



Episode 275: Outer Order, Inner Calm and
Happiness With Gretchen Rubin

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Katie: Hello, and welcome to the "Wellness Mama Podcast." I'm Katie from wellnessmama.com. And I'm here today, with Gretchen Rubin, who you may have heard of. She is the author of several books, including the blockbuster "New York Times" bestsellers, "Better Than Before," "The Happiness Project," "Happier at Home," and "The Four Tendencies." We touch on all of those today and explain how they can be practical to your daily life. She has an enormous readership, both in print and online, and her books have collectively sold more than 3.5 million copies worldwide in more than 30 languages. She is frequently on TV and is in demand as a speaker. She also has a podcast called "Happier with Gretchen Rubin," where she discusses good habits and happiness with her sister, Elizabeth. She started her career in law and was actually a clerk for Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, when she realized she wanted to be a writer. And she lives in New York with her husband and two daughters. And in this episode, we talk happiness, parenting, community, and how to foster inner calm in your own life. Gretchen, welcome. And thanks for being here.

Gretchen: I'm so happy to be talking to you.

Katie: Oh, my gosh, me too. And I'm guessing most of my audience is already familiar with you. But for those who aren't, just give us your background and your story and how you became what you are today.

Gretchen: Well, I started my career in law, and I was actually clerking for Justice Sandra Day O'Connor when I decided that I wanted to be a writer. And so, I switched to being a writer and I had been writing books for many years before I wrote the book, which is the book for which I'm probably best known, which is the book, "The Happiness Project." So, I'm a good example of somebody who worked 10 years to be an overnight sensation. And ever since that book came out 10 years ago, I've been writing about kind of human nature, with a happiness emphasis. So, happiness, good habits, the four tendencies, which is a personality framework that I devised. and my most recent book, "Outer Order, Inner Calm," which is about sort of how our surroundings influence our happiness. And then I also have a podcast called "Happier with Gretchen Rubin," where I talk about how to be happier, spoiler alert, with my sister, and co-host, Elizabeth Craft, who's a TV writer and producer in Los Angeles.

Katie: Amazing. And we'll go deep on the new book. But I wanna first... Can you talk about where the idea for "The Happiness Project" came from? Because I love that book.

Gretchen: Oh, well, thank you. You know, it came from a very ordinary moment in my life. I was stuck in a city bus in the pouring rain, and I had one of those rare opportunities for reflection that you don't often get in sort of, in the chaos of everyday life. And I thought, "What do I want from life anyway?" And I thought, "I wanna be happy," but I realized I didn't spend any time thinking about whether I was happy or how I could be happier. And I thought, "You know, I should have a happiness project." And that's the phrase I used and I ran out the next day to the library, got a giant stack of books about happiness because I wanted to know, can you make yourself happier if you wanted to make yourself happier? Like, what does science say? What does ancient philosophy say? What does pop culture say? And so, I decided to spend a year thinking about happiness. And I thought a year was long enough to feel like you could make real change, but not so long that you couldn't see the end of it. So, I found 12 themes, areas where I thought I could make myself happier. And then I found a handful of concrete manageable resolutions, within each theme that I thought, "You know, if I did this, I would be happier." And then I just tried it to see what would happen if you really set out to try to make yourself happier. And so, I was kind of my own guinea pig. And so, "The Happiness Project" is about that. And then my next book, "Happier at Home" was sort of the same thing on a school year, because I think a school year is another kind of year in our minds, really focusing on home. Because there are very few universals, but almost everybody has an idea of home, and almost everybody wants to be happier at home.

Katie: Yeah. I'm curious some of those things that were really actual needle movers in happiness, because I think you're right. Most of us have that idea that we wanna be happy, but we've never really defined that or know what that actually looks like for us. And so, it tends to default into, for a lot of people and me at times in the past, you know, thinking of possessions or achievements, like those things were gonna be benchmarks for happiness. So, what were the actual things that did make you happier?

Gretchen: Well, just about everything I did, did make me happier. But, you know, one of the things, if you look at the research and, you know, contemporary scientists and ancient philosophers would agree, that anything related to relationships tends to make people happier, because relationships really are so, so important to our happiness. So, something like joining or starting a book group or doing things to stay in better touch with your family members, going to a reunion. Anything that helps you deepen relationships or expand relationships is the kind of thing that's gonna make you happier. Looking at things like work. You know, how do you find more happiness at work? Work is super important for happiness, partly because we just spend so much time there, and also, because many aspects of a happy life come from work. So, what can you do to make your... You know, I asked myself, "Well, what could I do to make my work life happier?" For passion, you know, that's a thing, I think a lot of people would pick different things. My passion is reading. That's definitely my passion. So, I did a lot of things about, well, how could I read better and read more, make more time for reading? And other people, maybe they don't care about reading, but they wanna do more biking or they wanna spend more time with music. But what was interesting to me was that you would think or, like, it seemed to me plausible when I was starting, that reading a book was kind of observations about human nature generally, or looking at large studies of big populations would tell you the most about how to be happier.

