



ON OUR BEST BEHAVIOR ELISE LOEHNEN

BOOK CLUB KIT



GENERAL QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What was the most surprising insight you had about yourself or your own behavior while reading this book?
2. Loehnen says, “We have been made complicit in a culture that we did not choose, in the same way that we didn’t choose the factors of our birth—the tone of our skin, our gender, our sexuality, our place of birth, our socioeconomic class.” Does this feel true to you? In what ways do you think you are a part of a culture you “didn’t choose”? How does this affect you?
3. According to Loehnen, the way we allow ourselves to behave—and judge others for their behavior—can be traced back to the Seven Deadly Sins, whether or not we consider ourselves to be religious. She shows how we chastise ourselves for choosing to watch television or sleeping in instead of “hustling” (sloth); how we say we’ve been “bad” when we eat a second slice of pizza or cake at a birthday party (gluttony); how uncomfortable we feel when we’re complimented (pride). Can you think of ways that your behaviors align with the Seven Deadly Sins? Do you have a voice in your head—one that is often self-critical or negative—that admonishes you when you are lazy, envious, prideful, gluttonous, greedy, lustful, or angry?
4. In an interview, Loehnen stated that the process of writing this book changed her. “It’s a process and it’s hard work,” she said. “Now, I don’t regulate what I eat, I don’t weigh myself. I don’t feel guilty for getting a bit more sleep in the morning. For a decade, I didn’t watch an entire movie from beginning to end with full attention; I can now sit without guilt and watch TV with my kids. I find joy in simple moments without constantly trying to improve and optimize.” Has observing the way your behavior—or what you feel is “good” or “bad”—has been culturally influenced changed you? If you chose to see sloth, envy, pride, gluttony, greed, lust, and anger not as sinful but as natural parts of the human experience, what would you do differently?
5. “We must burn the morality map that keeps us from true self-definition,” Loehnen writes. What do you think she means by this? In what ways do you pursue “true self-definition”? In what ways is “self-definition” difficult?






CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

SLOTH

1. Loehnen describes the pressure women feel to always be “doing.” The onus of parenting falls on women, as do expectations of caretaking—both at home and at work. How does the pressure to “do it all” show up in your life? What behaviors do you exhibit to “prove” (to yourself or others) that you’re not lazy?
2. Loehnen points to research that suggests that the greatest breakthroughs happen when the conscious mind can relax and the subconscious gets the opportunity to play; if we cannot rest, we cannot maximize our creativity. How could you prioritize rest, leisure, and play over a depleting schedule? How would carving out that space benefit you?

ENVY

1. Loehnen explains how we are culturally conditioned to feel a sense of shame about feeling envious. As a result, we “ascribe our discomfort to something else—usually to the shortcomings of the other person inspiring our irritation.” According to Loehnen, this discomfort we feel when we experience envy is at the heart of most woman-on-woman conflict. When we criticize other women, question their accomplishments, or say things like, “must be nice . . .” we are really expressing our own latent desires. Can you think of instances when you’ve been irritated by another woman, and when, if you dig a little deeper, what you actually felt was a sense of wanting what she has? Why do you think that expresses itself as irritation or conflict? What happens for you if you give yourself permission to be envious instead?
 2. Who do you envy? What does your envy reveal to you about what you actually want for yourself? How could you lean into that envy to pursue your own true desires?
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PRIDE


1. Loehnen shows how a fear of pride keeps women from expressing their gifts and being seen in the world. She points to examples of public women who have been “taken down” or “put in their place” for seeming big-headed. Can you think of examples of public figures for whom this has been true? What do you think we find so off-putting about women who celebrate their achievements?
2. Can you remember the last time you said you were proud of yourself? How can you give yourself more credit for your talents and accomplishments? What good might come of vocalizing your pride in yourself?

