

GRETCHEN RUBIN

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“I Use Everything in My Resilience Toolkit to Keep My Mental and Physical Health Intact.”

**Interview: [Helen Russell](#).**

Helen Russell is the bestselling author of [The Year of Living Danishly](#). Formerly the editor of [MarieClaire.co.uk](#), she now lives in Denmark and works as a Scandinavia correspondent for the *Guardian*. For a long time, she wrote a column on Denmark for the *Telegraph* and has written features for the *Times*, the *Observer*, *Grazia*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Independent*.

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Now she has a new book, [*The Atlas of Happiness*](#). It's an illustrated, full-color, around-the-world look at the happiness secrets of different countries. The book covers 33 international happiness concepts, and explores places like Australia, Wales, Bhutan, Ireland, Finland, Turkey, Syria, Japan, and many more.

I couldn't wait to talk to Helen about happiness, habits, and productivity.

Gretchen: What's a simple habit or activity that consistently makes you happier, healthier, more productive, or more creative?

Helen: Being open to new experiences and talking to strangers. Both are outside of my comfort zone but I've found that the more I reach out and engage—interacting with the world around me—the more fulfilled I feel in every aspect of my life. And this habit has helped me meet some amazing people and write for a living—a huge privilege.

Gretchen: What's something you know now about happiness that you didn't know when you were 18 years old?

Helen: That the lows are all part of it and that we also need fallow periods to just be. I grew up in the 1980s and 90s where the pace of life was fast and if you weren't aiming for the top (of everything) you weren't aiming high enough. But life is filled with sadness as well as joy and not every day will be unicorns skipping with rainbows. This is something I've learned with age and through my research into happiness and the cultural differences in what 'a good life' means around the world.

In Sweden and Brazil, for example, a degree of melancholy in life is considered inevitable—desirable, even—and something to be savoured rather than ignored. No one can be "jazz hands" happy all the time. I've also been inspired by my recent research into the Italian concept: *Dolce far niente* or "the sweetness of doing nothing." Stillness isn't something that comes naturally to me but as one of my best friends puts it, "We all need some sitting down and staring into space time once in a while."



Gretchen: You've done fascinating research. What has surprised or intrigued you—or your readers—most?

Helen: I've become very interested in work culture around the world and how in many prosperous nations, the daily grind is actively damaging our mental well-being as well as impacting negatively on productivity. When I swapped a big, shiny job in London for life in rural Denmark, I was staggered by Danish working culture—with the average Dane only working 33 hours a week and prioritising family and leisure time. Happiness at work is prized and Denmark also comes top in terms of worker motivation, according to [The World Competitiveness Yearbook](#).

At first I presumed that this made Danes massive slackers, but then I found out that workers are 12 per cent more productive when they're in a positive state of mind, according to research from the University of Warwick—and Denmark is the fourth most productive country in the world, according to Expert Market data. It's staggering that a culture of presenteeism still pervades in much of the world when we know now from the data that this is bad for workers and bad for the bottom line. Now, I try to log off, power down and stop work on time.

Gretchen: Which habits are most important to you? (for health, for creativity, for productivity, for leisure, etc.)

Helen: Living by the sea means I can get out on my beloved paddle board a few times a week to broaden my horizons, focusing on nothing but a wide open expanse of blue for an hour. For my new book, I've been writing about Hawaii, where water is sacred and there's an ancient proverb, *ola alla wai*, or “water is life.” I'm beginning to agree with this.

Music is important, too—I listen to different playlists depending on the task at hand or how I'm feeling. Numerous studies have shown how music can alter our mood and I am a big fan of a psychological tool called “emotional arousal,” whereby you listen to music that makes you feel fired up and charged with



energy to help you to tackle whatever lies ahead. So far today, it's been a "This is Me" from *The Greatest Showman* on repeat kind of morning...!

Gretchen: Have you ever managed to gain a challenging healthy habit—or to break an unhealthy habit? If so, how did you do it?

Helen: I came to exercise late and only realised relatively recently that it was something I could do to make me feel better. At school, I was always told I wasn't sporty. I got picked last for all team sports and then I did no exercise at all until my mid 20s when I approached it with self-loathing. My body was a human pincushion for years, with various failed fertility treatments, then it miraculously grew three people and my body became theirs for a while. But now it finally feels like it's mine and so I'm taking care of it -- exercising to feel strong and stay sane and just for me. And I love it.

Gretchen: Would you describe yourself as an Upholder, a Questioner, a Rebel, or an Obliger?

Helen: I'm a terrible Obliger (thank you for pointing this out!) and as a freelancer I now make sure I litter my life with people who make me do the things I know I ought to (eating well, socializing, self-care or what Danes call "putting your own oxygen mask on first" and the brave new world of "relaxing").

Gretchen: Does anything tend to interfere with your ability to keep your healthy habits or your happiness? (e.g. travel, parties)

Helen: Travel is tricky, because I tend not to eat well or exercise and it's tough being away from my family. For the first few hours, I feel wonderfully free and giddy about the fact that I can go to the bathroom without toddlers following me in there—but then I miss them terribly. Yet as soon as I get home, the house is so chaotic, I'll often long for the solitude of a single occupancy hotel bedroom again.

There's still a lot of guilt tied up with being a working parent that no amount



wake up, on average, every other night, requiring something or other. So with three of them, statistically, I'm woken up at least once a night, every night. I know that if I don't get eight hours of sleep, I have a tendency towards depression—but I haven't had eight hours of sleep in four years. As a result, I use everything in my resilience toolkit to keep my mental and physical health intact.

Gretchen: Is there a particular motto or saying that you've found very helpful? (e.g., I remind myself to "Be Gretchen.") Or a quotation that has struck you as particularly insightful? Or a particular book that has stayed with you?

Helen: There's a phrase in Icelandic that has become the unofficial motto for Icelanders and wannabe Vikings everywhere: *Petta reddast*. This roughly translates as "it will be all right," but has come to represent the unwavering belief that everything will work out in the end. There's a sense that since Icelanders have made their home in such an inhospitable landscape that they can handle anything and all the Icelanders I know have an easy-going manner with a core of grit—an unusual but powerful combination. Studies show that resilience is key to happiness and the idea of taking the long view that "no matter how big a problem, we'll find a way" really appeals to me. So now I have the phrase pinned up above my desk to remind myself to be more Viking, wherever possible.