But actually, I think what I discovered was that people really related to my individual idiosyncratic story. And it's funny because when I was writing the book, some people said to me, "Look, Gretchen, you're so boring. Like, no one's gonna be interested in you. Like, not to be mean, but, like, no one's interested in you. Like, you're so ordinary." And then some people will be like, "Gretchen, you're so idiosyncratic. No one's gonna identify with you because you're just like this weird... Like, you've got your own, like, strange little things going on. Like, no one's gonna identify with you." And I think it turns out that we just identify with other people's stories. And when you hear, "Hey, Gretchen stopped reading books in the middle because she realized she would read more books that she liked if she stopped reading books in the middle." I could stop reading books in the middle or I could stop watching movies in the middle when I don't like them, or I could, you know, stop trying to get better on the guitar and really focus on the piano because the guitar is just not doing it for me, or whatever it might be. I think that's what people related to was sort of this... Just hearing what one person tried, it kind of gives you ideas of what you could try.

Katie: Yeah. Absolutely. I think there's so much power in a story. And, I mean, it's truly, I feel like that book sparked a movement, which is awesome because certainly, we needed that movement today. And as a follow up, you also have the book about the four tendencies. And...

Gretchen: Yes.

Katie: ...you said, "I want to spend a lot of time on "Outer Order Inner Calm," but I loved this book a lot too. And I will put myself out there as an example. So I am a rebel, which was probably not shocking to anyone who knows me.

Gretchen: Interesting. That's the smallest group. The smallest tendency is rebel. Yes.

Katie: Okay. So, can you explain to us kind of the premise for "The Four Tendencies" and what the four different tendencies are?

Gretchen: Yes. So, I will describe this now in brief. And frankly, most people can just tell what they are from a very brief description. But if you wanna take a quiz... So most people like to take a quiz that sort of will spit out an answer and give you a little report, and put it in context. If you go to quiz.gretchenrubin.com, it's short, it's free. Like, 2 million people have taken this quiz. So, you can do that, but I will describe it. And as I say, a lot of people just can tell what they are. So, the four tendencies divide people into upholders, questioners, obligers, and rebels. Rebels like you. And what it's looking at is a very specific area of your nature, but one that actually has a lot of consequences in how your everyday life plays out. And that's how you respond to expectations, which sounds boring, I know, but it actually ends up being very juicy. So, we all face two kinds of expectations. Outer expectations, which is things like a work deadline or a request from a friend, and then there are inner expectations. My own desire to get back into meditation. My own desire to keep a new year's resolution. And depending on how you meet outer and inner expectations, that's what makes you an upholder, a questioner, an obliger, or rebel because those are the four combinations. So, upholders readily meet outer and inner expectations. They meet the work deadline. They keep the new year's resolution without much fuss. They wanna know what other people expect from them, but what they expect for themselves is just as important. And so their motto is, "Discipline is my freedom." Then there are questioners. Questioners question all expectations. They'll do something if they think it makes sense. So, they're making everything an inner expectation.

If it meets their inner standard, they will do it, no problem. If it fails their inner standard, they will resist. They typically really object to anything arbitrary, unjustified. They always want reasons. They want efficiency, justifications. So, their motto is "I'll comply if you convince me why." Then there are obligers. Obligers readily meet our expectations, but they struggle to meet inner expectations. And I got my insight into this tendency when a friend said, "You know, the weird thing about me is I know I'm happier when I exercise. And when I was in high school, I was on the track team and I never missed track practice. So, why can't I go running now?" Well, when she had a team and a coach expecting her to show up, she had no trouble going. But when she was just trying to go on her own, it was a struggle. To meet inner expectations, obligers must have outer accountability. That is crucial. If an obliger wants to read more, join a book group. Like, that's how it works for obligers. So, their motto is, "You can count on me, and I'm counting on you to count on me." And then finally, rebels. Your tendency. The proud rebel tendency. Rebels resist all expectations, outer and inner alike. They wanna do what they wanna do in their own way, in their own time. They can do anything they wanna do. They can do anything they choose to do. But if you ask or tell them to do something, they're very likely to resist. And typically, they don't even like to tell themselves what to do. Like, they wouldn't sign up for a 10:00 a.m. spin class on Saturday because they don't know what they're gonna want to do at 10:00 a.m. on Saturday and just the fact that someone's expecting them to show up is just gonna annoy them. And so, the motto of the rebel is, "You can't make me and neither can I." So, those are the four tendencies.

Katie: And is it like with some personality tests, that there are elements of all of us and all of those? Like, I hear, like, little pieces of the others, I'm like, "Oh, that kind of is me, but definitely rebel." Like, do we all have aspects of all of them?

Gretchen: Well, I mean, no one likes to be controlled. So, in that way, we're all like rebels. And we, nobody likes to do something that's totally arbitrary or unjustified. So, in that we're like questioners. And all of us will take into account like outer expectations, and if something's really, really important to someone else, like, that's gonna influence the way I view that, and so that's obliger. But I think that, despite that, which is kind of, like, little bits in all human nature, just about everybody really does squarely fit within one tendency. Now, one of the things is that each tendency... If you imagine this, like, if you look on my website or you look in the book "The Four Tendencies," you'll see a diagram which is a Venn diagram in four circles in a triangle. If you think about like your tendency, you're a rebel. So, rebels are like questioners in that they both resist outer expectations. And rebels are also overlapped with obligers because they both resist inner expectations. And so, you can be a rebel who's more on the questioner side or you can be a rebel who's more on the obliger side. And that will influence the way your tendency comes out. So, like, I'm an upholder, who tips to questioner, so that means my upholderness looks a little different from upholders who tip to obliger. So, there is a range within the tendencies depending on which way you lean within your tendency. But like an upholder and a rebel, like, we're not gonna get ourselves mixed up. Like, you're not gonna have the same view on the world that I have because I'm an upholder, and upholders and rebels are kind of the most opposite and probably, there'll be many, many things, just in, like, setting up our day, that would feel very different to us and that would come naturally to us. So, you know, I think people do fit squarely within one.