GLUTTONY

1. Like so many women, Loehnen has had a tumultuous relationship with her body since adolescence. When she was researching gluttony, she realized that the pervasive cultural fixation on our dieting and the shape of our bodies consumes an enormous amount of our finite, creative energy. She writes, “Fixating on our diets, our thinness, on whittling ourselves down . . . takes us out of our life . . . it fixates on the outside, rather than the inside.” Think about your relationship with your own body. How would you describe that relationship? What has influenced? Has it taken you “out of your life”? How?
2. Loehnen suggests that instead of trying to control our bodies, or even instead of just trying to feel positive about them, we should seek “body neutrality.” What if we saw our bodies as just a vessel—with no value attached—through which we experienced the world? Does that feel possible to you? How could you stop treating your body like something to be punished, measured, and denied—and instead as your soul’s home?

GREED


1. Loehnen includes examples of women who did not negotiate on their own behalf out of a fear of appearing greedy, spoiled, or difficult. Women are often told that having their basic needs satisfied should prevent them from trying to get more (We often ask ourselves, “Why do I deserve more when I have so much more than others?”). Do you have a difficult time negotiating for yourself? In what ways has a fear of appearing “greedy” dictated your behavior?
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2. According to Loehnen, there is a difference between “value” and “worth” (worth is an exterior validation: the world deciding what you deserve; value is an internal calculation). How does thinking about your “value” (rather than your “worth”) change things for you? Would you feel more confident negotiating if you believed you were asking for your value rather than your worth?

LUST

1. “We’re still mired in the belief that a vital sex life while single is good for men and bad for women,” Loehnen writes. She shares studies that reveal how differently men and women are treated with regards to sex, explains how our culture prefers women to be “sexual objects, static receptacles for male lust,” and describes how “foreign and shocking” it feels when women embody their own desire. Does this feel true to you? What messages do you feel you’ve received throughout your life with regards to women and sex? How do those messages disempower or empower women?
2. Loehnen describes the body as “a microcosm of the world,” and says that “to avoid the body is a disavowal of the beauty of our humanness, the creative matter of life, and arguably the reason we’re here: to experience the world through our senses, to be fully ourselves.” In what ways do you “avoid” your body? What does it feel like when you don’t?

ANGER

1. Loehnen explains how women are punished in our culture for expressing anger, which leads them to avoid any difficult, big, or “hot” feelings. Do you avoid certain feelings or emotional experiences? Why? Think of times in your life when you’ve communicated your anger or frustration. How were those feelings received?
 2. According to Loehnen, we must “allow anger as part of a cycle of required emotions.” She explains how anger has historically been a force leading to an expansion of rights and that when “anger informs us,” it can be the “energy force that changes the world.” Can you think of a time when expressing your anger has led to a positive change? What do you think Loehnen means by letting “anger inform us”?
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SADNESS

1. Loehnen explains how our culture “exhorts us to be happy,” and describes the ways we avoid, shut down, or shun feelings of sadness. She then suggests that the emotional experience of sadness might be linked to a need to control, writing: “I wonder if a desire for control is why so many of us—men in particular—do not permit our own sadness to emerge.” What do you think she means by this? What do you think the connection between control and sadness might be?
2. “It is human to sometimes be sad,” Loehnen writes. “Sadness is a gateway to feeling and to life—it must be reclaimed from the idea that it is weak.” In what ways does this ring true to you? Can you think of a time when expressing sadness helped you feel more alive?





