late, working weekends. It started to occur to me that what I was doing was preparing to write a book and writing a book was something that people did as a job. And I realized that I wanted to do as a job what I do for fun.

I got a book about how to write and sell your non-fiction book proposal. And then

**PODSTER:** You graduated from Yale law school, and you were working for Justice Sandra Day O'Connor when you realized you wanted to be a writer. How'd you figure that out?

my husband and I decided to move from Washington D.C to New York and we both switched out of law at the same time. I thought, "If I move to New York and get a law job, I might never try writing. This is the chance, this is my window, this is the obvious logical time to do it. I have an idea and I'm moving to New York City."

**PODSTER:** What does happiness look like to you?

**Gretchen:** You know, I never define happiness. Partly it's my legal training because you spend a whole semester arguing about the definition of contract and another semester about the definition of a tort. I think for the layperson, spending a lot of time trying to drill down the exact definition of happiness is not that useful. But I think it's clear if you think more loosely about being happier: If I did this, will I be happier? Next month, next year, would that make me happier? Yeah, that would make me happier.

**PODSTER:** Hence the title of your podcast.

**Gretchen:** There are times in our lives when we're just not going to be happy. It wouldn't even be appropriate to be happy. But can you be as happy as you can be under the circumstances? Can you be happier? And to me it seems like a waste, if you can be happier, not to do these minor tweaks that for most of us are low-hanging

fruit. There is stuff we can do without much time, money, or effort that could make us happier. So why not do it?

**PODSTER:** How did you connect happiness to habit?

**Gretchen:** After my books *The Happiness Project* and *Happier at Home* came out, I noticed that when people talked about their happiness challenges, it often had to do with something that was a problem with a habit. So somebody would say, "I'm exhausted all the time." Well, that's the habit of getting enough sleep. Or somebody would say, "I'm frustrated because I want to write a novel in my free time and I just can't make any progress." So I became more and more interested in the role that habits play in how people create healthy, happy, productive lives, and how you can harness habits to get yourself where you want to go. When I look back to *Happier at Home* and *The Happiness Project* there's tons of stuff in those books about habits, but I hadn't put my finger on it as a subject. So the minute I had the idea, I thought, "Oh my gosh, this is so important."

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of a sense of personality than even when you're reading a first person narrative like I write. And two people speaking is different from one person speaking. One of the nice things about Elizabeth and me is that we're so close and we are different. It's not like we fight all the time, but we're different. So we can talk about ideas from two different perspectives, which is great.

**PODSTER:** What's different about communicating via your podcast as opposed to your books or blog?

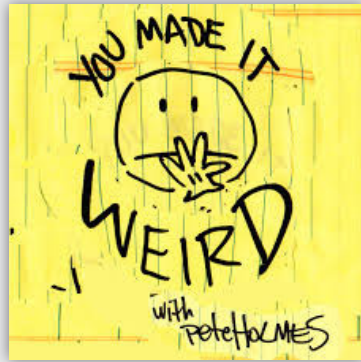
**Gretchen:** Because I started out as a traditional book writer and I gradually added these elements, it's been fascinating how each form has its own strengths and weaknesses and each form permits certain things the others don't. So first of all, the podcast is much more intimate. People even say this about audio books—that they always want to hear the author reading it. There's a lot more nuance, and you get more

**PODSTER:** I love just listening to your voices and the way you talk to each other. Your sister relationship is pleasing and makes me feel good.

**Gretchen:** That's so nice to hear! It's been so fun for us to have this. I love to collaborate anyway, and I've always wanted to collaborate with my sister. We talked about it for a long time but could never figure out what we could do together. We had talked about writing a YA novel together, but that didn't work out because she has this gigantic day job. But this is perfect.

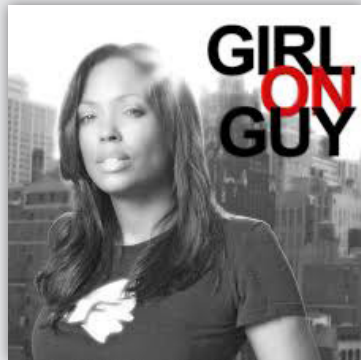
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**PODSTER:** You and Elizabeth live on opposite coasts, and you're both busy with big jobs and your families. How has doing the podcast together changed your relationship?

**Gretchen:** In all my books Elizabeth has been this repeat character because she's super important to me, and a constant theme is that I wish I could do things to spend more time with her. We talk about this on one of the podcasts but one thing that our mother said was, "If you want to deepen a relationship with somebody, work

on something together." So for Elizabeth and me, even though we're so close already, having this project and sort of being forced to pick up the phone has been really great, and now we have all new things in common. It's just been tons of fun.

**PODSTER:** In a recent episode of Happier, your daughter Eliza asked listeners for their advice for a 16-year-old. What's your answer to that question?

**Gretchen:** My answer is: Be Eliza. The most important thing is to know yourself. We can only have a happy life based on our own nature, our own temperament, our own values, our own interests. And yet it's so easy to be distracted by the way you wish you were, or the way that other people want you to be, by your own fantasies of who you ought to be, but I really feel like it's the self-knowledge that's so important. What does it mean to be Gretchen? The great task of my life is to figure that out. ⚡