

EPISODE 198

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.6] PF: Welcome to episode 198 of Live Happy Now. This is your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us today. This week, we're cutting the clutter with New York Times bestselling author, Gretchen Rubin. For the past decade, Gretchen has been delving into what makes us happy, and spoiler alert, it's not a bunch of stuff. In fact, her new book, *Outer Order, Inner Calm: Declutter and Organize to Make More Room for Happiness*, shows us how outer order contributes to our overall wellbeing.

She sat down with me to talk about why organization and happiness go hand in hand and tell us how we can achieve it.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:36.6] PP: Gretchen, I appreciate you getting into our studio today and talking to us about this book, because this is such an important topic.

[0:00:43.2] GR: I'm so happy to be talking to you.

[0:00:45.3] PP: Well, you know, I know that we have a lot of interest in organization now and you know, something that's kind of caught my attention, we seem to be more fascinated with organization than ever before. Can you tell me why that is?

[0:00:57.1] GR: Well, you know, I do think it's something that people are always interested in. I think it's sort of a perennial subject of sort of getting control of our stuff and people recognized that they feel more focused and calmer and it's easier to find your keys. But I do wonder if right now, if the world feels like a very noisy, overwhelming place. It seems like there's like so much going on and like, so much to deal with, it's very easy to become overwhelmed and so I wonder if that's making people think, "You know what? I can't control the world but I can control my coat closet, and if I can't bring down the level of noise on the outside, I can at least get everything more orderly within my immediate environment and that will help me cultivate that sense of kind of calm, it's going to make me feel better."

[0:01:41.5] PP: That makes perfect sense, because I wondered if it's harder to declutter these days? It just seems like we have more stuff but maybe it's just the noise from the outside world that makes it feel that way. What do you think?

[0:01:53.6] GR: Well, I do think it's easier to buy more stuff. I mean, a lot of stuff has become cheaper and cheaper over time and so it's easier to kind of reach out and buy it. I think for some people, things like online shopping have made it a lot easier in a way that maybe isn't good.

So, I think one of the things to do and I certainly suggest this in the book is kind of understand where you might be tempted. Some people do a lot of online shopping. For them, it's like, "Okay, delete your accounts." Every time you buy on line you have to shop as a guest. That's just a little bit more inconvenient and it's probably enough that a lot of people won't impulse buy because it's just a little bit of a nuisance.

Now, other people, they shop in person and you might say to that person, "Okay, well, don't carry cash." Some people do better when they use a credit card because then they have the statement that tells them exactly how they spend their money. A lot of people are just the opposite. Credit card feels like pretend money, but when they have cash in their hand, they feel that pain and so it's like, "Well what works for you?" Then there's little tricks like don't use a basket or a cart. If you're carrying things in your arm and you're going to be a lot less likely to just randomly start picking things up.

So I think part of it is just knowing what for you might cause you to buy things that you later regretted or realized that you didn't need.

[0:03:07.7] PP: Those are great tips. You know, the thing that struck me about this book as I was going through it, first of all, it has so many great tips and it is something that everyone can get something out of and what was it that made you personally interested in taking on this topic and really giving us a great game plan for getting through all these clutter in our lives?

[0:03:30.6] GR: Well, you know, ever since I wrote *The Happiness Project* 10 years ago, I've noticed in myself and in other people, how kind of energized people are around the subject of outer order. You know, you talk about the resolution to make your bed, which is one of the most

common happiness project resolutions. People laugh and talk about it, they want to talk about making their bed, do they make their bed? I make my bed in a hotel room on the day I check out. I'm that kind of person.

[0:03:54.3] PP: Do you really?

[0:03:55.6] GR: I do. So people have to talk about it and I noticed and I wrote a book about habits called *Better Than Before* and what I noticed is like people are not that energized about talking about exercise which is a habit that is very important but people don't – it's not like there's not this kind of sense of buzz around it.

I just became more interested, like, "Why is that?" I realized, it's because out of order contributes to inner calm for most people and most of us are very aware of that. We know, "Oh my gosh, if cleaning out this closet is going to make me feel amazing," you know? "Getting control of my kids and cabinets is like going to give me such a surge of energy and cheer. I can't wait for it." There's just this connection and so it just, over time, I became more and more intrigued by it and I wanted to focus on it.