Katie: That makes sense. And then once we know this about ourselves, kind of give us a couple of examples of ways we can use this to our advantage in life. Because I know, like, when I read that about myself, I'm like, "Yeah, that's totally true. I resist even my own expectations of myself." And then you also gave some guidelines for then, how do I then springboard into using this to my advantage and getting myself to do the things I know I needed to do?

Gretchen: Yeah. I mean, I think that's really the value of the four tendencies, well, either for self-knowledge or understanding how to work more effectively with somebody else, whether that's a co-worker, or a spouse, or a child, or a student, or a patient. I hear from a lot of people in health care. Yeah. Because what you can do is, once you know this about yourself, you can far more effectively set things up to succeed. So, let's just talk about you dealing with yourself as whatever tendency you are. So, let's say you're an obliger, because obliger is the biggest tendency. For both men and women, this is the biggest tendency. You either are an obliger or you have many obligers in your life. So they matter a lot, because there's a lot of them. If you're an obliger, and you wanna meet an inner expectation, like, you wanna quit sugar, you wanna start exercising, you wanna start meditating, you wanna read more, you wanna stop using the snooze alarm. Don't try to rely on inner accountability. That does not work for obligers. You need outer accountability. Well, the good news is, it's very easy to come up with outer accountability. There's a million different ways to give yourself outer accountability, but you have to realize that that's what you need. And a lot of times the obligers are like, "I just need to get motivated. I just need to, you know, learn to make more time for myself. I need more self-care." It's like, "No. That's not what's going on here." What you need is outer accountability.

If you wanna exercise, don't try to go running on your own, sign up for a class, workout with a friend who's gonna be disappointed if you don't show up. Think of your duty to your future self, "Oh, if you come to the end of 2019, and you haven't run that race, the way you've really had been hoping to do, you're gonna be so disappointed." You can think of your duty to be a role model for other people. You can think of like, "Oh, I need to take my dog out because my dog is gonna be so disappointed if she doesn't get to go out." I mean, there's a million ways to create outer accountability And obligers are different. So, sometimes a certain kind of

outer accountability doesn't work. Like, paying for something works really well for some obligers, but some obligers, it almost makes them feel like they're off the hook. They're like, "Well, I paid for it, so that's like as good as doing it." It's like, "No, it's not." You need to find another form of outer accountability. But for a rebel like you, outer accountability can actually be counterproductive. Because let's say I'm like, "Oh, you need outer accountability. Let's have a check-in meeting. Let's set deadlines. Like, I'm gonna, like, look over your shoulder, and that's gonna help you." It's like, not with a rebel. That's gonna ignite their spirit of resistance. That's gonna slow them down. That's gonna make them wanna push back.

You gotta say to a rebel, "Hey, you do it in your own way. Like, if you wanna exercise... If you're a rebel, you're like, "If I wanna exercise, maybe I'll join a big gym, and then I'll just go when I feel like it and I'll take whatever class I feel like in the moment. Today, I feel like yoga, feeling a little stiff. Today, I'm feeling kind of restless, I wanna do a cardio workout. I heard about this cool new kind of, like, training. I'm gonna do that because I like to be on the cutting edge of what all the exercise trends are." It's like, but saying to somebody, like, "You need to sign up with a trainer who's gonna, like, really hold you accountable." It's like, don't do that to a rebel. That's not gonna work for them. They don't like that feeling of being trapped. Questioners, it's all about reasons why. Why are you doing this? You know, questioners often will say to me, "Oh, well, I'm trying to eat more healthfully, and everything in my life comes easy to me, but not this." And I'm always like, "Have you really in your own mind committed? Have you really decided that you do believe that you have figured out what you think is the best way to eat because there's so much conflicting information?" So, there's part of you thinking that you should be vegetarian and part of you is thinking you should be paleo, and part of you is thinking that you should quit sugar, and part of us thinking that you should follow the 80/20 rule, because until you have that clarity, you're not gonna be able to stick to it.

You need to, in your own mind, decide, "This is the right way for me. This is customized for me. This is the most efficient way. I truly commit to this method." And once you have that, then questioners can really follow along. But a lot of times if you don't understand your tendency, you might really be trying to address a problem in a way that's not gonna work for you. You know, like, a rebel could think, "Oh, I need accountability," when they don't need accountability. Or like an upholder like me, why should I waste time on accountability? I don't need outer accountability. Outer accountability can slow you down. It's just another thing to work with, but I don't need outer accountability. So, I don't need to do that stuff. That was a revelation for me when I realized I was an upholder. So knowing what your tendency is, can make you be much more strategically efficient in figuring out why something's not working, and then what is likely to work, rather than just kind of throwing spaghetti against the wall and hoping that you happen to find the right solution.

