

A tip from ‘The Happiness Project’

All sorts of people are finding that singing, alone or in a group, can be life-changing

by Julia McKinnell on Tuesday, February 9, 2010 4:10pm - [8 Comments](#)



Looking for happiness? Try singing. That’s the advice in a new self-help book that’s striking a chord with thousands of readers. Gretchen Rubin’s *The Happiness Project* has become an instant bestseller with simple prescriptions such as “Sing in the morning.” “You know, I’m a terrible singer,” Rubin told *Maclean’s* this week. “Everybody laughs at my singing. But one of my main focuses of my happiness project was to create a more lighthearted, calm atmosphere in my household.”

Mornings are the most hectic, says the mother of two young girls. “Everyone’s racing around and there’s a lot of whining and nagging. It can be a very unpleasant part of the day and yet it’s the beginning of the day, so it’s important to set the tone. It’s very hard to be crabby when you’re singing.”

In the book, Rubin describes a morning when one of her daughters didn’t want to go to tae kwon do class: “I wanted to snap back, ‘You always say you don’t want to go, but then you have fun.’ Instead, even though it wasn’t easy, I sang out, ‘I don’t want to go to tae kwon do—you’re a poet and didn’t know it!’ After a minute, I added, ‘I don’t give a snap about going to tap.’” Rubin’s daughter joined in, rhyming, “I’d rather pass gas than

go to science class.” “We laughed until our stomachs hurt, and she didn’t mention tae kwon do again. This technique worked better than telling her to buck up, and it was certainly more fun.”

The author is not alone in singing the praises of song. University of North Carolina psychologist Reid Wilson believes “you can sing away your woes.” Wilson, the author of *Don’t Panic: Taking Control of Anxiety Attacks*, suggests choosing a familiar song, like *New York Times*, and making up new lyrics. Here’s his example: “My credit card is going to be late, going to be late, going to be late; my credit rating is going to be ruined, and I’ll never get a mortgage.” “The singing makes you feel ridiculous,” he says. “And it’s very hard to maintain distress when you’re doing something foolish.

You step back from the worry and put it into perspective.”

In December, the eminent University of Chicago philosophy professor Martha Nussbaum illuminated how singing has changed her perspective when a *New York Times* reporter asked her, “Do you find it difficult being a single woman in her early 60s, in a culture that values youth over wisdom?”

Nussbaum answered, “I think that’s overplayed. I’m just happy being myself. I sing for an hour before dinner, and now I’m singing Cherubin’s aria from *The Marriage of Figaro*. It’s one way I have fun.”

Fun may not be Nussbaum’s only boost from singing. In a 2004 study on members of a professional choir in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, Frankfurt scientists found that singing strengthens the immune system. And it’s not just professional singers who benefit, according to members of an amateur singing group on Vancouver Island. Shirley Whitelaw is the founder of More Singing Please! “We’re not a choir,” she stresses. “We don’t have another word for it yet, but we’re not a choir.” The group gets together three times a week to sing for fun. “There’s no rules here. The only rule we have is you have to keep your clothes on.” Beginners “float along” learning the songs. “We sing the songs over and over again, because the joy is in singing and feeling that song.”

Nanaimo cab driver Annie Bell was among the 30 who paid the \$8 drop-in fee to come sing for fun on a recent Thursday morning. Bell joined More Singing Please! five years ago when she was suffering from a rare lung disease, bronchiectasis. She was chronically ill and on antibiotics and had never sung a note in her life. Bell joined, she says, with the desperate hope that singing might help her breathe better. “My lungs were very sick and it took me a year to get the guts to go singing because I’m not a singer, and I’m so shy.” She weighed 300 lb. at the time. “But once I got there, I just loved it. Singing is good exercise. Sing from the heart! Just let it out! There’s hardly any session that somebody doesn’t cry. There’s lots of hugging—and I don’t know these people. We’re not friends away from singing. It’s just very emotional when you’re there and you’re looking at somebody and you’re singing to them.” Bells says that now she sings every day. “My lung disease has not surfaced in years. They hear me down at the ferry.” Often Bell sits in

her cab, waiting at the dock for fares. “I have all these songs I’m working on, and then I realize, ‘Oh! I forgot to roll up my window.’ ”