It had always been part of the discussion of happiness and good habits and human nature that I was doing, but I thought, "You know, I really want to shine a spotlight on this very specific area." You know, it's a small area but it's actually quite significant in our lives. I think it's interesting because in the research, there's not that much attention paid to it and what research is done, I think is not very helpful. But in popular culture, of course, it's wildly popular and people love to talk about it and there's articles and TV shows and books and, you know, there's a lot of conversation around it. Because I think people really are interested in it and the thing is, it is a challenge in a lot of ways and there's a lot of different challenges, different people face different challenges so you have to think about that.

Once you create it, of course then you have to maintain it and it's a whole separate challenge. So there is a lot going on when it comes to outer order.

[0:05:31.1] PP: How do you go about compiling all the information, what was the collection and writing process like for you?

[0:05:38.9] GR: Well, it was so fun. This was such a fun playful book to write. I was very inspired in the structure of it from a little book called *Food Rules* by Michael Pollen. That's the book where he has his famous statement, "Eat food, mostly plants, not too much," and anyway, just the way he talks about food and eating, in just these like quick snippets and I love the way you could like, tear through the book, get a ton of information in this very kind of streamlined way.

I admired that book and I realized that as I was thinking about clutter and order is I was kind of thinking about, "Well, you can do this and you could do that, you could do this other thing." It sort of fit into that kind of structure. So I started keeping track of all the ideas that I heard from other people or that I came up with myself or that we talked about on the Happier Podcast, the podcast I have with my sister, Elizabeth Craft, like things that were resonating with people and it just sort of started to take its form.

You know, the thing that I realize or the thing that I believe is that there's no one right way. There's no magic one size fits all solution to tackling a challenge. Like whether it's clearing clutter or eating right or getting more sleep or reading more or whatever it is. You kind of have to do it in the way that's right for you. What I wanted to do with this book was to have tons and tons of possibilities so that each person could pick, go through and that everybody would hit some things when they're like, "Oh my gosh, I can totally do this. Yeah, this is what I want to do, this would work for me, I could do this, I could imagine myself doing this." To the point where they're like halfway through and they just leap from their seat and go running to the medicine cabinet to start cleaning clutter. That was the kind of book that I wanted to write.

So it's not about like, "Here's the program, you know, my way is the right way and you got to do it this way." It's kind of like, pick and choose what works for you.

[0:07:23.4] PP: I think that's one thing that is so appealing about it because it is light and playful in its tone and it just – it feels like such a cleansing kind of read because they are bite sized. As you noted then, it's like a buffet, you can just go and pick the things that you want out of there and have those and not worry about the things that aren't relevant to you.

[0:07:43.2] GR: Right. Well, it's funny that you said that because I did think like, well, kind of a challenge a book like this is that it better be pretty streamlined, and pretty – every single thing

should be useful and there for a reason because the whole point of the book is like, let's get rid of the things that we don't need. So I wanted to write a book that felt light.

[0:08:01.1] PP: Well, it works very well and it's so funny because one of my friends I was telling her about this book, I was reading this book and she's like, "Well, can I borrow it when you're done?" I'm like, "Well, I don't know when I'll be done," and she said, "Isn't it wrong for you to hoard a book about getting rid of clutter?" She got me.

[0:08:17.1] GR: Yeah, I know that's funny.

[0:08:18.8] PP: But touched on this earlier, and you mentioned that there is a great relationship between outer order and inner calm, as your book title says, and we know that's true but what exactly is that? You know, we hear that relationship and that correlation a lot, but can you explain to us how that works?

[0:08:36.5] GR: You know, I think it's true on many levels. In the simplest kind of noise concrete level, life is easier when you get rid of things you don't need, don't use, don't love. I mean, you can find your keys more easily, you can clean and dust and vacuum more easily, you can put things away more easily. Life is just easier. It's easier to make a decision about like, "What am I going to wear to work tomorrow?" Because everything fits, everything you like, you're not fighting your way through a bunch of stuff where you're happy to be like, "Well, this one has a stain so I have to wear a sweater and this one doesn't really fit." It's just, life is easier.