Katie: Yeah. And I don't know if this is a common use case, but I've also found this really helpful with my team at work and also with my kids. So, especially with my kids, I have at least one of each type amongst my kids. And so...

Gretchen: You're kidding.

Katie: Yeah. I was shocked. At least the little ones, I had to guess when I took the quiz for them, but the older ones could take it themselves. And it's been fascinating in how I parent because realizing if I have a rebel, I

need to respond much differently than a questioner, and just whether I answer questions, whether I'm helping be their outside accountability, or whether I'm, like, finding ways to support their inner accountability or challenge them. I'm curious, is that a common use case? Have other people used it that way as well?

Gretchen: Absolutely. And actually, on my website and the resources, I have these one-pagers for parents, or teachers or healthcare professionals, or work, spouses, sort of like, how would you use it in that context? And it's interesting that you're a rebel with a rebel child because many rebels... And I don't know if you feel this way yourself. I don't know what your parents were. But many rebels have said to me, like, "Oh, I really was lucky that I had a rebel parent." Because rebel is the most different from the other three. It's the one that confuses people the most. And I think if you have a rebel parent as a rebel child, they just get it in a way that can be very, very helpful. And I think for people who don't know about the tendencies, who do have a rebel child who are trying to understand how to be the right kind of parent to help that rebel child, it's a huge relief to say, "Okay. This is the pattern of what you're seeing. This is how you can work with this child effectively to get them where they wanna go." Because a lot of times, out of the deepest sense of love, we do things that really are not helpful to a rebel. So, like, for example, piano lessons. Somebody was saying, "Oh, I used the reward chart. I threatened my child." I said, "Oh, like your teacher knows if you've been practicing or not. Like, aren't you gonna be embarrassed? And like, none of it worked."

And then when I realized she was a rebel and that she really prided herself on her musicality, I said, "You're a performer. Like, I'm blown away with what you can do. You're only 10 years old, and I cannot believe the stuff that you can play. I love seeing you up on stage just blowing people away with your performance. Here's a hard piece of music. I really hope that I get the chance to see you perform this, but it's gonna be hard to master something this complex." It's like, yeah. What does a performer do? A performer practices. What does a musician do? A musician plays. It's the identity, which is so appealing to a rebel. You have to appeal to their identity. What did they want? What did they choose? They can do anything they want, but they're not gonna do it because you tell them to or because their teacher tells them to, or because you're gonna, like, give them some kind of ridiculous reward, which they absolutely understand is a method of control. They're gonna do it because they want to. And you can remind a rebel child, this is what they want. But for people who are upholders, questioners, and obligers, often they don't see how to appeal to a rebel child in a way that's gonna be effective. And sometimes they actually make things much, much worse.

Katie: Yeah. It's so fascinating. And I feel like it's just a really helpful tool, especially, like I said, for parents to just understand your child a little more and align your motivations and your intention, so you're not just spinning your wheels. And I wanna make sure we reserve time to talk about the new book too, "Outer Order, Inner Calm," which I'm really excited about. So, from the beginning, why did you decide to write this book particularly?

Gretchen: Well, you know, since I have been talking to people about happiness for so long, I noticed that whenever the subject of anything related to outer order, decluttering, organizing, making your bed, whenever these subjects came up, there was, like, an extra energy around it. Like, people were just fired up in a different sort of way. And that intrigued me. You know, and I felt that way myself. I'm like, "Why is it...?" Like, just this happened to me like six weeks ago. I couldn't sleep. I got up in the middle of the night, I'm like, "I'm gonna clean out our utility closet." And like, for the next three weeks, I was just going out of my way to walk by this closet and be like, "It looks amazing. Look at this. It looks so great." It's like, "Why do I have this

disproportionate energy, and feeling of, like, good cheer, from doing something as simple as cleaning out our utility closet?" There's just some connection there, a disproportionate connection. And I was really always curious about it. I felt it myself, and I thought, "Well, why is there this connection?" And then given that that's true for most people, not everybody, but for most people, how do we create it? How do we maintain it? And I have the secrets of adulthood, which are kind of, like, the little bits of wisdom that I feel like I've gained over time, through hard experience. And one of them is, you know, for most people, outer order contributes to inner calm, more really than it should. And people kept repeating that back to me. They would say, "Oh, yeah. I feel the same way. Outer order contributes to inner calm." And so I thought, "Well, you know, I wanna explore this." But I wanted to do it in, like, a fun little book, like a book you could just zip through, that would get you psyched up to kind of jump out of your seat and go running to the medicine cabinet and clean it out. So, I wrote it in kind of a very light way, so that it would be very easy to just kind of, like, zip through it, get the big ideas, get the ideas that would work for you, and get started.

Katie: Yeah. I love that. So, what are some of the concrete practical suggestions that you give in the book? Because I think that you're right. This is an area people get really excited about. We all know that it's an important thing we should be doing, but yet a lot of people struggle to actually, like, just make it over the mountain and do it. So what are some practical ways we can start that process?