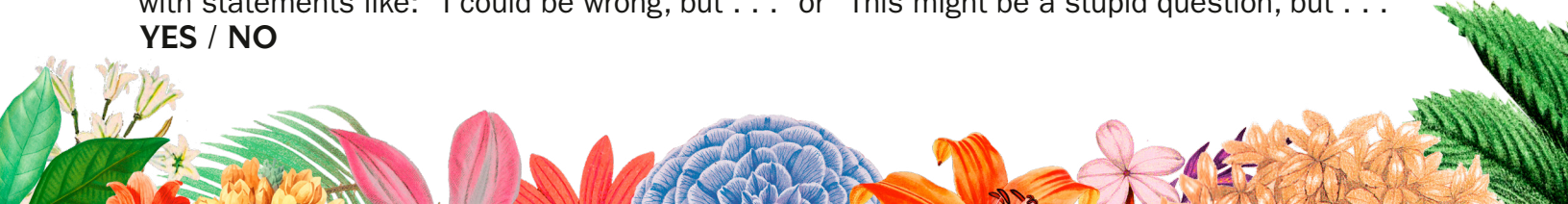
ON OUR BEST BEHAVOIR QUIZ

We are programmed by our society: There's who we are, and then there's who we are told to be. We can sense the gap between the two, but it's hard to see—we can only make out the cultural messages that divide us from ourselves when we tune our ears to listen. I started listening to what our culture was telling me about who I should be: what I heard was alarming. I was internalizing so many messages about what it is to be a “good” woman and how a “good” woman behaves. Most alarmingly, I realized I had concretized these concepts in my own consciousness; I patrolled and policed myself and other women by these dictates. These messages fall into a few categories. Take the quiz below to see whether these often-imperceptible rules prescribe your behavior as well.

SECTION 1

1. I feel compelled to set my alarm clock so I can get a jump start on my day.
YES / NO
2. When I sleep in, skip the gym, take a nap, or leave work early in order to rest, I feel guilty.
YES / NO
3. I don't feel comfortable until I've crossed almost everything off my to do list each day
YES / NO
4. I have a hard time saying no to people who ask me for favors.
YES / NO
5. I secretly fantasize about getting sick or injured so I have a valid excuse for staying in bed.
YES / NO

SECTION 2

1. I frequently send emails to my manager to let them know about recent work accomplishments.
YES / NO
 2. When someone compliments me, I say “Thank you” and do not explain away, shrug off, or belittle their statement.
YES / NO
 3. I can easily list three qualities about myself or personal achievements that I am proud of.
YES / NO
 4. I have told more than three other people about those three things.
YES / NO
 5. I don't hesitate to ask questions or to speak up in meetings; I don't preface my contributions with statements like: “I could be wrong, but . . .” or “This might be a stupid question, but . . .”
YES / NO
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SECTION 3

1. I have been on more than one diet in my lifetime, or I have been dieting on and off for several years at a time.
YES / NO
2. I struggle to trust my body to let me know what I need to eat and to signal when I am hungry or full.
YES / NO
3. I can easily point to which part (or parts) of my body I dislike or wish were differently shaped or sized.
YES / NO
4. I find myself saying things like “I was so bad today” or “I was so good today” in reference to the types of foods or amount of foods I’ve eaten.
YES / NO
5. I have used a filter or altered my posture in photographs so as to appear smaller or thinner than I think I naturally look.
YES / NO


SECTION 4

1. I am comfortable expressing my needs with friends, family, and colleagues.
YES / NO
2. When I am frustrated or angry with someone, I tell them clearly how I feel—I don’t shy away from hard conversations; I don’t believe in sweeping anything under the rug or just letting it go.
YES / NO
3. I don’t hold in my emotions, storing them up for an explosion; I rarely feel the need to vent.
YES / NO
4. My relationships would not change or feel different if I began to speak up for myself and demand that my needs be met.
YES / NO
5. When I feel impatient or resentful, I name the emotion and ask for help alleviating the situation.
YES / NO

SECTION 5

1. When offered a job or a promotion, I negotiate a higher salary as a matter of course.
YES / NO
2. I know what the gender wealth gap is and/or I invest in the stock market, keep track of my own investments, and own bonds.
YES / NO

