ONE

What Is Regret?

One of the most remarkable qualities of human nature is our ability to think about what could be and what could have been. Our imagination allows us to consider a range of possibilities so that we can plan for the distant future and mentally rehearse alternatives that we will not ultimately pursue. We could choose to pursue that relationship, that career, that purchase—or that dessert—but we hesitate because we can anticipate the unpleasant consequences that might follow. We imagine that pursuing another relationship will risk our current relationship, or giving up the career we are following to pursue some other work could end in disaster, or buying that expensive item will result in debts we cannot afford, or eating that delicious chocolate cake will lead to the weight gain we are seeking to reverse.

And just as we can imagine having regrets in the future, we are often plagued by regrets of the past. What would our life have been like if we pursued a different partner, career, home, or health habits? Would we be happier today, more fulfilled and successful in our work, enjoying a more comfortable place to live, and being able to fit into our clothes again? There is no end, it appears, to what we could regret.

The Possibility Emotion

But perhaps regret is the cost of wisdom. We can imagine a world better than the one we have lived in; we can imagine what life would

have been like if we chose something else. Regret is the ability to imagine possibilities. It is the aspirational *possibility emotion*. It points to what could have been or what might be—not limited by what really exists.

Consider some of these observations about regret.

> The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone.
>
> —Harriet Beecher Stowe

> Maybe all one can do is hope to end up with the right regrets.
>
> —Arthur Miller

> There are two possible situations—one can either do this or that. My honest opinion and my friendly advice is this: do it or do not do it—you will regret both.
>
> —Soren Kierkegaard

Some people say that we should never regret anything. They claim that nothing good can come from regrets, that we must live completely in the present moment. They say that it makes no sense to regret something that you freely chose and that leaving the past behind is the only reasonable thing to do. Others are trapped, frozen in time with regrets about what they chose to do—or not do—in the past. They cannot seem to enjoy what they have or could do now because they imagine what they believe would have been a better life if only they had done something different. And as one comic said, "The only reason to live in the past is that the rent was cheaper."

Who is right?

Both may be partly right and partly wrong. In fact, we have to realize that if regret is so common, so much a part of human nature, it must have some value. Why would it have evolved? Why does it survive? What good is it? Maybe there is an advantage to regret. But regret has its downside. It leads to guilt, indecision, rumination, worry about future regrets, and depression. It is the "either/or" that we face, the decisions we did not make, the possibilities we can only imagine but have never experienced. We battle within ourselves. We imagine what could have been possible and often devalue what actually is our current reality.

Regret: "Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda"

One definition given by the *Oxford Languages Dictionary* is that regret is "a feeling of sadness, repentance, or disappointment over an occurrence or something that one has done or failed to do." But behind this simple definition there are other assumptions that we carry around about things that we regret. For example, we believe that *we should have* known better, that *we had control* over the outcome, and that the outcome was *important* or even essential to our happiness. "I had control," "I should have," and "it's important" are key elements in what makes some regrets trivial to us while others haunt us for years. For example, when we regret something we did or did not do, we assume that we had some control over the outcome—that we knew what would happen and we could have done something different. This is different from feeling sad about an outcome. For example, you can feel sad that a friend has died, but you might realize that it was not caused by anything that you did. (You might regret not telling them how much you loved them because you did have control over saying that.) You might feel upset that your car was hit by another car you did not see that was running a red light, but you are not likely to regret that it happened since you would not hold yourself responsible for something that you could not predict. So, regret has something to do with a negative outcome where we knew what would happen and we could have chosen to do something different. We need to keep this in mind because many times when we are feeling regretful we are assuming that we knew everything and controlled everything. But the reality is that we were making decisions with limited knowledge and control.

The Tyranny of the Shoulds

Our assumptions that we knew and had control are especially important when we think, "I should have done something different." Maybe we "should" have, but in many cases, we did not know how things would work out and we may not have had control over the outcome. It doesn't make sense to say, "I should have done something I lacked knowledge about or did not control." We would not tell someone, "You should have brown eyes, not blue eyes." We don't control the color of our eyes. We don't hold people responsible for something they could not have known.

