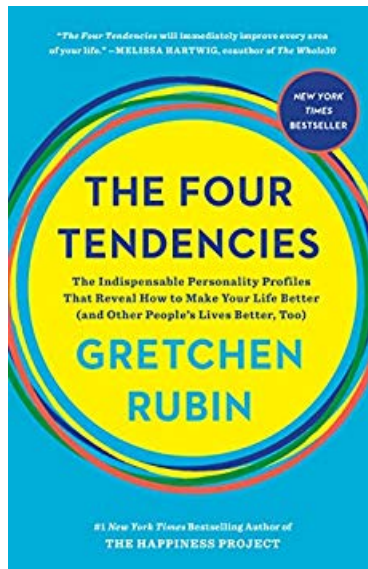


# #1 Book Summary: The Four Tendencies, by Gretchen Rubin

by Allen Cheng

<https://www.allencheng.com/four-tendencies-summary-gretchen-rubin/>



How do you feel about New Year's resolutions, breaking rules, or keeping commitments to yourself? These might seem like simple questions, but your answers point to a personality type that defines why and how you take action.

*The Four Tendencies* explains the four very different personalities determining how we deal with external and internal expectations. Learn why your daughter won't do anything when you ask her to, why your spouse will go to the ends of the earth for you but can never seem to do anything for himself, and why your colleague asks too many questions at team meetings.

## 1-Page Summary of The Four Tendencies

### Introduction to the Four Tendencies

Gretchen Rubin is a writer interested in human nature and patterns in human behavior, what actions we

take and why we take them. Why do some people who are strong performers at work find it hard to keep themselves accountable to diet or exercise? Why do others seem to find it easy to do whatever they put their mind to?

Rubin mulled this over and had an epiphany. She designed a simple personality test based on one question: **how do you respond to expectations?** From people's answers to questions around this subject, she devised the Four Tendencies.

**The Four Tendencies describe four different personality types based on response to expectations, both internal (the expectations you have for yourself) and external (the expectations other people have for you).** Expectations are things we act on, or not. An example of an internal expectation would be, "I want to be a famous writer" or "I need to clean my room." External expectations would be more like, "my boss needs this report by Friday," or "my mother wants me to dress more modestly."

According to Rubin's research and system, **these are the 4 tendencies: the Upholder, the Questioner, the Obliger, and the Rebel.** The way each tendency generally responds to internal and external expectations is:

- **Upholders meet all expectations, internal and external.**
- **Questioners meet internal expectations, but not external.**
- **Obligers meet external expectations, but not internal.**
- **Rebels resist all expectations.**

Because this is based on one simple consideration, **everyone falls pretty squarely into one tendency.** However, the Four Tendencies have some overlap, and can be illustrated this way:

![alt\_text](https://media.shortform.com/images/fourtendencies-venn.jpg ""image\_tooltip")

As you can see from the diagram, **each tendency has two "tips" of other tendencies** -- Upholders can tip either Questioner or Obliger, and so on.

### About Tendencies

People are certainly more complex than just how they respond to expectations, and **Rubin's 4 tendencies only cover the scope of how you respond to expectations.**

Your tendency can't be changed: it's a part of your nature. All the tendencies have strengths and weaknesses, and no one tendency seems to be more successful or happier than the others. **\*\*The happiest, most successful people are the ones who can learn to work *with* their tendency instead of against it.**  
**\*\*Any tendency can thrive in any career, given that they adapt the role to meet their strengths and weaknesses.**

In this 1-page summary, we'll cover the four tendencies at a high level, discussing each one's strengths and weaknesses and how to interact with them. The full summary has far more detail on each tendency, tips on how to do better as your tendency, and strategies to interact with the tendency in different scenarios (your romantic partner, your children, your colleagues at work).

## Upholders

### Overview

**Upholders readily respond to both external and internal expectations.** They think expectations, in general, are important, and *enjoy* fulfilling both their own and others'. They appreciate balance between doing what other people expect of them and doing what they expect of themselves -- in the age of self-care, they've figured out how to take care of themselves without losing their productivity.

