

**“Gretchen Rubin is one of the most erudite authors of her generation.” –SUSAN CAIN, author of *Quiet***

# **THE FOUR TENDENCIES**

**The Indispensable Personality Profiles  
That Reveal How to Make Your Life Better  
(and Other People’s Lives Better, Too)**

**GRETCHEN  
RUBIN**

**#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author of  
THE HAPPINESS PROJECT**

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**GRETCHEN RUBIN**



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First Edition

# 1

## The Four Tendencies

The Origin of the Four Tendencies • How the Tendencies Weave Throughout Our Characters • Why It's Helpful to Identify Our Own Tendency • Why It's Helpful to Identify Others' Tendencies

I didn't realize it at the time, but when I walked through the door of the Atlantic Grill restaurant one blustery winter afternoon, I was heading to one of the most significant conversations of my life.

As I bit into my cheeseburger and my friend picked at her salad, she made a comment that would occupy my mind for years. In an offhand way, she mentioned, "I want to get myself in the habit of running, but I can't, and it really bothers me." Then she added, in a crucial observation, "When I was on the high school track team, I never missed track practice, so why can't I go running now?"

"Why?" I echoed.

"Well, you know, it's so hard to make time for ourselves."

"Hmmm," I said.

We started talking about other things, but even after we'd said good-bye, I couldn't stop thinking about our exchange. She was the same person she'd been in high school,

and she was aiming to do the same activity. She'd been able to go running in the past, but not now. Why? Was it her age, her motivation, her family situation, the location, team spirit, or something else?

She assumed that we all have trouble "making time for ourselves." But actually I *don't* have any trouble making time for myself. How were she and I different from each other?

I would spend the next few years trying to answer these questions.

## The Origin of the Four Tendencies

They say there are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don't.

I'm definitely the first kind. My great interest is human nature, and I constantly search for patterns to identify what we do and why we do it.

I've spent years studying happiness and habits, and it has become obvious to me that there's no magic, one-size-fits-all answer for building a happier, healthier, more productive life. Different strategies work for different people—in fact, what works for one person may be the *very opposite* of what works for someone else. Some people are morning people; some are night people. Some do better when they abstain from a strong temptation; others, when they indulge in moderation. Some people love simplicity; some thrive in abundance.

And not only that. As I pondered my friend's observation about her running habit, I sensed that deep below the "night people vs. morning people" sorts of differences, there existed some kind of bedrock distinction that shaped people's

natures—something profound, but also bold and obvious—that nevertheless eluded my vision.

To help figure out what I was missing, I posed a number of questions to readers of my website, including: “How do you feel about New Year’s resolutions?” “Do you observe traffic regulations—why or why not?” “Would you ever sign up to take a class for fun?” As readers’ responses poured in, I saw that distinct patterns were threaded through the various answers. It was almost *weird*—as though groups of people had agreed to answer from the same script.

For instance, about New Year’s resolutions, a subset of people gave virtually identical answers: “I’ll keep a resolution if it’s useful, but I won’t start on New Year’s Day, because January 1 is an arbitrary date.” They all used that word: “arbitrary.” I was intrigued by this specific word choice, because the *arbitrariness* of the January 1 date had never bothered me. Yet these people were all giving the same answer—what did they have in common?

And many people answered, “I don’t make New Year’s resolutions anymore because I never manage to keep them—I never make time for myself.”

Another group said, “I never make resolutions because I don’t like to bind myself.”

There was some meaningful design here, I knew it, but I just couldn’t quite see it.

Then finally, after months of reflection, I had my eureka moment. As I sat at my desk in my home office, I happened to glance at my messy handwritten to-do list—and suddenly it hit me. The simple, decisive question was: “*How do you respond to expectations?*” I’d found it!

I’d discovered the key. I felt the same excitement that Archimedes must have felt when he stepped out of his bath.