Then, I think you know, part of what's going on with our possessions is they do allow us to project our identity into our environment and they do remind us of the people and places and activities that we love. That's a very positive aspect of possessions but possessions can also embody our fantasy self. Things that we wish were true that aren't true. Sometimes when we look at possessions, we're full of guilt and regret and remorse because maybe I feel bad when I look at that pair of shoes because I think, "Wow, I paid a lot of money for those shoes and I've never really worn them, that was a mistake."

Or, I think, "I got that yoga mat because I was planning to do so much yoga but I haven't really been doing any yoga." Or it's like, "I have these clothes and I used to fit into them and one day I want to fit into them again, so if I get rid of them, even though I haven't worn them in five years,

does that mean that I'm admitting to myself that my body is not going to change?" That for some people is a very painful prospect.

So these possessions are not just possessions; they serve as kind of embodiment of certain kinds of ideas and emotions that we have that can be painful. Then of course for many people, there is this powerful emotional aspect of possessions and so things are dear to us far beyond what we can manage, you know?

If every toy that my daughter ever loved is important to me, it's like, "I'm going to be drowning in plastic for the rest of my life. If every outfit, if every T shirt my husband has ever worn is precious, then we got no room for any new T shirts." So part of it is understanding like these things do have emotional value, they do represent people that I love, yes this person has died and this set of China was important. I'm not using it; how do I think about that in a way that lets me let go of it?"

So, this takes some work and that's why for many people, clearing clutter can be very emotional and difficult because it's not just a matter of deciding, "Hey, I have," this is what I recently happened to me, I was going through my kitchen and it was like, "Hey, we have two garlic presses, why do we have two? Let's get rid of one," and then it's like, "Wait a minute, we never use a garlic press at all, why do we have any garlic presses? Let's give away both." That was sort of like I don't know how that happened but it wasn't painful.

You know, your grandmother's china, that's like a different kind of calculation.

[0:11:31.7] PP: Yeah, there's a lot going on.

[0:11:33.2] GR: Getting rid of those things, though, then releases this enormous sense of relief and that's on the other side where you get the cheer and the energy and sense of possibility and just the lightness of it. That's the slimily people always used as they feel later. They really feel like their very body has been unburdened.

[0:11:54.0] PP: Yeah, getting there as you noted is no small task and I'd like to talk for a second about that emotional attachment that we have with this stuff and you mentioned, like I've got my great aunt's cedar chest and I have no use for it. It does not fit in any way with my décor but she

wanted me to have it so bad that I'm like, "I have to keep this cedar chest in a contemporary living room," and so you know what is that? What is the process that each of us has to go through to detach from stuff, from belongings?

[0:12:24.9] GR: Well, part of it was to think like, "Well, was my great aunt important to me?" Was your great aunt important to you?

[0:12:29.9] PF: Absolutely.

[0:12:30.9] GR: Okay, so she really was important. Because sometimes people inherit things from people they don't even know. They will get pictures of people that they don't even recognize and I am like, "Well, that's like, yes, you have family connection but you know?" Your great aunt was truly important to you.

Do you think that you have another possession in your house that reminds you of your great aunt other than the cedar chest? Do you have anything else?

[0:12:53.4] PF: Absolutely. Yeah, I have a graduation picture from high school. So, to me that's the most important thing to me.

[0:12:58.4] GR: So maybe you could say to yourself, "I have the thing that," — what's important is the relationship to your great aunt and that is very, very important and dear to you. But for you, the thing that represents that is this picture. Now to your great aunt, the cedar chest is more important. The picture maybe was less important, but for you, the actual picture of her and maybe at this time in her life or whatever it meant to you that is more important.

So the cedar chest is kind of incidental, because you have the picture and also the picture, let's just note, this kind of thing is better when it is small in size and easy to store. A cedar chest is one thing, a framed photograph is something very different. So I'm like, the framed photograph makes so much better memento than a cedar chest and so it was very important to her and so you have acknowledge that was important to her. You know it was important to her.

But what is important now is your memory of her and you don't need the cedar chest for that and also the thing about memento's is the more you have, they become unworkable and then

they don't even serve their purpose at all. So this is like if you're like, "I am going to keep every drawing my child made in kindergarten through third grade." What you're going to end up with is a box full of very similar indistinguishable pictures that you will put in the basement which will then flood and then everything will get mildew-y and you will throw it away never having opened it.