For example, if an upholder's their boss asks them to stay late to finish a project and they know it's important, they'll stay (fulfilling external expectations); but if they happen to have an event they signed up for months ago and are excited about, they'll most likely go to the lecture (fulfilling internal expectations), and work on the project later.

### Strengths of Upholders

Upholders like schedules and routines, form habits easily, and don't make feel pressured or trapped by expectations -- **\*\*Upholders feel free, creative, and productive when they have expectations placed on them. \*\***If there's an expectation, they'll fulfill it; if expectations conflict with one another, Upholders will figure out what expectation is most important to them, and prioritize that one first (they'd probably *still* try to fulfill the other expectation, if possible).

**Upholders are good self-preservationists**, for the most part. They take care of themselves and have good habits. Being able to fulfill their internal expectations on their own means they often lead satisfied lives, finding ways to be productive in their work and careers without sacrificing their personal values or getting burnt out from doing too many things for other people and not enough for themselves.

### Weaknesses of Upholders

**Upholders sometimes follow the rules even when it's better not to.** Rubin (an Upholder herself) recounts waiting at a boat taxi stand that was clearly non-functioning when a taxi stand a few yards up the river was active, all because someone told her that's the taxi stand she should wait at. In a related weakness, Upholders generally have good habits, but can rigidly keep the habit far after it's necessary or good for them.

Upholders also aren't very adaptable or flexible in their schedules and routines. Because they have no difficulty meeting expectations, when other people *do* have difficulty, Upholders can be disdainful, impatient, or rude.

### Dealing with Upholders

At work, upholders make great colleagues and bosses because they believe expectations are important. However, **occasionally an Upholder might need help prioritizing tasks and making priorities clear** -- since all expectations are important to them, they might not get to the right things first.

**Upholders also occasionally need help *not* meeting expectations**, when a different balance of

expectations would make them happier. When arguing with them, play to their values: acknowledge the rules or expectations they're responding to, and make another priority more important than following that rule or meeting that expectation.

## Questioners

### Overview

**\*\*Questioners readily respond to internal expectations, but not external expectations. \*\***They're committed to logic, information, and efficiency, and refuse arbitrary, inefficient, or illogical expectations. The Questioner responds best to her own internal expectations because she's already thought through these expectations and made sure they're justified, achievable, and logical.

**External expectations need to be justified** -- once they are, the Questioner will view them as internal expectations and will have little trouble fulfilling them. For example, a Questioner might get a text from her husband asking her to pick up lunch meat on her way home. If that's all the text says, the Questioner might not do it: her husband can pick up lunch meat if he really wants it, they have plenty of other food in the house. But if the husband texts that they need lunch meat because their daughter has two field trips that week and needs bagged lunches, the Questioner will do it: now it makes sense and has justification.

### Strengths of Questioners

Once Questioners agree with the reasoning behind something, **they're self-directed and don't need supervision**. They meet justified expectations as easily as Upholders meet any expectations.

Questioners make great employees and partners because **they want to improve any process they're involved in to make it the most efficient and logical**, and they do thorough and exhaustive research to make the best decisions possible. Questioners want to live in a world where everything makes sense and is as efficient as possible -- they question endlessly in pursuit of that world.

### Weaknesses of Questioners

However, their refusal to meet expectations without reason can sometimes lead to trouble, particularly in school. **Others often find their questions tiring and obstructive**, and feel like they raise needless questions and refuse to respect authority.

And, because of their relentless research and desire to make the best decision, **Questioners can also sometimes fall into analysis-paralysis**, where they become incapable of making a decision based on how much research they've done.

- Questioners and people around them can help them avoid analysis-paralysis by setting limits on research, giving deadlines, and finding people or sources they admire enough to follow their lead.