I was sitting still, but my mind was racing forward with thoughts about *expectations*. I grasped at that moment that we all face two kinds of expectations:

- outer expectations—expectations others place on us, like meeting a work deadline
- inner expectations—expectations we place on ourselves, like keeping a New Year’s resolution

And here was my crucial insight: Depending on a person’s response to outer and inner expectations, that person falls into one of four distinct types:

**Upholders** respond readily to both outer expectations and inner expectations

**Questioners** question all expectations; they meet an expectation only if they believe it’s justified, so in effect they respond only to inner expectations

**Obligers** respond readily to outer expectations but struggle to meet inner expectations

**Rebels** resist all expectations, outer and inner alike

It was that simple. With just one single, straightforward question, all of humanity sorted itself into these categories.

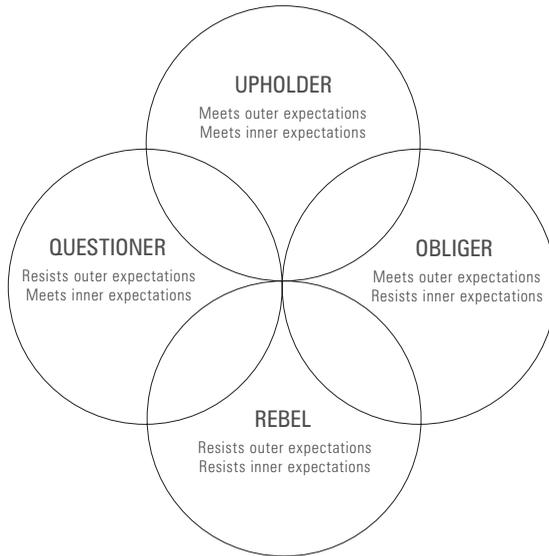
Now I understood why my friend had trouble forming the habit of running: She was an Obliger. When she’d had a team and a coach expecting her, she had no trouble showing up; when she faced her own inner expectations, she struggled. I understood those repetitious comments about New Year’s resolutions. And I understood much, much more.

The Four Tendencies framework clarified the striking patterns of behavior I’d perceived, and I was able to make

sense of what everyone else had seen—but no one else had noticed.

When I mapped the complete system on a sheet of paper, in four symmetrical overlapping circles, my framework showed the elegance of a fern frond or a nautilus shell. I truly felt that I'd uncovered a law of nature: human nature.

Or maybe I'd created something more like a Muggle Sorting Hat.



Once I'd identified the framework, I worked to deepen my understanding. "The Strategy of the Four Tendencies" became the first chapter in *Better Than Before*, my book about habit change; I wrote about the Four Tendencies on my website, [gretchenrubin.com](http://gretchenrubin.com); my cohost and sister, Elizabeth Craft, and I talked about the Four Tendencies on our weekly podcast, *Happier with Gretchen Rubin*. Every time I discussed the framework, readers and listeners responded.

Most people can identify their Tendency from a brief

description, but for people who aren't sure or who want their answers to be analyzed, I designed a quiz. Hundreds of thousands of people have taken the Four Tendencies Quiz, which appears in chapter 2 or at [happiercast.com/quiz](http://happiercast.com/quiz). People's answers to the quiz, as well as their open-ended responses, gave me an additional trove of insights. (For one thing, I've noticed that people's Tendencies influence their willingness to take the quiz. Questioners sometimes ask, "Why should I spend my time and effort taking this quiz?" and Rebels sometimes think, "You're telling me to take this quiz? Well, I won't do it.")

To test my observations about the Four Tendencies, I decided to run a study of the framework among a nationally representative sample, to examine a geographically dispersed group of U.S. adults with a mix of gender, age, and household income.

The most important thing I discovered? The distribution of the Four Tendencies. At 41%, Obliger was the largest Tendency. Next came Questioner, at 24%. The Rebel Tendency had the fewest members, at 17%—I'm surprised that the survey put the number that high—and my own Tendency, the Upholder Tendency, was just slightly larger at 19%. The study also confirmed many of my observations about the Four Tendencies; for instance, when considering New Year's resolutions, Upholders are most likely to make them; Rebels dislike them; Questioners make resolutions when the time seems right rather than waiting for an arbitrary date; and often Obligers give up making resolutions altogether because they've struggled in the past.