Whereas if you picked the one, best one that for whatever reason stands out to you and you get it framed and hanging on the wall then you are like, "Oh my gosh, I remember those days of finger paint. Oh my gosh, I remember you in kindergarten," and then you can let go of the other ones. Or if you need to, you can take pictures of them and then you have a picture of them. But you don't actually need the boxes and boxes because the fact is, you never go through the boxes and boxes because who's got the time or the energy? Even your child doesn't want to go through boxes and boxes.

[0:14:38.6] PF: They are going to be embarrassed actually.

[0:14:40.0] GR: Well, I mean they aren't just going to care, you know? It is not the kind of thing – I mean, so if you picked the one few things like what I have for my daughters is I have a nice banker's box like a fancy banker's box. There is a file for every year of the school year and I pick a few things like where you could see their hand writing especially if they're doing something like an autobiography project or something that really reveal or like, "My Saturday." You know sometimes they have these exercises where it is kind of a little diary entry or something and I will pick a few things and I'll put in things to like their birthday party invitation or a family holiday card. Something like their school portrait, put in there and then it's like they have something that's like, "Oh, these are highlights from kindergarten," and it is a little manila folder that they can go through and that is fun.

Having three boxes full of stuff, no one is ever going to go through that. It is too much. You are not doing the hard work of deciding. You are just saying, "I'll keep everything because it is easier to keep everything than decide." But then it's just like the attic full of everything that you have ever owned. At some point, somebody's got to pace that attic. The decision has to be made at some point. It's just easier for everyone, for you and for everybody in your life if you are carefully choosing along the way because then you end up with things that are actually meaningful and get rid of the things that aren't meaningful.

[0:15:54.7] PF: So you have to think like a curator instead of a hoarder.

[0:15:58.7] GR: Yes, it is easier to just keep everything. I remember when I was growing up we had this copper, I don't even know what it was. It was like a giant – it wasn't a pot, I don't know? It was a giant pot copper container and we just put everything in there and then what happened to it? I have no idea. I just remember anything or any paper I had, "Well, it goes in the container." So I put it in there.

[0:16:18.8] PF: It was like a time capsule.

[0:16:20.0] GR: Yeah but it was too big, it was too much. I think my mom would just go through and then throw everything away maybe she didn't want to throw it away in front of us. I don't know? But I do think that when there is a few things then they become intensely servicing the memory whereas if you have many, many things they all are just generally evoking that person but not in a way that is special.

[0:16:45.1] PF: And you quit seeing it after a while. When you have all this stuff and we don't see it.

[0:16:49.7] GR: Absolutely. Yes, if you pick the one iconic thing usually you pick the best thing out of the most interesting thing and that is nice to have around. But having like a million what would it be? What are they, you know Polly Pockets or you know something.

[0:17:01.0] PF: Yeah beanie babies.

[0:17:02.8] GR: Yeah, I mean, one My Little Pony is a memory. 30 My Little Ponies is like, "Oh my gosh, what am I going to do with all of these ponies?" and so I think that it is that mementos they do their work best when they are carefully selected and especially when they are manageable in size.

[0:17:18.3] PF: Now a lot of people can't even imagine that they can get to the point that you are talking about where you can truly de-clutter and what is so wonderful about this book is you tell them how to do that and once they hit that point, as you have mentioned, it is really hard to

maintain it. So what are your tips then for people who have gone through the de-cluttering and to keep them from stepping back over crossing the Rubicon again and re-cluttering?

[0:17:44.8] GR: Yeah, there is a lot of little habits that you can follow that make it a lot easier. One is the one minute rule. Anything you can do in less than a minute do without delay. So if you can hang up your coat, if you can print out a document and put it in the file where it belongs and then throw away the letter that made you feel like you needed to do it. If you could put the cap on the toothpaste and put the toothpaste back in the medicine cabinet, just go ahead and do it and so this doesn't take any time or energy out of your day because these are small tasks, but it gets rid of that scum of the surface of life like all those little tasks that very quickly mount up if you are not careful and then you just feel like, "Oh my gosh everything is such a mess."