Gretchen: Well, one thing I like to think about is like, "What are the little things you can do as part of your ordinary day?" Because I get it. People are like, "I have three kids. I work full time. You know, like, I can't spend an afternoon every Saturday cleaning up. And by the way, I don't want to. So, even if I had the time, I definitely would not do that with my time." So, like, what are the little things that you can do as you go? And so, one thing I love, and I think of everything in the book, this may be the thing that is resonating most with people, is the one-minute rule. Anything you can do in less than a minute, go ahead and do it without delay. If you can hang up your coat, instead of throwing it over a chair, if you can glance at a document, realize you need to file it and put it in the right file folder, if you can throw away a piece of trash instead of just, like, putting it on the desk beside you, go ahead and do that. And this is good because it's just part of your ordinary day and yet, it gets rid of that kind of scum of clutter on the surface of everyday life that really makes us feel weighed down. Another thing that's kind of along the same lines is power hour. And so, things that can be done at any time are often done in no time. And so, I have a habit of, like, I'll leave out this pile of library books on the kitchen counter because I'll remember to take them back to the library.

But then, like, weeks go by and I don't take them because it's like, "When am I gonna go to the library?" Anytime, no time, and yet they're just sitting out there, cluttering up my mind and cluttering up my space. So, power hour is you keep a running list of all the little things that you need to do. Like, you need to run to the hardware store to buy some kind of weird light bulb or you need to go to the shoe store, you need to go to the library, or it's just something that you need to get done. Like, I need to go through the month's receipts and, like, put them in chronological order and tally them up. So, with power hour, again, if you're a very, very busy person, you're like, "Could I take an hour and just sort of, like, try to handle some of these nagging tasks?" And what you find is that when you really sit down and do things, you can do a lot more in an hour, maybe than you think, and over a couple of weeks, a month, you start to make serious progress, and then you have this feeling of peace that comes when you're not looking at that burned out light bulb every single day, and be like, "Oh, I gotta go to the hardware store." You know, that's draining. So, that's another way to tackle it as you go. One thing that a lot of people seem to like is the ex-factor, to consider the ex-factor. This is with clothes.

If you are trying to decide whether to keep an item of clothing, imagine that you were walking down the street and you ran into your ex. Would you be happy that you were wearing that item of clothing? If not, maybe you wanna let that thing go. Another thing that works for a lot of people is to do a virtual move. We all are very familiar with the idea that moving is a great time to clear clutter because when you're packing stuff up, you don't wanna pay to move it, and box it up and deal with it, so people get rid of a lot of things before they move. And you should really try to clear clutter as much as you can before you move. Don't do it on the other side because that's a pain. But we're not always moving. You know, some people move frequently, some people are in place for a long time. So, what you can do is do a virtual move or an imaginary move, where you say to yourself, "Here I have this giant metal mixing bowl. If I were moving, would I take that with me?" And if you're like, "Well, probably not because we haven't used it in 10 years." It's like, "Okay. Well, why don't you go ahead and get rid of that now?" Because if you wouldn't move it to a new place, you probably don't need it in your current place.

Katie: I love that. I've always thought moving was great for that. But you're right. Why wait until we're actually moving to do it?

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Katie: And you already touched on one of the challenges, I would guess, that you hear from people or the factors that keep people from doing this, which is just overwhelming busyness. I know that's something I deal with a lot both as a mom and hear from my audience a lot. What are some of the others you hear about? And what are some of the ways we can kind of conquer those?

Gretchen: Yeah. Being overwhelmed is one... Like, especially people who have sort of like, I had a baby and started a new job in the same six months or I moved and switch jobs. And then it's easier to keep up than to catch up. So, remind yourself that if you get caught up, then it's much easier to keep up. So definitely, one is being overwhelmed. And I would say for that, just try to chip away at it until you get all those boxes unpacked or whatever. Another thing is decision fatigue. This is maybe the biggest contributor to clutter, which is a lot of times it takes effort to decide, "What am I gonna do with this? Okay. My daughter has outgrown this extremely cute little yellow dress. Do I keep it as a memento? Do I keep it because maybe it'll be a hand me down? Do I frame it? Do I give it away? Is it in good enough shape to give it away or actually is it really more like a rag because she wore it so often? But it's such a lovely memento, I wanna keep it." And instead of, like, coming to and coming to a decision, you're just like, "Why don't I just put everything in a box and jam it under the guest room bed, and then I'll just leave it there." But then that stuff mounts up, and then you've got a bunch of things where you don't really know what to do with it. So, part of it is to really push yourself to make a decision right away. And it's like, "I really love this yellow dress, it's in good shape, I'm gonna give it away. But first, I'm gonna take a picture of it because I never wanna forget it. But I don't need to keep it. I'm not gonna have another baby, so I don't need to keep it for a hand me down. I'll give it away so that somebody else could get good use out of it, because it's still got a lot of good wear."

So, now I made that decision. Now, I can act on it. Now I can give it away and get it out. But I have my picture, so I have my memory. Another thing, and this is related to that, is the emotional attachment that we feel to things because sometimes we just, it's like everything my children touch is precious to me or, you know, every photograph of anybody that I've ever...you know, feels kind of like, how can I throw that away? I've been astonished by how many people keep holiday cards of other people year after year, after year. There is something kind of superstitious in us where it feels like kind of wrong to throw away a picture of someone who we feel close to. And so, that makes it hard sometimes to get rid of things because you're like, "Oh, yeah, you know, I don't fit into this business suit anymore and I don't have the kind of job where even if I fit into it, I would wear this kind of suit, and it's out of fashion because it's 20 years old. But there was a time when I wore it every, once a week and I loved it, and it was in my first job. So, I feel this emotional attachment to it, which is making it hard for me to figure out what to do with it because it has this weight, beyond kind of its usefulness in my life." And so, I have to work through that in order to clear the clutter.