As I refined the framework, I even assigned a color to each Tendency, by using the model of a traffic light. Yellow represents Questioners, because just as a yellow light cautions us to "wait" to decide whether to proceed, Questioners always

ask “Wait, why?” before meeting an expectation. Green represents Obligers, who readily “go ahead.” Red represents Rebels, who are most likely to “stop” or say no. Because there’s no fourth traffic-light color, I chose blue for Upholders—which seems fitting.

The more I’ve studied the Tendencies, the more I’ve come to see their tremendous influence.

When we consider the Four Tendencies, we’re better able to understand ourselves. This self-knowledge is crucial because we can build a happy life only on the foundation of our own nature, our own interests, and our own values.

Just as important, when we consider the Four Tendencies, we’re better able to understand other people. We can live and work more effectively with others when we identify their Tendencies—as coworkers and bosses, teachers and coaches, husbands and wives, parents and children, health-care providers and patients.

Understanding the Four Tendencies gives us a richer understanding of the world.

## **How the Tendencies Weave Throughout Our Characters**

Our Tendencies are hardwired: they’re not the result of birth order, parenting style, religious upbringing, gender. They’re not tied to extroversion or introversion. They don’t change depending on whether we’re at home, at work, with friends. And they don’t change as we age. We bring these Tendencies into the world with us.

To a degree that surprises me, most people do indeed fall squarely into one of the four camps. While it can sometimes be difficult to identify a child’s Tendency (I still can’t

figure out the Tendency of one of my daughters), by adulthood we clearly fit into a particular Tendency that shapes our perceptions and behavior in fundamental ways. Unless we go through some catastrophic, character-reshaping experience—such as a near-death experience, a grave illness, or a serious bout with addiction—our Tendencies don't change.

Depending on history and circumstance, though, our Tendency might be more or less helpful as we make our way in the world. In North Korea, a Questioner's questions might get him thrown in jail, while in Silicon Valley a Questioner's questions might win her a promotion.

Also, there's an enormous range of personalities, even among people who share the same Tendency. Regardless of Tendency, some people are more or less thoughtful than others, or ambitious, intellectual, controlling, charismatic, kind, anxious, energetic, or adventurous. These qualities dramatically influence how they express their Tendencies. An ambitious Rebel who wants to be a well-respected business leader will behave differently from one who doesn't care much about having a successful career.

People often argue that they're a mix of Tendencies. They tell me, "I'm an Obliger and an Upholder," or "My Tendency changes depending on where I am or who I'm with." This may sound sensible, but I must say that when I ask a few more questions, the person falls easily within a single Tendency, almost without exception.

To be sure, as discussed in the sections on "Variations Within the Tendency," people often "tip" in the direction of a Tendency that overlaps with their own, but nevertheless they still remain firmly located within a core Tendency.

And, of course, it's also true that no matter what our fundamental Tendency, a small part of each of us is Upholder, Questioner, Obliger, and Rebel.

All of us meet an expectation when we don't want to bear the consequences of ignoring it. The Rebel wears his seat belt after he pays a few big fines.

All of us may question why we should have to meet an expectation, or become annoyed by inefficiency, or refuse to do something that seems arbitrary.

We all meet some expectations because they're important to someone else. The most determined Upholder will sacrifice her regular Monday-morning meeting if her child is recovering from surgery.

And whatever our Tendency, we share a desire for autonomy. We prefer to be asked rather than ordered to do something, and if our feeling of being controlled by others becomes too strong, it can trigger "reactance," a resistance to something that's experienced as a threat to our freedom or our ability to choose.

After I'd described the Four Tendencies at a conference, a guy walked up to me and said, "I think everyone should be able to drive at whatever speed they think is safe, so I must be a Questioner!"

I smiled, but the fact is, it's not a simple matter of "I ignore the speed limit, so I'm a Questioner," or "I refuse to wash dishes, therefore I'm a Rebel," or "I love to-do lists, so I'm an Upholder." To identify our Tendency, we must consider many examples of our behavior and our *reasons* for our behaviors. For example, a Questioner and a Rebel might both reject an expectation, but the Questioner thinks, "I won't do it because it doesn't make sense," while the Rebel thinks, "I won't do it because you can't tell me what to do."