### Dealing with Questioners

If you get annoyed by hearing too many questions from Questioners, help restrict their questioning by

setting limits, guidelines, and deadlines for decisions. Remind yourself that **their questions aren't confrontational** -- Questioners *need* the answers they seek to do the work you want them to do.

**Make sure to justify your own questions to Questioners**, which will help them understand why you're asking.

Questioner spouses have some difficulty in relationships. If your spouse is a Questioner, remember that **the more justifications you give them, the more likely they'll be to do what you need them to do** -- *asking* them to do something is rarely enough to *get* them to do it.

## Obligers

### Overview

**Obligers readily respond to external expectations, but not internal expectations.** They meet deadlines and follow through for bosses, colleagues, spouses, and so on -- but **\*\*if there are no external expectations, Obligers almost always fail to complete the task, no matter how important it is to them.** **\*\*Picture a high school track star who thrived when her team depended on her, but now finds it hard to run for her own sake, no matter how much she wants to.**

Obligers are most likely to wish they were another tendency: since they are capable of meeting other people's expectations without problem, they view their inability to meet internal expectations as laziness or self-sacrifice, and they often can't figure out *why* they can't meet internal expectations.

### Strengths of Obligers

Obligers are the "rock of the world" -- **\*\*everyone can depend on them.** **\*\*They're most likely to contribute to home and work, and get along well with other tendencies. They keep the people around them very happy, for the most part.**

### Weaknesses of Obligers

Obligers simply cannot meet internal expectations unless they figure out sources of external accountability. **If they don't have any external accountability, they need to organize it for themselves.**

- They can try various forms of accountability to find out what works for them, such as automated email reminders, to-do lists, or accountability partners or groups.

Because Obligers expend so much energy fulfilling others' expectations, they get easily burnt out. **If they get too burnt out or the expectations are so high they can't meet them, Obligers can go into *Obliger-Rebellion* mode**, where they suddenly, without warning, refuse to meet any expectations: everything's fine until it absolutely isn't.

- People around Obligers can help them avoid Obliger-Rebellion by setting up systems that encourage them to say no more often, helping them delegate tasks, pushing them to make time for

themselves, and encouraging them to take breaks.

## Dealing with Obligers

We know Obligers struggle with internal expectations, so **if they request accountability, find a way to give it to them, because they need it.**

Be wary of setting expectations for Obligers that are too high, or of accidentally setting expectations with offhand comments. They'll strive to follow the expectation, when it may not be all that important.

## Rebels

### Overview

**\*\*Rebels resist *all* expectations, internal and external -- they do what they *want* to do. \*\***They value choice, freedom, and self-expression or identity, and enjoy bucking convention and expectation.

Picture a Rebel who wants to write of her own spontaneous desire. She can do it without a problem. But then her friends say they love her work and suggest she get an agent and publish. Suddenly there are *expectations* - people expect her to do certain things. The Rebel's internal conflict with expectations can cause her to purposely act counter to advice she receives, or to stop writing at all.

### Strengths of Rebels

Rebels teach everyone else that we're "freer than we\*\* **think**": we can do what we want to, and the world will still turn. And **Rebels *with* a cause can be incredibly useful** -- they serve as the voice of dissent and an alternative to the status quo. (Shortform example: Most revolutionary leaders are probably Rebels: they take issue with the expectations of a particular power, and the more they're told they'll fail or that they shouldn't fight, the harder they pursue their goal.)

### Weaknesses of Rebels

But that characteristic can backfire, too:\*\* the harder you push a Rebel to do something, the harder they resist.\*\*

Because of this, Rebels are the most frustrating group to other people. They expect Rebels to "grow out of it," "grow up," or mature beyond their Rebel nature. But that's just what it is -- their *nature* -- and it isn't a phase they'll grow out of, it's the tendency they'll have to learn to live with (and so will everyone else).

### Dealing with Rebels

A good rule of thumb for dealing with Rebels is to **present them with information, consequences, and choice**, then step back.\*\* **\*\*Give them the information they need to make an informed decision, the consequences they'll suffer depending on what actions they take, and then the freedom to choose for themselves. They'll feel better making their own decision, and it may be in the direction you would have**

suggested yourself.