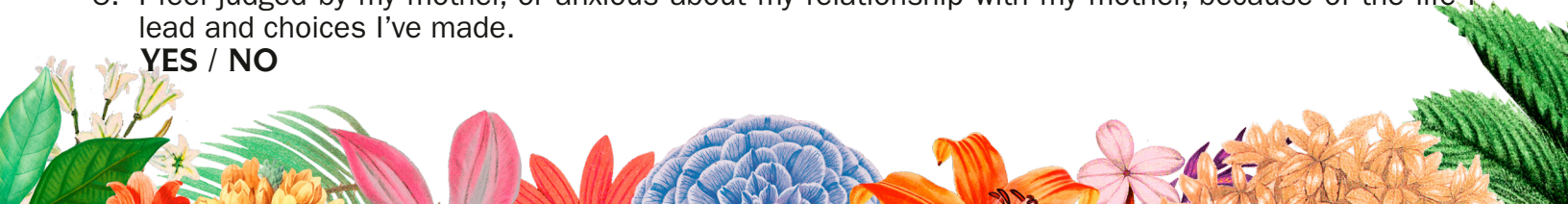


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3. I am comfortable discussing my salary, savings, and financial strategies with close friends or loved ones.
YES / NO
 4. I know how much money I want and need and have budgeted and financially planned accordingly.
YES / NO
 5. I rarely feel pressured to spend money I don't have.
YES / NO

SECTION 6

1. I am able to state clearly, without shame or embarrassment, what excites me sexually. I explain confidently to partners how I like to be touched, what feels good, and what turns me on.
YES / NO
2. I felt empowered the first time I had intercourse—I saw sex as a natural, thrilling, adventurous part of the human experience and I was excited to share that with someone.
YES / NO
3. I understand the connection between my brain and my body—I know what makes me aroused on both cognitive and physical levels, and I use that understanding to make my intimate life more pleasurable, rewarding, and empowering.
YES / NO
4. I don't know how many sexual partners I've had; I don't believe there's a number that signals someone is overly promiscuous or overly prudish.
YES / NO
5. I feel my sexuality is a source of strength and power, and I want everyone to know it.
YES / NO

SECTION 7

1. I have put down other women or privately delighted in another woman's misfortune.
YES / NO
 2. If I think deeply about the instances I've criticized another woman or gossiped about her, I can acknowledge I did it because she has something or has achieved something that I'd want for myself.
YES / NO
 3. I have a hard time speaking out loud or articulating to others what I'd like to achieve, possess, or earn in order to have the life I've imagined for myself.
YES / NO
 4. Other women who confidently articulate their desires or give voice to their ambitions irk me.
YES / NO
 5. I feel judged by my mother, or anxious about my relationship with my mother, because of the life I lead and choices I've made.
YES / NO
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CONCLUSION

The categories in this quiz correspond to the Seven Deadly Sins.

If you answered mostly **Yes** in **Section 1**: You likely view sloth as a sin, as a result you deny yourself rest.

If you answered mostly **No** in **Section 2**: You likely view pride as a sin, as a result, you deny your own gifts.

If you answered mostly **Yes** in **Section 3**: You likely view gluttony as a sin, as a result, you deny your body's signals.

If you answered mostly **No** in **Section 4**: You likely view anger as a sin, as a result you deny your own needs.

If you answered mostly **No** in **Section 5**: You likely view greed as a sin, as a result, you deny your own security.

If you answered mostly **No** in **Section 6**: You likely view lust as a sin, as a result, you deny your own pleasure.

If you answered mostly **Yes** in **Section 7**: You likely view envy as a sin, as a result, you deny your own wanting.

Internalizing these sins in the way women have prevents us from crediting ourselves (pride), pleasuring ourselves (lust), from feeding and securing ourselves (gluttony, greed), from releasing our emotions and asserting our needs (anger), from relaxing and resting (sloth), and from desiring . . . really anything at all (envy).

*When I thought about this, I was stunned. I'm not even religious?!? How can it be, I wondered, that I restrict myself and behave according to a millennia-old religious code . . . that wasn't even in the Bible? To answer that question, to find a path back to a truer and more honest version of who I really am—who we can all be—I wrote **On Our Best Behavior**.*

—ELISE LOEHNEN