I've learned that while each of the Four Tendencies poses its difficulties, people find the Obliger and the Rebel Tendencies the most challenging—whether as a member of that Tendency themselves or dealing with that Tendency

in others. (Which is why the Obliger and Rebel sections in this book are longer than the Upholder and Questioner sections.)

Many people try to map the Four Tendencies against other personality frameworks, such as the Big Five personality traits, StrengthsFinder, the Enneagram, Myers-Briggs, VIA—even onto the four houses of Hogwarts.

I'm fascinated by any scheme that helps me to understand human nature, but I think it's a mistake to try to say that "this" equals "that." Each framework captures a certain insight, and that insight would be lost if all of the systems were dumped together. No single system can capture human nature in all of its depth and variety.

Also, I think that many personality frameworks cram too many elements into their categories. By contrast, the Four Tendencies describes only one narrow aspect of a person's character—a vitally important aspect, but still just one of the multitude of qualities that form an individual. The Four Tendencies explain *why we act* and *why we don't act*.

## Why It's Helpful to Identify Our Own Tendency

When I describe the Four Tendencies, I sometimes get the impression that people try to figure out the "best" Tendency and shoehorn themselves into it. But there's no best or worst Tendency. The happiest, healthiest, most productive people aren't those from a particular Tendency, but rather they're the people who have figured out how to harness the strengths of their Tendency, counteract the weaknesses, and build the lives that work for them.

With wisdom, experience, and self-knowledge from the

Four Tendencies, we can use our time more productively, make better decisions, suffer less stress, get healthier, and engage more effectively with other people.

If we don't understand our place in the Four Tendencies, however, we may fail to pinpoint the aspects of a particular situation that's causing us to succeed or fail. For instance, a literary agent told me, "I represent a journalist who did excellent work at a newspaper. No trouble with deadlines, great work ethic. But now he's on leave from the paper to write a book, and he's got writer's block."

"I bet it's not writer's block. He's probably an Obliger," I said. "He had no trouble working when he had to meet frequent deadlines. But with a distant deadline and little supervision, he can't work. He should ask his editor to check in with him every week, or join a writers' group, or you could ask him to submit pages to you every month. Just some system of external accountability."

Also, if we don't understand the Four Tendencies, we may have unrealistic assumptions of how people may change. One woman wrote, "My husband is a Rebel. I feel frustrated thinking that this is actually his character and that he'll never change. Is it possible that a Rebel is just someone who hasn't 'grown up' and realized that the world doesn't run on doing only what you 'feel like' doing at the moment? And that he will eventually change his attitude?" I didn't want to say it bluntly in my response, but gosh, no, at this point I *don't* think he'll change.

People often ask me, "Should your Tendency determine your choice of career?" Every Tendency could find a fit with just about every job, but it's interesting to think about how career and Tendency might interact. For instance, I know a professional dog trainer who is an Upholder, and he brings

an Upholder spirit to it. But I can imagine how Questioners, Obligers, and Rebels could also do that work.

Even if people from each Tendency *could* pursue any career, however, that doesn't mean they *should*. The Four Tendencies can help us identify why we might enjoy certain kinds of work more—or less. One reader wrote, “Now I see why I hate my job. I am 100% Questioner, and also a tax accountant. I don't care about keeping up with the details of what's ultimately a large set of arbitrary rules that make no sense, and this has been a major hurdle in my success and happiness at work.”

Knowing our own Tendency can allow us to show ourselves more compassion by realizing, “Hey, I'm this type of person, and there's nothing wrong with me. I can make the best of it.” As one Upholder wrote, “My parents always told me to loosen up, my late husband always told me to loosen up, now my daughter tells me to loosen up. But now I know I'm much happier when I follow the rules that I've set for myself.”

One Rebel explained:

Realizing that I'm a Rebel revealed why years of therapy failed. We'd analyzed my dearth of discipline, tried and rejected techniques that backfired (accountability? ha). It's not just that some techniques don't work for Rebels. It's that we're told (and often believe) that something is deeply wrong with us. An otherwise high-functioning, highly successful grown-up who still struggles to pay bills, complete projects, and follow through on, well, anything? Who struggles to meet everyone's expectations—even our own? That's not merely unusual; in today's world, it sounds downright pathological. But your framework assures us it's not. It's been freeing to focus on what works for me rather than what's wrong with me.