And there is another part of our thinking that we should have done something different. And that's when we also think, "I should criticize myself and ruminate about it." For example, I might think, "I should have paid my taxes on time, and I got a penalty," but then—rather than criticize myself—I could choose to learn from the experience and accept the penalty. I could prepare my taxes on time next year. Our "should" about regret comes back to haunt us. Here is what it sounds like.

I should not have said that, so now I should criticize myself and dwell on it.

I should not have taken this job, so now I should label myself as a failure.

I should not have had too much to drink last night, so now I should tell myself how bad I am.

And, most importantly, I should criticize myself over and over for not doing what I should have done.

We will see that we have a choice here. We can either *self-criticize* or *self-correct*. Imagine that you are learning tennis. You keep hitting the ball into the net. We have two tennis instructors—Critical Carol and Laura Learner. Critical Carol tells you to take the tennis racket and slam it against your head 10 times, repeating, "I am such an idiot" to teach yourself a lesson you will never forget. You then hit the ball into the net and collapse from a severe brain injury. In another scenario, your instructor Laura Learner shows you how to hold the tennis racquet and how to move your arm. You now hit the ball over the net. You have learned something and your brain is still intact.

We can either self-criticize or self-correct.

You might have regretted hitting the ball into the net. You might say to yourself, "Damn, that was a bad shot." But which is going to help you—self-criticism or self-correction? The point here is that you have a choice about what you do next—do you condemn yourself or correct your swing?

Also, when we regret something, we are usually assuming that it is important. For example, let's say that you know that your pants are a bit worn and there is a small hole in the pocket, but you put some coins in your pocket and later you realize that you lost a nickel. You might regret it for a second, but how long would you dwell on it? How important is a nickel? Let's say you are stuck in traffic and you find yourself frustrated, almost enraged. You realize that you will be delayed 20 minutes. You start regretting it, thinking, "I should have left earlier."

Your anxiety and anger with yourself have escalated now, and you say to yourself, "This is terrible. I am such an idiot." You are now equating being delayed for 20 minutes with a *terrible outcome*—rather than a temporary inconvenience—and you are labeling yourself based on this one choice. And you are assuming that you knew you would get stuck in traffic. Does that make sense? Were you thinking, "I know I will get stuck in traffic but—damn it—I am going to do it anyway"? Is 20 minutes that important to you?

Sometimes, we regret something that we think is *essential*—almost like we cannot live without it. For example, a college student partied last night and now did poorly on a monthly exam. She regrets not studying, but now she thinks it is a disaster that she didn't do well on the exam. She begins to think that this exam is essential to doing well in college, in life, and that nothing will ever help her get over it. Doing well on the exam is viewed as so important that she becomes anxious and depressed. But is one exam essential? I know what is essential. Breathing air. Not an exam.

Sometimes, of course, your regret can be about a course of action with significant consequences. For example, Kevin got married 12 years ago, and he and Gabriela had a son, Pedro. Their marriage has been a loveless, sexless relationship for 10 years now, and Kevin is thinking about separating. But he now dwells on how his life would have been better if he had never married Gabriela. And perhaps he is right. But Kevin's regret keeps him stuck in the past. Even if he would have been better off without Gabriela, focusing on the regret, criticizing himself, and blaming Gabriela does not move him forward in his life. The options for Kevin are to criticize himself and regret the past decision or to make a change in his life now. Regret is in conflict with focusing on future positives that you can pursue.

> Dwelling on regret can lead to regretting that you are regretting.

What Does Regret Sound Like?

What does regret sound like? Well, listen to yourself and your friends and see if you recognize any of the following:

- I regret buying that stock. Taking that job. Moving to this city.
- I regret I didn't get out of that relationship earlier.
- I regret saying such a stupid thing.

- I regret drinking so much last night.
- I regret I didn't study more.

Or think about regrets that you anticipate having in the future.

- I will regret leaving this relationship.
- I will regret throwing out those clothes.
- I will regret selling that stock.
- I will regret telling him what I really feel.