Katie: Yeah. I think that that sentimental attachment side is really tough. And I don't struggle with it much. I, like, go to my husband and I, I tend to, like, get rid of everything and, like, be not attached to stuff, some things I probably should be a little more attached to you. He's actually a little bit more sentimental, but I think that, it seems like the toughest one to overcome, because these items, even though they're just intangible

items, they have these sentimental meanings to us. And you're right, it makes total sense. It's hard to let go of that.

Gretchen: Yeah. It's interesting that you talked about the difference between you and your husband because this is definitely something where you see a huge range in how powerfully people feel attached. And it's interesting when you read kind of advice about clearing clutter, it's clear that many people who are sort of in the business of telling people how to clear clutter, themselves feel very little emotional attachment. And they don't seem to have very much understanding of how other people feel towards their objects. I think it's very important that if you are a person who feels a high emotional attachment to possessions, to really respect that into account for that, because just dismissing it doesn't help. Because it's like for me being like, "That stuff is in the past. Why keep it? Get rid of it." It's like, well, that doesn't help you if you feel a powerful attachment. I think you have to respect that attachment and help work through it. What I say to people who have that, I think I'm kind of in the middle of the two extremes, is to say, "If what you want from your possessions is to hang on to memories, those objects will do that. They will function better as that memory prompt if they are few in number and carefully chosen and probably smaller in size."

Because if you keep every drawing that your kindergarten son did in kindergarten, you will have a huge amount of paper that is not very interesting. Because it's just like yellow finger paint, blue finger paint, green finger paint, spelling test, spelling test, spelling test, spelling test. That's not interesting to anybody. If you have a folder of six things from kindergarten year, and it's like, the kindergarten photograph and the invitation to his birthday party, and three pieces of art that were really cool, and, like, three things that he did that were really great, and that's in a folder, well, that's fun. Because, you could go back with your son and like, "Let's look at what you did in kindergarten. You're in third grade now." And then you look at it, and it takes, like, 10 minutes, and it's like the highlight reel, that's fun. And that you can keep on a shelf and that's manageable. This four boxes in the basement, no one's ever gonna look through it because it's too boring, it's too low value, it's too diffuse. There's too much to go through. It takes up too much space and eventually, like, your basement will flood, the boxes will get ruined and, like, you'll throw them away, never having opened them in 10 years. You know, so, if you keep every t-shirt that you had in college, nothing special. If you keep the three that are the most iconic, the most special, then that's something that's manageable.

And so, I think often for people who are trying to imagine emotions, it's like, what is the best? What's the most iconic? What's the most typical? You know, and then maybe you take pictures of the other ones so that you get kind of that little memory prompt, but you often don't need the whole item. Or like my grandfather. My grandfather died, I could have kept his chair, his favorite chair. I could have kept his roll-top desk. I could have kept his grandfather clock because he collected clocks or I could have kept his pocket watch because he was an engineer on the Union Pacific Railroad, and his pocket watch was like, absolutely essential to his job. I picked the pocket watch because it's small and can fit on the shelf. I don't have to, like, what I'm going to move a roll-top desk around the...? You know, I live in New York City. But all I need something to remind me of my grandfather. And really, I don't need a thing to remind me of my grandfather, but I like having a thing to remind me of my grandfather. I like having something of my grandfather's, but I can choose what that is. I don't need to choose a major piece of furniture. I can pick something different and saturate it with those memories, as long as it's something that I associate with him.

Katie: Yeah. And that's a great point as well, especially, I haven't gone through this yet, but when we lose, you know, a parent. At some point, I've lost grandparents, but I wasn't at an age where I kept something of theirs. But there is that tendency to, like, wanna hold on to all of those things, to all of their furniture, and all of the things that have memories. And we don't need all of them. We're of course gonna remember those people we love, whether we have just one little reminder or every piece of furniture from their entire house. And I also love the photo idea. That's something I've done, just as a mom with six kids for sanity is, I will take pictures of my favorite things of their artwork or them in favorite clothing, and eventually, those get compiled into digital photo books that I can print out if I want, but small. So, I have this one eight-inch by eight-inch book that's, like, three years of their memories versus boxes of artwork, which I love. I bet you've gotten this question before. But I'm curious how this method differs from, like, the life-changing magic of tidying up. Because the one really big critique I hear of that for moms, is like, sparking joy is not a good metric because, like, all that artwork does actually spark joy for us, whereas diapers don't spark joy and dishes don't spark joy, but we can't throw those away. So, how does this differ?