## **What to Expect in the Full Summary**

In the full summary, we go into more detail on each of the tendencies: we'll identify your tendency and its variations, illuminate your strengths and weaknesses, and discuss each tendencies challenges or quirks and how best to deal with them. We'll also help you identify the tendencies of major people in your life.

Then we'll cover how the tendencies pair up together -- for example, why the Upholder-Upholder pair makes great colleagues but maybe not the best spouses, or why the Obliger-Rebel pairing can be an extremely difficult parent-child pair. Finally, we'll discuss how to communicate more effectively with people from a different tendency.

## **Full Summary of The Four Tendencies**

### **Introduction: The Four Tendencies**

Life is full of expectations, ones we have for ourselves and ones other people have for us. How do you respond to expectations? Do you fulfill them, or resist them? When, and why? Gretchen Rubin has developed a simple yet powerful personality test based on expectations that can change the way you get things done.

### **How Rubin Created the Four Tendencies**

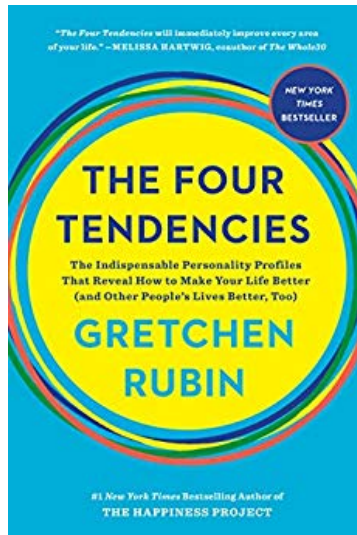
Gretchen Rubin is a writer interested in human nature and patterns in human behavior, what actions we take and why we take them. Over lunch one day, a friend of hers was complaining that she wanted to keep up her running habit, but she was ...

**---End of Preview---**

## #1 Book Summary: The Four Tendencies, by Gretchen Rubin

by Allen Cheng - <https://www.allencheng.com> - Visit for more summaries like this one.

---



Read the rest of the "The Four Tendencies" summary at my new book summary product, [Shortform](#).

Here's what you'll find in the **full The Four Tendencies summary**:

- Introduction: The Four Tendencies
- Chapter 1: Identifying Your Tendency
- Exercise: Identifying Your Tendency
- Chapter 2: Upholders
- Exercise: Understanding the Upholder in your Life
- Chapter 3: Questioners
- Exercise: Understanding the Questioner in your Life
- Chapter 4: Obligers
- Exercise: Understanding the Obliger in your Life
- Chapter 5: Rebels
- Exercise: Understanding the Rebel in your Life
- Exercise: Processing Your Tendency
- Chapter 6: How the Tendencies Pair Up
- Exercise: Pinpointing the Pairs
- Chapter 7: Communicating Effectively with Other Types
- Conclusion

I've been building Shortform for the past year. It's the book summary product I always wanted for myself. I was never satisfied with the summaries from what was on the market, and so I built Shortform for myself and readers like you. **If you like my book summaries, you'll love Shortform.**

Shortform has the world's best summaries of nonfiction books and articles. Even better, **it helps you**



## #1 Book Summary: The Four Tendencies, by Gretchen Rubin

by Allen Cheng - <https://www.allencheng.com> - Visit for more summaries like this one.

---

**remember what you read, so you can make your life better.** What's special about Shortform:

- The [world's highest quality book summaries](#)—comprehensive, concise, and everything you need to know
- Broad library: 1000+ books and articles across 21 genres
- Interactive exercises that teach you to apply what you've learned
- Audio narrations so you can learn on the go
- [Discussion communities](#)—get the best advice from other readers

Sound like what you've been looking for? [Sign up for a 5-day free trial here.](#)

**Like this book summary? Visit [www.allencheng.com](https://www.allencheng.com) for more.**