One of the key parts of regret is the thought "if only." You can see it immediately. "If only I had studied more, if only I had gotten out of that relationship, if only I had taken that other job, if only I didn't say that stupid thing." We think that the alternative we rejected would have made our lives so much better. And then we dwell on it. Regret is that continuous reminder that you could have done something different and that a better outcome was or could be within your reach. And we believe that the different outcome—the one we never experienced or will experience—is *essential* to our happiness. It's like the meal you missed is your last meal. You will never eat again.

But you will.

Regret cancels out *what is* in favor of *what could have been*. What could have been becomes the enemy of what is true in your life. You punish yourself with what you imagine could have been possible. "If only I had pursued that other career, I would be happy today" or "If only I had kids, I would never be lonely again" or "If only I had moved to California, I would be enjoying my life now." We idealize what we never had and discredit what is or what could be in the future.

> Regret is the "cancel emotion"—it erases and cancels out the life that we are living.

What Do You Regret?

Are you canceling out the life you are currently living? That sounds pretty terrible, doesn't it? As if nothing in your life is worthwhile or valuable. To get started on figuring out what regret is to you, think back over your life for a few minutes. What do you regret? It can be something you did or did not do. But give it some thought. It might

help if you wrote this down and looked back at your regret as you read through this book. What have been some of your biggest regrets? And what did you regret in the past that you no longer regret?

It's important to realize that you can have regrets—but then let them go. It's like spring cleaning in your mind. When in doubt, throw it out.

Now take a few minutes and think about a recent decision that you were trying to make (or one you're trying to make right now). What did you fear you might regret in the future? Again, it can be helpful to jot some notes about this and look back at them as you read the book.

When we think about our regrets, we may notice that there are certain domains of our lives—certain issues—that bother us more than others. Look at the following list of various areas that people have concerns about.

Work
Intimate relationships
Financial matters
Time wasted
Leisure
Travel
Sexual behavior
Advancing in my career
Education
Friendships
Health
Spiritual/values
Exercise
Personal growth

In which of these domains have you had regrets? As you look at your list of regrets about the past, do you find that you regret actions you took or actions you did not take? Are there certain areas of your life that you regret more than other areas? Which areas do you have the most regrets in? Are there certain decisions that you are considering now or in the future about what to do—where you might regret taking action? As we explore more in the next chapters, your fear of future regrets can keep you stuck, trapped in indecision, procrastinating, and avoiding important issues in your life.

What Are the Most Common Regrets?

In a national survey, researchers found that the most common regrets were about romance, family, education, career, finance, parenting, health, "other," friends, spirituality, community, leisure, and self. Men have more regrets about achievement, and women have more regrets about romantic relationships or sexual experiences. This may reflect the cultural pressure for men to achieve (although women also can regret their past decisions regarding school and achievement). And there are certainly many men who have regrets about their intimate and romantic choices. In fact, if you are highly prone to regret, you can regret your most recent conversation at dinner or the route you took to get to a restaurant.

Research on regret in college women shows that they are more likely to regret having intercourse once and only once or after knowing the other party for less than 24 hours.

In a review that summarizes research from nine studies on regrets including participants ranging from undergraduates to elderly individuals, the most frequent areas of regret in descending order were education (32%), career (22%), romance (15%), parenting (10%), self (5%), leisure (3%), finance (3%), and family (2%). In another study, college students were asked to describe a vivid experience that they wished had turned out differently (that is, a regret). The average duration of their regret was 2 years, and the order of regrets was as follows: (1) romance, (2) friends, (3) education, (4) leisure, (5) self, and (6) career. According to these researchers, young undergraduates may be in romantic relationships that are less stable and therefore open to more opportunities for regret.

When we measure the intensity of emotion associated with regret, the research shows greater intensity for regrets about social relationships (romance and family) compared to other areas of life. Interestingly, what people do with their regrets has an impact on later well-being. One area of study that is relevant is the midlife review—how you look back at your life at around age 40. One study found that women who had regrets about what they did earlier in life but did not make corrections or changes in their lives were more likely to be lower in psychological well-being and more likely to ruminate compared to women who made changes. Thus, regret can be "productive" in leading to positive changes.

Women who *voluntarily* chose to be childless were less regretful, reported higher levels of well-being, and felt greater mastery in their lives compared to women who were involuntarily childless. Apparently, making it one's choice leads to being more comfortable and accepting of the outcome.

