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GRETCHEN RUBIN
Author of **THE HAPPINESS PROJECT**

BETTER

Than

BEFORE

WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT MAKING AND
BREAKING **HABITS**—TO SLEEP MORE,
QUIT SUGAR, PROCRASTINATE LESS, AND
GENERALLY BUILD **A HAPPIER LIFE**

“A force for
real change.”
—**BRENÉ BROWN**

BETTER THAN BEFORE

*Mastering the Habits of
Our Everyday Lives*

GRETCHEN RUBIN



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First Edition

A Note to the Reader

Better Than Before tackles the question: *How do we change?* One answer—by using habits.

Habits are the invisible architecture of daily life. We repeat about 40 percent of our behavior almost daily, so our habits shape our existence, and our future. If we change our habits, we change our lives.

But that observation just raises another question: *Okay, then, how do we change our habits?* That's what this book seeks to answer.

But while *Better Than Before* explores how to change your habits, it won't tell you what particular habits to form. It won't tell you to exercise first thing in the morning, or to eat dessert twice a week, or to clear out your office. (Well, actually, there is *one* area where I do say what habit I think is best. But only one.)

The fact is, no one-size-fits-all solution exists. It's easy to dream that if we copy the habits of productive, creative people, we'll win similar success. But we each must cultivate the habits that work for *us*. Some people do better when they start small; others when they start big. Some people need to be held accountable; some defy accountability. Some thrive when they give themselves an occasional break from their good habits; others when they never break the chain. No wonder habit formation is so hard.

The most important thing is to *know ourselves*, and to choose the strategies that work for us.

Before you begin, identify a few habits that you'd like to adopt, or changes you'd like to make. Then, as you read, consider what steps

you want to try. You may even want to note today's date on your book's flyleaf, so you'll remember when you began the process of change.

To help you shape your habits, I regularly post suggestions on my blog, and I've also created many resources to help you make your life better than before. But I hope that the most compelling inspiration is the book you hold in your hands.

I see habits through the lens of my own experience, so this account is colored by my particular personality and interests. "Well," you might think, "if everyone forms habits differently, why should I bother to read a book about what someone else did?"

During my study of habits and happiness, I've noticed something surprising: I often learn more from one person's idiosyncratic experiences than I do from scientific studies or philosophical treatises. For this reason, *Better Than Before* is packed with individual examples of habit changes. You may not be tempted by Nutella, or travel too much for work, or struggle to keep a gratitude journal, but we can all learn from each other.

It's simple to change habits, but it's not easy.

I hope that reading *Better Than Before* will encourage you to harness the power of habits to make change in your own life. Whenever you read this, and wherever you are, you're in the right place to begin.

IT'S ENOUGH TO BEGIN

First Steps

What saves a man is to take a step. Then another step. It is always the same step, but you have to take it.

—ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY, *Wind, Sand and Stars*

Some habit-formation strategies are familiar and obvious—like Monitoring or Scheduling—but others took me more time to understand. As I studied habits, I slowly began to recognize the tremendous importance of the time of beginning.

The most important step is the *first step*. All those old sayings are really true. Well begun is half done. Don't get it perfect, get it going. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Nothing is more exhausting than the task that's never started, and strangely, *starting* is often far harder than *continuing*.

That first step is tough. Every action has an ignition cost: getting myself to the gym and changed into my gym clothes can be more challenging than actually working out. That's why good habits are a tremendous help: they make the starting process automatic.

Without yet having a name for it, in fact, I'd invoked the power of the Strategy of First Steps as I was starting to write this book. I'd spent months reading and taking copious notes, and I had a giant document with a jumble of material about habits. This initial period of research for a book is always exhilarating, but eventually I have to begin the painstaking labor of actual analysis and writing.

What was the most auspicious date to start? I asked myself. The first day of the week, or the month, or the year? Or my birthday? Or the start of the school year? Then I realized that I was beginning to invoke tomorrow logic.

Nope. *Begin now*. I was ready. Take the first step. It's enough to begin.

Now is an unpopular time to take a first step. Won't things be easier—for some not-quite-specified reason—in the future? I have a fantasy of what I'll be like tomorrow: Future-Gretchen will spontaneously start a good new habit, with no planning and no effort necessary; it's quite pleasant to think about how virtuous I'll be, *tomorrow*. But there is no Future-Gretchen, only Now-Gretchen.