Gretchen: Well, it differs quite a bit and, like, I'm a huge fan of Marie Kondo. I read her book the minute it came out. I've watched the Netflix's series, like, I binge-watched it in, like, a day-and-a-half. So I'm a huge fan of Marie Kondo. But the thing about Marie Kondo is she's got one right way, the Marie Kondo way. And it's like, you take every item of a certain kind and put it in a big pile on your floor, and you start in the morning, and you do it by yourself, and you don't have music, and you don't have a companion, and you do it in a certain order. And I just think, clearly, it works really, really well for some people, but I think sometimes people are like, "I can't do it that way. Therefore, I'm hopeless." Or like, "Therefore, what can I do? I can't do it the right way." And I'm like, "There's a lot of right ways." I would have nervous collapse if I took every item of clothing out and put it in a pile. Like, I just can't handle that. It's like, my mind explodes at the thought. So, I think there's a lot of right ways to do it, like, and the hard thing about what order you do it in. My view is like, do it in whatever order you want to. And I often, when people ask, like, when I'm constantly begging my friends to let me come over and help them clear clutter because I love to do it so much, I often say like, "What's bothering you the most? Let's just start with, like, what is the eyesore or like, what is annoying you? Like, to me, that's helpful. Now, I'm not saying Marie Kondo's way doesn't work. I think it really works well for a lot of people, but I don't think it works for everyone.

The Spark Joy test, again, I agree, I feel like that's the wrong test for me. I feel like there are things that I don't have a strong emotional attachment to, but that are necessary to my life and kind of do their job in their way. And you know, so I find that, do you need it, do you use it, do you love it is a better test, because there are things where I don't love it, but I use it or I need it, and so I'll keep it. And then there's things that I love, that I don't really use or need, and so, those maybe are my spark joys. But I felt like spark joy just was like too, like, it eliminated too many things on the one hand, and then like you say, it almost preserves too many things. Because, if you're like, I truly can recount the story of every "My Little Pony" figurine and have a happy memory with each one, but I don't wanna live with 40 My Little Ponies for the rest of my life. So I need another test. So, again, I think she's got a great way, and there's many things that she says that I think are really terrific. One of the things that I got from her book that I love is the idea of, like, if someone gives you a gift, and you don't really like it, a lot of times people feel like they have to keep it out of love and respect for the giver. But what she says, and I think this is a great way to think about it, is the purposes of a gift, really, is to be the outward symbol of someone's affection for you and their desire to give something to you. And so, by receiving it, it has accomplished that. And so, now you can sort of say to your gift, "Thank you for your service, thanks, thanks," which I also really love.

"Thank you for your service. And now I'm gonna let you go and be with somebody else who wants a giant fish platter because I don't." You know, and so, you can acknowledge that a gift has succeeded as a gift, even if you don't really like the gift or wanna use the gift. And another thing, I really do like the way she suggests that you touch everything, because I think that when you actually pick something up, when you pull it off a shelf or pull it out of a closet or whatever, I think often, it does make you think like, "Do I really wanna keep this?" Because when it's sitting on the shelf and it's kind of put away nicely, like, "Oh, that's not clutter." But when you pull it out... Like, I remember, I had somehow amassed 13 one-inch binders. It's like, I pulled it off the shelf, I'm like, "Do I really need 13 one-inch binders? No." So, I do think there's lots and lots and lots of things that she has that are very useful, even if you don't wanna follow her whole program. But I just don't think that there's one right way. I think there's a lot of right ways. There's a lot of ways for people to achieve their aims. So, that's what I would say the fundamental difference is. The show has kind of softened it. If you read the book... But she didn't write the book before she had children. So I will be very interested to see if she writes, you know, like, what does this look like for someone who now has two little kids? Because she may have changed her some of her philosophies.

Katie: Yeah. That's a great point. Motherhood is definitely a game changer for sure. And I wanna...

Gretchen: Yes, it is.

Katie: I know that we have a hard stop, so I wanna make sure I respect your time. And links to all of your books for anyone listening will be in the show notes at wellnessmama.fm. They're also available anywhere you buy books. But I wanna circle back to something you mentioned in relation to happiness, in the beginning, because it's such a big passion project for me right now, which is the importance of relationships and community. And, I mean, being in the online world myself, I feel like we're in a sense more connected than we've ever been, but also much actually less connected than we've ever been. And as a data nerd, I know the statistics say that having strong relationships and community, it's more important than quitting smoking, it's twice as important as exercise. Truly, it's one of the most important things we do for health and longevity. So, do you have any other suggestions or practical ways that we can really foster that in our normal life?

Gretchen: There's so many things to do in this area. So, my sister and I have talked about this several times on our podcast, the "Happier with Gretchen Rubin" podcast, because people have been so enthusiastic. It's actually something that my mother suggested. And it's called Update. So this is what we do with, like, our family of origin. My sister, my mother, my father, and I all do this. And you send an email, and people do this by text and different platforms, but we are always just emailing. And in the subject line, it says update, and you literally write the most prosaic ordinary things that are going on. This is, like, literally just to tell people, like, what are you doing right now. And the motto of Update is, "It's okay to be boring." So, like, my dad is like, "My knee is still giving me trouble. I've been icing it regularly. I'm thinking that maybe I need to go get an X-ray." You know, it's like, this goes on for weeks because he's like, his knee is getting better, now it's getting worse. My mother's like, "I'm getting my hair colored." I'll write things like, "Oh, Eleanor's really excited because today was her last math test of the school year," or whatever. And we started doing this because my mother made an observation that many people observe. It's a very common observation, that is, when you see people every day, you have a lot to tell them. And when you see them rarely, you're like, "How is everything?" "Fine." "How are you?" "I am also fine," and you don't have anything to say.