An Obliger wrote:

As a TV writer, I've struggled miserably with my inability to stick to any kind of personal deadline, yet I've always been a dutiful employee who submits scripts on time to my boss. I've given this tendency many names: laziness, being irresponsible, being a child in grown-up clothes, and many terms that wouldn't get past your spam filter. By giving me a new name—Obliger—you've given me a way to accept myself. I can put the self-loathing aside and concentrate on devising clever ways to trick myself into doing stuff. It's already made me more productive, but more importantly, it's made me much happier.

When we recognize our Tendency, we can tweak situations to boost our chances of success. It's practically impossible to change our own nature, but it's fairly easy to change our circumstances in a way that suits our Tendency—whether by striving for more clarity, justification, accountability, or freedom. Insight about our Tendency allows us to create the situations in which we'll thrive.

### **Why It's Helpful to Identify Others' Tendencies**

On the flip side, when we understand others' Tendencies, we're more tolerant of them. For one thing, we see that a person's behavior isn't aimed at us personally. That Questioner isn't asking questions to undermine the boss or challenge the professor's authority; the Questioner always has questions. A reader wrote, "I've lived with a Rebel for the past seven years. It's comforting to know that his way of being is as natural for *him* as being an Obliger is for *me*."

Knowing other people's Tendencies also makes it much easier to persuade them, to encourage them, and to avoid conflict. If we don't consider a person's Tendency, our words may be ineffective or even counterproductive. The fact is, if we want to communicate, we must speak the right language—not the message that would work most effectively with *us*, but the message that will persuade the *listener*. When we take into account the Four Tendencies, we can tailor our arguments to appeal to different values.

On the other hand, when we ignore the Tendencies, we lower our chances of success. The more an Upholder lectures a Rebel, the more the Rebel will want to resist. A Questioner may provide an Obliger with several sound reasons for taking an action, but those logical arguments don't matter much to an Obliger; external accountability is the key for an Obliger.

A reader sent me this hilarious list of lightbulb jokes that captures the distinctions among the Tendencies:

*How do you get an Upholder to change a lightbulb?*

Answer: He's already changed it.

*How do you get a Questioner to change a lightbulb?*

Answer: Why do we need that lightbulb anyway?

*How do you get an Obliger to change a lightbulb?*

Answer: Ask him to change it.

*How do you get a Rebel to change a lightbulb?*

Answer: Do it yourself.

A Questioner nutritionist told me, "My goal is to improve the way people eat in this country. I'm writing a book to explain how cultural and economic systems shape the way

people eat.” She firmly believed that if her book presented the arguments in a sufficiently logical way, people across the country would change their eating habits. Questioner!

But to communicate effectively, we must reach people through *their* Tendency, not our own. That’s true for doctors, professors, coaches, bosses, spouses, parents, coworkers, teachers, neighbors, or people in any walk of life who want to persuade others to do what they want—in other words, it’s true for all of us.

Even for messages meant for a wide audience, it’s possible to convey information to strike a chord with every Tendency. I heard a creative example one afternoon when I spoke about the Four Tendencies at a business conference. Before introducing me, the group’s head had explained, at considerable length, why it was important that participants show up on time, in the right place, for the rest of the weekend’s conference activities.

After I gave my talk, I was delighted to hear him aim his reminders at each of the Four Tendencies. He said, “To you Upholders, thanks in advance for cooperating with my request for promptness. Questioners, I gave you a bunch of reasons for why you need to show up on time at all the meetings. To you Obligers, I’m watching you, and I’m counting on you to be there promptly. Rebels, save it for the bar later.” *Exactly!*

Even the vocabulary we choose may resonate differently among the different Tendencies. A Rebel child might respond better if asked, “Do you feel like playing the piano now?” while an Upholder child would be happy to be reminded, “Time to practice the piano.”