A friend told me about how she used tomorrow logic: "I use a kind of magical thinking to procrastinate. I make up questionable rules like 'I can't start working at 10:10, I need to start on the hour' or 'It's already 4:00, it's too late to start working.' But the truth is that I should just *start*." It's common to hear people say, "I'll start my new habit after the holidays are over/I've settled into my new job/my kids are a little older." Or worse, the double-remove: "I'll start my new habit once I'm back in shape."

Tomorrow logic wastes time, and also it may allow us to deny that our current actions clash with our intentions. In an argument worthy of the White Queen, we tell ourselves, absolutely, I'm committed to reading aloud to my children, and I will read to them tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow—just not today.

The same tendency can lead us to overcommit to responsibilities that take place in the comfortably distant future—but eventually the future arrives, and then we're stuck. My father-in-law has a mental habit to correct for that kind of tomorrow logic. He told me, "If I'm asked to do something—give a speech, attend an event—I always imagine that it's happening next week. It's too easy to agree to do something that's six months off, then the time comes, and I'm sorry I agreed to do it."

When taking the first step toward a new habit, a key question from the Strategy of Distinctions is “Do I prefer to take small steps or big steps?”

Many people succeed best when they keep their starting steps as small and manageable as possible; by doing so, they gain the habit of the habit, and the feeling of mastery. They begin their new yoga routine by doing three poses, or start work on a big writing project by drafting a single sentence in a writing session.

As an exercise zealot, I was pleased when my mother told me that she was trying to make a habit of going for a daily walk.

“But I’m having trouble sticking to it,” she told me.

“How far are you going?”

“Twice around Loose Park,” she told me, “which is about two miles.”

“Try going just *once* around the park,” I suggested. That worked. When she started smaller, she was able to form the habit.

Small steps can be particularly helpful when we’re trying to do something that seems overwhelming. If I can get myself to take that first small step, I usually find that I can keep going. I invoked this principle when I was prodding myself to master Scrivener, a writers’ software program. Scrivener would help me organize my enormous trove of notes, but I dreaded starting: installing the software; synchronizing between my laptop and desktop computers; and most difficult, figuring out how to use it.

Each day gave me a new opportunity to push the task off until tomorrow. Tomorrow, I’d feel like dealing with it. “Start *now*,” I finally thought. “Just take the first step.” I started with the smallest possible step, which was to find the website where I could buy the software. Okay, I thought. I can do that. And then I did. I had a lot of hard work ahead of me—it’s a Secret of Adulthood: things often get harder before they get easier—but I’d started. The next day, with a feeling of much greater confidence and calm, I watched the tutorial video. Then I created my document. And then—I started my book.

However, some people do better when they push themselves more boldly; a big challenge holds their interest and helps them persist. A friend was determined to learn French, so he moved to France for six months.

Along those lines, the *Blast Start* can be a helpful way to take a first step. The Blast Start is the opposite of taking the smallest possible first step because it requires a period of high commitment. It's demanding, but its intensity can energize a habit. For instance, after reading Chris Baty's book *No Plot? No Problem!*—which explains how to write a novel in a month—I wrote a novel in thirty days, as a way to spark my creativity. This kind of shock treatment can't be maintained forever, but it's fun and gives momentum to the habit. A twenty-one-day project, a detox, a cleanse, an ambitious goal, a boot camp—by tackling *more* instead of *less* for a certain period, I get a surge of energy and focus. (Not to mention bragging rights.) In particular, I love the retreat model. Three times, I've set aside a few days to work on a book during every waking hour, with breaks only for meals and for exercise. These periods of intensity help fuel my daily writing habit.

However, a Blast Start is, by definition, unsustainable over the long term. It's very important to plan specifically how to shift from the intensity of the Blast Start into the habit that will continue indefinitely.

There's no right way or wrong way, just whatever works.

I'd noticed something perverse in myself. If I feel anxious about the fact that I haven't started, I become even more reluctant to start, which just makes me more anxious. When I fretted about the fact that I hadn't sent out Eleanor's birthday party invitations, I felt an almost irresistible urge to put off dealing with them. When I took too long to reply to an irksome email, I kept putting it off for another day.