So, we thought that by really keeping each other up to date on, like, the super detail, boring stuff of our lives, we would feel more connected. And this is 100% true, wildly true. And so, we do this regularly. We've been doing it for years now. And a lot of people have picked this up. And it is just this way. You could do with your college roommates, any people that you wanna feel closer to who, for some reason, you're kind of... It could even be people who live in the same town or whatever, but now because your lives are so busy, you're not connected the way you might have been in the past. So, Update is a great thing. Another thing that I'm a big fan of is joining or starting a group because if you're a group, it's like... First of all, when groups come together, often, it's like you invite some of your friends and I invite some of my friends to form this group. Well, I don't know all your friends. So, now I'm meeting new people, you're meeting new people, and now we all know each other, so we're a social network instead of being just standalone friends. And because we meet regularly, it's like, "Okay. Well, I've been on book tour. I haven't come to this meeting in three months because I've been out of town so much." But you've kept meeting and then I'll join you when I can, and I'll start again. And so, it makes it a lot easier to schedule because it's like, "Well, if you miss something, that's okay, You'll just come back when you can."

And it's often easier to form relationships with people who are different from you because you have something in common, like, maybe it's a book club, which is very classic. I've heard of podcast clubs where people listen to a podcast, and then they get together and talk about it. I know a guy who had a podcast club called "Cereal and Cereal," and this was when "Cereal" was first airing, and they would get together, they eat breakfast cereal and listen to "Cereal" and then discuss it, which I thought was brilliant. I heard about a bunch of guys who were like, "Realistically, we're not gonna read a book," so they would take turns choosing a famous profile from the "New Yorker" magazine, because these are really masterpieces of profile writing of, like, really famous people like, Johnny Carson, or Joe DiMaggio, or whoever, and yet, they were short enough that everybody could get them read. So, they felt like they were reading something really valuable, really good, but short because that fit them better. My father-in-law is in a group where they talk about fly fishing. They don't even go fly fishing. They just talk about fly fishing, but that's what he likes. So, you know. So, you can form it around anything. Also, if you're volunteering, it can be good because often it's easier to form friends with people when you're doing something rather than just talking.

So, it's like, if you're cleaning out a city park or whatever it is, that can help you forge relationships. Another thing, because a lot of people, a lot of, a big, big problem, and you've alluded to this, for adults, is friendship. It's something that many adults complain about, which is, it's harder as an adult to make new friends. One thing you can do is you can try to revive a dormant friendship. This can often be easier than making a new friend. So, a dormant friendship is like somebody who you were once close to but now you've drifted apart from. So, like, maybe it was a neighbor, who you saw all the time, and you had so much fun with that neighbor, but now your neighbor lives across town and you've just sort of fallen out of touch. Can you get back in touch with that? Because, that's somebody you know from your past is a friend. You could revive that dormant friendship. Or maybe, in your life, there's somebody who kind of got away. Like, somebody at work where you were like, "You know, I always really liked them, that guy, but we never really took it past just the friendly acquaintances. We somehow never passed over that hurdle. But maybe I could reconnect with that person now and say, "Hey, I remember you love blah, blah. And I love it too." Like, do you wanna..." You know, can you revive that dormant friendship or like an almost friendship because sometimes that's less intimidating than trying to form a relationship with a new person.

So, there's a lot of things that people... Like, there was just an interesting article in "New York Times" about casual friendships. This is like the person who makes your coffee every morning, the person who cuts your hair, the person you see in the dog park. There's a lot of value in these very casual friendships. So, go out of your way to make conversation, to really treat these relationships, to consider them to be relationships of importance because it turns out that the research shows that they really do have a lot of value in terms of our happy life. They make us more empathetic. They make us feel more connected to our neighborhood and our community. They lift us up kind of on a daily level. They make us feel more connected and recognized. And so, these casual friendships are actually more significant than you might think. So, even for a very, very busy person, there's a lot of ways I think that you can amplify your relationships in a way that can really boost happiness.

Katie: I love that. And I think that's a perfect place to wrap up with that reminder of community relationships and happiness. And of course, all the books that we've talked about will be linked in the show notes as well as your podcast. But where's the easiest place for people to find you and stay in touch?

Gretchen: Well, at gretchenrubin.com, it's got the quiz that we talked about, the four tendencies quiz. It's got all sorts of resources related to my books, like, discussion guides and one-pagers. And you can see my podcast there. If you wanna listen to an episode, you can subscribe, of course, but you can go to the website, gretchenrubin.com. And then I'm all over social media just as Gretchen Rubin. And I love to connect with readers and listeners. And so, hit me up if you have an insight, or an observation, or a question. I'm all over the place.

Katie: Awesome. Gretchen, thank you so much for the time. I know how busy you are, and I'm honored you took the time to be here with us.

Gretchen: Oh, I'm so happy to talk to you. Thank you for having me.

Katie: And thanks as always to all of you for listening and sharing your most valuable asset of your time with both of us today. We're so grateful that you did. And I hope that you will join me again on the next episode of the "Wellness Mama Podcast."

If you're enjoying these interviews, would you please take two minutes to leave a rating or review on iTunes for me? Doing this helps more people to find the podcast, which means even more moms and families could benefit from the information. I really appreciate your time, and thanks as always for listening.