Just in the area of health, people’s failure to listen to their doctors carries a huge cost. Poor diet, inactivity, alcohol and prescription drug abuse, and smoking are among the leading causes of illness and death in the United States—all

behaviors that are within our conscious control. When we take people's Tendencies into account, we're more likely successfully to persuade them to cut back on sugar, go for a twenty-minute walk, do their rehab exercises, give up booze, or take their medications.

But it's important to remember that the Four Tendencies framework is meant to help us understand ourselves more deeply, not to limit our sense of identity or possibility. Some people say, "When you define yourself, you confine yourself." I think systems of self-definition are very helpful—because they serve as a starting point for self-knowledge. The Four Tendencies framework isn't meant to be a box that cramps our growth or a label that determines everything about us, but rather a spotlight that can illuminate hidden aspects of our nature.

When we understand ourselves and how our Tendency shapes our perspective on the world, we can adapt our circumstances to suit our own nature—and when we understand how other people's Tendencies shape *their* perspectives, we can engage with them more effectively.

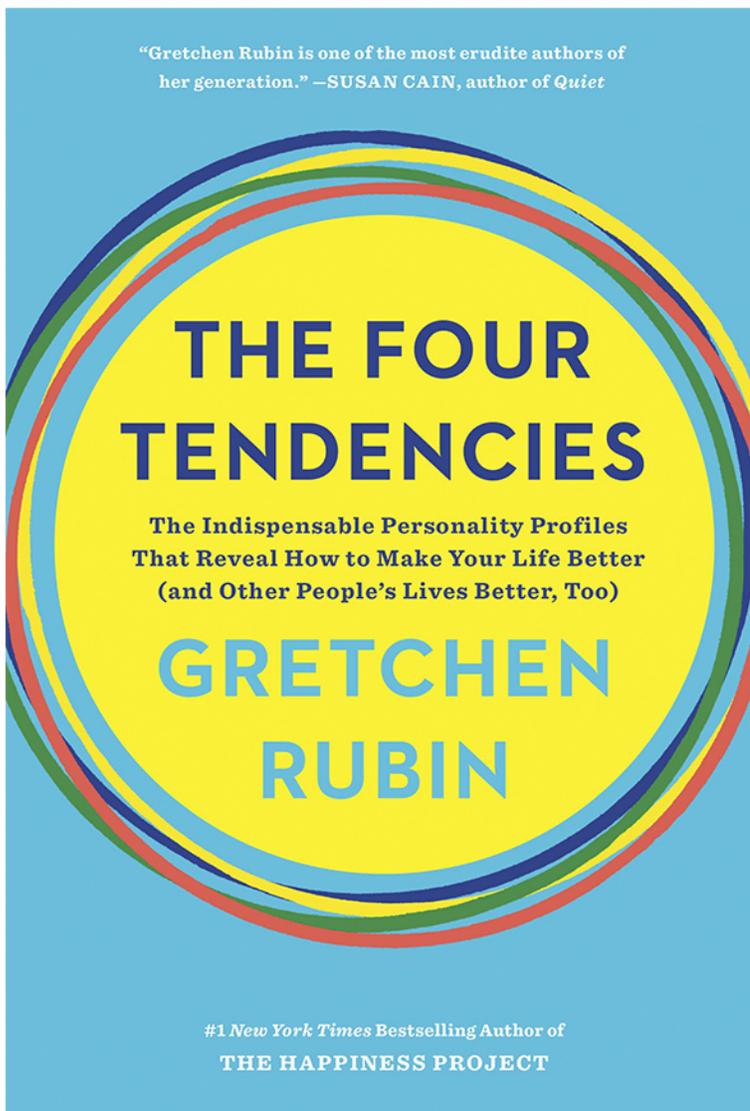
With the Four Tendencies, we see how a subtle shift in vocabulary, or a quick conversation, or a minor change in procedure can be enough to change a person's entire course of action. And that matters. If this patient takes his blood-pressure medication regularly, he'll live longer. If this student completes her professor's assignments, she won't fail the course. If this husband and wife can speak to each other calmly, their marriage will last. And if I stop sending out work emails over the weekend, I won't annoy the people with whom I work.

One of the big daily challenges of life is: "How do I get people—including myself—to do what I want?" The Four Tendencies makes this task much, much easier.

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