That's the trap of procrastination, and taking the first step is a way to escape. If I dread starting a task, just making a plan for beginning—

jotting down a to-do list, finding the right link (as I did for the Scrivener website), locating the instructions—helps me start. This first step almost feels like cheating, because I'm not actually doing the task I'm avoiding. But taking this first step makes taking the second and third steps much easier, because I've already started.

For me, it's hard to make phone calls. Except to speak to family members, I put off making phone calls, which makes daily life more difficult.

So I decided to make a new habit: make the call today. I have to call eventually, and postponement just makes it worse. I note any calls that I need to make, and as soon as possible, I follow through. The call to the eye doctor about Eliza's dry eyes. The call to my accountant. The call about the leaky pipe in my home office.

"Make the call today" helped me start a new habit of donating regularly to a thrift shop. I want to keep our apartment clutter-free, and I'd accumulated a cabinet full of things we no longer wanted. I live in a neighborhood with several thrift stores, and since we moved here *eleven years ago* I'd been meaning to stop in to ask the store's policies on donations.

Because I didn't know exactly what to do, the discard pile kept growing. Somehow—even though I knew it was ridiculous—I worried that the shops would scoff at my donations, or tell me I was doing something wrong (Upholder concerns). But I knew that if I found a place where I could easily drop things off, I'd get in the habit of doing so.

I'd never been able to get started. Okay, start now, make the call.

I got the number of the closest thrift shop, just three blocks away, and steeled myself to pick up the phone—and I spoke to a very nice man at the Arthritis Foundation. Yes, they accepted VHS tapes and shoes, but not books.

Making this phone call had a surprising effect on me. Suddenly, I could envision myself dropping things off at the thrift store. And what was the worst they could do? Reject my box of VHS tapes? The

next Saturday, I walked the three blocks to the store, spotted a “Donations” sign at the back, and deposited my box under the sign. Done.

Taking the first step is hard, and every first step requires some kind of transition. Adults help children to manage transition—by giving them bedtime routines, cleanup reminders, and warnings of “Five more minutes!”—but we adults often expect ourselves to careen effortlessly from one activity to the next. I’m in the habit of writing a blog post every day, yet every day I have to gear up to start. Running activities too closely together makes me feel harried and irritable, and habits of transition help me to switch gears more calmly.

I love my morning transition from sleep to family time. I wake up early, even on the weekends, because I never want to miss that time to myself.

Other people have their own transition rituals. A friend said, “I drop my son off at school, then I buy myself coffee and read celebrity gossip from 9:15 to 10:00, then I start work.” Another friend explained: “When I was working on my daily writing habit, I didn’t think about writing, I thought about my prewriting ritual. I sat down at the computer, put on my headphones, and turned on my Writing Music mix. By the second or third song, I wouldn’t even hear the music anymore, but it was a clear signal that it was time to write. I’ve listened to it 267 times.” Another friend said, “I can’t just show up at the gym and work out. There’s a cafe there, so I take my laptop and work on my thesis. After an hour or so, I’m ready to exercise.”

Jamie has a transition habit when he comes home from work. He gives everyone a hello kiss, then disappears for twenty minutes or so. He changes out of his suit, sends one last round of emails, glances at a magazine, and then he’s ready to join the family. Because I’m always eager to cross things off my to-do list, I often want to hit him with scheduling issues or chore requests as soon as I see him. Think-

ing about the importance of transitions made me realize that I should respect his habit and save my questions until he'd settled in.

A friend's husband has a more idiosyncratic transition. He sits on a sofa that faces a built-in bookcase, and, one arm flung over the sofa back, looks at the bookcase. "He calls it 'staring at the bookcase,'" she told me. "He's not meditating or anything like that, and I can talk to him, but he wants fifteen minutes to stare at the bookcase when he gets home."

Regular bedtime habits can ease the challenging transition from waking to sleeping, and help us fall sleep faster and sleep more deeply. A friend who works in finance and travels all the time, and who definitely doesn't seem to be the bath type, needs a bath before he can get into bed, no matter how late his day ends.

