
How Regret Can Be Your Friend



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When managed properly, regret is a great decision-making tool.

Dealing with regret is a universal human experience. All of us have made poor or foolish choices that we regretted later. All of us have felt disappointment and sorrow at what could have been. But while regret reminds us that we made some unfortunate decisions, it also tells us that we could have done so much better.

Our greatest regrets seem to revolve around pivotal life choices such as education, career, parenting, marriage and romance (including regrets about extra-marital affairs). This is unsurprising as decisions in these areas tend to have long-term and sometimes irrevocable consequences. Other regrets that often arise relate to finance, health, friendship, charity, travel, worry (too much), and even having led a too conventional life.

However, many people I have asked about regrets claim to not have any. In fact, they seem to resist expressing doubts or moving into a space of discomfort about their past life, actions and decisions. Perhaps this avoidance mirrors an existential fear of confronting the darker parts of ourselves.

How narcissism and ageing influence regret

Other people, unfortunately, go in the opposite direction and ruminate endlessly about regret. This maladaptive habit can contribute to self-blame and depression, with serious emotional, cognitive and neurophysiological impact. Self-torment by regret stymies our personal development and may even cause mental health problems.

The intensity of our regret very much depends on our narcissistic equilibrium. Individuals who lack self-esteem seem more susceptible to thoughts of regret and reflections that can further impede their sense of self-worth. Although their willingness to face regret is commendable, they appear to struggle working through it. This can make them risk-averse, fearful about making yet another bad decision. To be stuck between regretting the past and fearing the future is not a good position to be in.

Ageing also influences how we deal with regret. As we realise that our time on this planet is running out, we are more likely to reflect upon the past and try to sort out the mistakes we may have made. This can bring a greater acceptance of our limitations, which in turn can temper the ravages of regret and even generate a new intensity of life. For some, of course, wallowing in regrets may trigger despair and bitterness.

When the opportunities for change are rapidly slipping away, we become more open to assessing the things we have done in a realistic way.

Thankfully, we also become more aware that our life lessons may be used to prevent future regrets and help us achieve a life well lived.

The survival function of regret

Talking about regret often brings up negative experiences and emotions such as sadness, shame, grief, annoyance, anger or guilt. Having said that, from an evolutionary point of view, regret could have a survival function.

Regret can be a psychological construct related to decision making, coping and learning. It forces us to engage in a retrospective analysis to understand why we thought or acted the way we did. Such a review may help us see specific patterns or behaviours that have made us who we are, but also kept us from leading a different life.

Through analysing regrets and getting over the past, we may be able to take remedial action. Regret can become a positive impetus for finding new

constructive solutions and moving forward. Thus, in more than one way, regret is our brain's way of telling us to take another look at our choices; to signal that some of our actions had very negative consequences; and to try things differently in the future.

Unfortunately, despite regret's important guidance, most of us don't pay sufficient attention to it. While we try to reduce our level of stress – articulate our career goals, improve our diets, boost our finances, and manage pretty much everything else – we are reluctant to deal with regrets. Staying open vis-à-vis regrets, however, can provide us with greater insight about ourselves and help us avoid future dysfunctional scenarios. In short, it can greatly improve our future decision-making skills.

Becoming better versions of ourselves

When we experience regret, the challenge is not to try to change the past. On the contrary, it is about shedding light on the present. We cannot alter what has happened, but we can refine how we react and how we are going to live in the future.

Analysing our own shortcomings can prevent us from behaving repeatedly in dysfunctional ways. As we incorporate these learning experiences into our decisions and actions, we are less likely to get stuck in “if only” thinking. It can also help us gain clarity and take advantage of opportunities that otherwise could have slipped by.

We may even engage in various forms of reparative action, like making amends to the people we may have hurt. We may also find and accept that some events were completely out of our control.

Instead of avoiding regret, it's much wiser to deal with the feeling up front, so long as we don't let it set the tone for the rest of our lives. We must learn to use our regrets constructively and forgive ourselves for our mistakes. Hopefully, the insights revealed by our regrets will help us elevate our decisions so that we don't regret tomorrow how we lived today.

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