Another thing that I really like to do is a ten minute closer and this is when every time you are getting ready to make a transition, you take 10 minutes to shut down what you are doing in order to move and this is helpful because you know we are really good about giving children transitions. We know the children need transitions but we expect ourselves to rock it from one activity to another and I think it is actually very helpful to give yourself transitions. So for me, I have a home office and 10 minutes before I am ready to end for the day, I will take 10 minutes and I will just sort of blast off a few emails, throw away any trash. I have this weird thing where I take out pen after pen after pen from a pen cup.

I don't just pick up a pen from the desk, I don't know why this is. So I put all the pens back in the pen cup. This is not hard work, you know? It is very quick but it gives me that feeling of, "Okay everything is getting put away," everything looks great by the time I am done and then when I come in the morning, it is much more energizing because to fight your way through a bunch of junk and here's the scratch paper that I don't need. "Wait, what is this? Why is this? I have this empty can of diet Coke?" It is draining and so you could do the thing at work. You could do it before you go to bed. You could do it before you leave in the morning. That is a really, really helpful habit.

[0:19:35.2] PF: So really it's just doing it in bite size chunks. Once you have completed your de-cluttering that initial task, then it's just maintaining.

[0:19:42.2] GR: Just to stay on top of areas that tend to get re-cluttered very fast.

[0:19:46.0] PF: And there is one more thing. I know we have to let you go here in a couple of minutes, but there was one thing in your book that I really wanted to talk about and that was your mock move. I thought, “I love this idea.” Because we moved about four months ago and one of the things we love about moving is all this stuff you get to throw away. So can you tell me what a mock move is and why it’s so helpful?

[0:20:06.1] GR: Well, absolutely because as you pointed out, one of the most valuable times for clearing clutter is moving. Because when you’re faced with, “Do I really want this and do I want this to the point where I am going to pay for a box and a mover to move it and then figure out what to do with it on the other end?” A lot of things just fail that test. You’re like, “Actually I don’t feel like moving this rice cooker which I have never used,” you know? “It weighs 50 pounds and I will give it away now rather than move it to where I am going,” and people often talk about, “Oh they feel so great after they move.”

So one of the things to do is because we get so used to our stuff, it’s hard to evaluate it. So a mock move just changes your perspective and then you really say, “Okay well I have this fax machine from 10 years ago. It still works. Nobody ever sends faxes anymore, but it is still working.”

[0:20:50.1] PP: Yeah. It’s like, “What is a fax machine?”

[0:20:51.1] GR: Yeah, well it still does work if I figured out how to plug it in. Am I going to get rid of it? No, why would I get rid of it? It’s perfectly good. Would I move it? There is no way I would move it. Why would I move a fax machine? I haven’t used that fax machine in 10 years. You know what I mean?

So there’s something about doing a mock move that often helps people see that they don’t really value something because if you wouldn’t pay to move it – If you wouldn’t pay to buy it and you wouldn’t pay to move it, you probably don’t use it, need it, or love it. So it is a helpful question to ask yourself.

[0:21:20.4] PF: That’s fantastic. Well, Gretchen, you have such great information, *Outer Order*, *Inner Calm*, fantastic book. I am thinking too, mother’s day is coming up. There is a lot of people

who can give it to their mothers because, like you said, someday someone is going to have to deal with that stuff in the attic. So maybe let mom know in a really nice way that you don't want to do that.

[0:21:38.5] GR: Yes, excellent. It was so fun to talk to you. Thanks for having me on the show.

[0:21:43.4] PF: Thank you. You have a wonderful day.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:21:49.2] PF: That was Gretchen Rubin, author of *Outer Order, Inner Calm: Declutter and Organize to Make More Room for Happiness*. You can find out more about Gretchen's latest book and where to buy it just by visiting us at livehappynow.com.

Of course, we already hope that you are a subscriber to Live Happy Now, but if you are not, you can find us on Pandora Podcast Network, Spotify, SoundCloud, iTunes, and Google Play. Just look for us on your favorite platform, then hit subscribe so you will never miss an episode.

That is all we have time for this week so we'll meet you back here again next week for an all new episode and until then, this is Paula Felps reminding you to make every day a happy one.

[END]