I wish Jamie had a habit like that, because he really struggles to fall asleep. Habits cheerleader that I am, I kept pointing out good sleep habits, such as "Don't watch TV before bedtime," "Don't check your email before bed, it gets you all riled up," "Don't stare into a glowing screen, the light will make you more alert," and "Let's open a window, because cooling the body down helps to prepare for sleep." He ignored all these suggestions—except for the open window.

Finally, though, I dropped the issue. If Jamie didn't want to change his habits, I couldn't change them for him. I remembered a joke that a psychiatrist friend told me, "How many shrinks does it take to change a lightbulb?" "Only one, but the lightbulb has to want to change." My lightbulb didn't want to change.

I had a problem nighttime habit myself. For me, and for many people, transitions often trigger the urge to snack or drink—and choices are generally not of the celery or chamomile tea variety. I'd fallen into the habit of wandering into the kitchen around 9:00 to forage, because even though I wasn't hungry, I craved a snack. The evening felt incomplete without it. But I didn't like this habit, so I decided to quit eating after dinner.

I'd often heard the advice to brush my teeth after dinner, as a way to quit night snacking. I doubted that this could make a difference, but decided to give it a try. Instead of brushing my teeth right before I went to bed, I started to brush my teeth after I finished tucking in Eleanor, around 8:30.

To my astonishment, this simple habit proved highly effective; my urge to snack drops after I brush my teeth. As I brush, I think, "No more eating for today, that's finished," and that thought, along with the clean feeling in my mouth, helps to end the eating portion of my evening. Also, many years of nightly brushing have made me connect the experience of toothpaste with the transition to bedtime.

By examining these moments of transition, we can make small changes that yield big benefits.

I pay a lot of attention to *starting*—and also to *stopping*. Because taking the first step is so important, and often so difficult, I try not to falter in my steps once I've started. But any change can trigger a stop: bad weather, work travel, vacation, illness, a new boss, a new baby, a change in a child's schedule, a new home, someone else's stopping (a coworker can no longer go for a lunchtime run). If I stop, I have to take that very first step all over again—and I very well may not do it.

Stopping halts momentum, breeds guilt, makes us feel bad about losing ground, and, worst of all, breaks the habit so that the need for decision making returns—which demands energy, and often results in making a bad decision.

Stopping is a particular problem with the habit of exercise, and for this reason, my yoga instructor doesn't let people stop. He gives a lot of private instruction, and many of his clients leave town in the summer. "People tell me, 'I'm stopping for the summer, but I'll call you when I get back in September,'" he told me. "I say, 'No, you're not stopping. I'm canceling these certain appointments, but you're still in

my schedule, and I'll see you at the usual time on September 4. If you can't make it that day, we'll reschedule.'"

"That way, they don't feel like they're stopping?"

"Right. If they stop, they might not start, but this way, they never do 'stop.'"

Along the same lines, when Lori, my trainer at the strength-training gym, left the gym, I switched to another trainer without hesitation. However, many of my friends also trained with Lori, and I discovered that for several of them, Lori's departure was a "stopping" point. Again and again, I heard, "I just don't want to train with anyone but Lori." And I noticed that this feeling seemed stronger among people who were more reluctant to visit a gym.

One friend told me, "I don't want to go if Lori is gone. I'd like to do some different kind of exercise anyway, just for a change. I'm going to find something else."

Now, this is a friend I know *very well*—well enough to be very skeptical of this plan. She'll ski, play tennis, hike, and swim, but she hates regular "exercise." Nevertheless, she'd managed to form the habit of strength training.

"You're going to find exercise you like better than this—once a week for twenty minutes, no shower, no music, no mirrors? Like *what*?" I pressed. "It seems like a bad idea to let yourself stop this habit before you're well started on something else."

I saw her several weeks later. "What did you do about strength training?" I asked.

"Oh, you're right," she said with a sigh. "I have to find something new before I quit. Anyway, I worked out with a new trainer, and it was fine."

The fact is, while some habits are almost unbreakable, some habits remain fragile, even after years. We must guard against anything that might weaken a valuable habit. Every added link in the chain strengthens the habit—and any break in the chain marks a potential stopping point.

For many people, don't-break-the-chain is a powerful strategy—for the same reason that some people want to get the attendance award in grade school. It's very satisfying to have a perfect record. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld advised aspiring comedian Brad Isaac that, because daily writing was the key to writing better jokes, Isaac should buy a calendar with a box for every day of the year, and every day, after writing, cross off the day with a big red X. "After a few days you'll have a chain," Seinfeld explained. "You'll like seeing that chain, especially when you get a few weeks under your belt. Your only job next is to not break the chain."

A friend told me, "I got in a bad habit of blowing off our three-times-a-week staff meeting. Most of the meeting is irrelevant to me, but often I did miss a few key points. After one particularly bad situation, I made a rule: I'd never miss a single staff meeting. Now I want to keep my perfect record."

Upholders find this chain approach very satisfying, because they love to cross items off a to-do list. Questioners find it useful if they expect to find it useful; otherwise, they won't bother with it. Rebels resist the notion of the chain—and just the name "chain" explains why. They want to choose an action each time and generally won't bind themselves. For some Obligers, the chain approach is helpful, if they develop a feeling of accountability to the chain itself. These Obligers may need a form of external accountability to get the chain started, but once it's under way, they often can keep it going out of a sense of obligation.

No matter what our Tendency, when faced with an unavoidable stopping point—such as a long trip or a summer break—it helps to commit to a specific day to jump back into the habit, as my yoga instructor requires. Something that can be done at *any* time often happens at *no* time, and waiting vaguely for the right time to start again is very risky. (Starting *tomorrow* usually sounds like a good plan.) But the more tomorrows go by, the more intimidating it becomes to take that first step back.

Another reason to avoid stopping a good habit is that, sadly, starting *again* is often far harder than starting the *first time*. It's natural to think, "Oh, I did this before, it will be easy to do it again," but often it's much harder to start again. True, taking that first step the first time around can be hard, but there's also a special energy and optimism to launching a new habit. When I've tried to summon up the same energy for restarting a lapsed habit, it hasn't worked very well. The novelty has worn off, I've remembered all the reasons I struggle with that habit, and it's discouraging to feel myself backsliding.

A friend told me, "I quit drinking for a month, and I really enjoyed the challenge. When the month was up, I started drinking again, as I'd planned to do. After a while, I thought it would be good to give up alcohol again for another month. I expected it to be easy because it had been easy the first time, but I couldn't do it again. It wasn't the same."

"Indefinitely"—or even worse, "forever"—is where habit change becomes unnerving. Often, with our good habits, *there is no finish line*. We can imagine taking those first steps but become overwhelmed at the prospect of never stopping. Am I going to meditate *forever*?

It's one thing to resist a single major temptation, or to make a brief, heroic effort during a Blast Start, or even to train for a marathon or to give up chocolate for a year, but to trudge along with a good habit, *forever*, can feel too demanding. It requires a surrender—an acceptance of the way we must live to abide by our own values.

Persisting with a habit can be particularly hard when the habit doesn't yield flashy results. While there's the satisfaction of knowing that I'm doing what's good for me and holding myself to my intentions, rarely do I achieve glorious outcomes. I've found, however, that if I can get through this dry period, the habit truly takes over and proves itself by making my life better than before.

I'd been wondering whether I should drop the habit of meditation

because it seemed pointless. Then, for the first time, it seemed as though it might be making a difference. Late one night, I was ruminating about various disagreeable moments from my day, and the longer I lay awake, the angrier I got at the thought of how much sleep I was losing. Then I envisioned my most helpful meditation image: snow falling on Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. It sort of worked. So I decided to stick to the meditation habit, at least for now. Or rather, I decided not to make a decision about it.

Habits are the behaviors that I want to follow forever, without decisions, without debate, no stopping, no finish lines. Thinking about *forever* can be intimidating, so the one-day-at-a-time concept helps many people stick to their good habits. A friend told me, “I remind myself, ‘What I’m eating now isn’t necessarily forever, it’s just for right now,’ and that helps me stick to it. One day at a time—even though I do plan to eat this way forever.”

Again, this is where deciding-not-to-decide comes to the rescue. I don’t revisit my habits. I just think, “This is what I’m doing today.” Trust the habit. I take that first step, over and over and over.

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Better Than Before

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