Women who took longer family leave after the birth of their children expressed fewer regrets later. Women who returned to work earlier were also more likely to have more regrets if there was less commitment by their organization to flexibility in working hours. But there are interesting "cohort" effects—the year in which the mother was born—reflecting historical changes in how women might see career and family.

In a study comparing older women (60s) with younger women (40s and 20s), there was a reversal of the nature of regrets. Older women, who had children before the women's movement, were more likely to regret putting family first over career, whereas younger women were more likely to regret putting career first over family. Apparently, once the right and opportunity to have a career have been established, some women feel the freedom to choose family over career. Of course, it would be interesting to see data for men on these issues, but alas there are none.

How Do Regrets Evolve over Our Lifespan?

Every stage in our lifespan is an opportunity for regret. Each stage in life can place different demands on you—and different opportunities for decisions and regrets. Young kids can regret that they said something that alienated a friend. High school kids can regret that they didn't study for an exam. College students can regret that they pursued the "wrong courses" and "wasted" time. Young adults can regret that they took a job that was not to their liking. Newly married people can regret that they married the wrong person. Think back on your own life and what the regrets were at different stages for you. Has the content of your regret changed?

How do older people handle their regrets? As people age they realize that they have limited opportunities and time to undo poor decisions and outcomes—thus, to regret something when you are quite old is to realize that you are unlikely to have an opportunity to rectify or change things. In fact, the research shows that older individuals often have a

"positivity bias," looking at the brighter side of things, and they are more skilled than younger people in predicting their future emotions and in regulating their emotions. In one study comparing younger and older people, researchers found that "life regrets" (longer-term regrets) were more common among older individuals but that daily regrets or short-term regrets were less common among older adults. Apparently, older people adapt to their daily life by having fewer regrets over the short term—that is, they live life day to day the best that they can.

Given that certain kinds of regrets cannot be "undone"—that is, there is less opportunity to change your career or pursue educational goals after the age of 60—older individuals may cope with this reduced opportunity to change things by *disengaging* (for example, not caring about something or thinking about it differently) and by pursuing other goals. This is what the research shows. Compared to undergraduates, who viewed themselves as still focusing on the goals for which they reported regret (for example, romance and education), older individuals focused on pulling away from those prior goals toward newer goals within their reach. *The ability to disengage from prior regrets and focus on current goals was associated with greater psychological well-being, less depression, and less rumination*. This is a lesson we could all take to heart! Letting go and getting on.

In a study comparing younger (25 years old) with older (over 65) individuals, the participants played a game in which they initially were confronted with a loss. They could then continue to play the game (hoping to reverse the loss) or take their earnings and quit the game. Which group would try to reverse their loss and "undo" their regret? Younger participants and depressed older adults were more likely to continue the game, attempting to undo their regret for the prior loss by continuing to play, whereas older healthy or nondepressed participants were more likely to take their earnings and quit. This "disengagement" was related to the activation of the ventral striatum, a part of the brain involved in decision making and emotion regulation. This part of the brain mediates reward and pleasure and the anticipation of reward, thus affecting decision making. After all, decision making is aimed at pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. Depressed older adults were similar to the younger adults in that they attempted to undo their regrets by taking an additional risk. They couldn't give up, let go, and get on. They got hijacked by their regrets.

Even young children experience regret. One study of children as young as 5 years old found that they did experience regret. Another

study demonstrated regret in children as young as 6 or 7. How about feeling "relief" in finding out that the outcome you achieved is better than a possible alternative? This does not seem to develop until age 7. In another study, children as young as 4 showed some regret. The ability to understand that others might regret outcomes seems to appear at age 7. Other research shows that children who experience regret about a choice are better able to delay gratification—that is, regret helps children make less impulsive decisions. Perhaps regret has its advantages—even for kids.

Although there is no research identifying the common regrets of young children, research on adolescents indicates that a significant proportion report regretting either having sexual intercourse "too early" (32% of girls and 27% of boys) or having sex at all (13% of girls and 5% of boys).

As children and adolescents get older they are more likely to express regrets and to understand that other people have regrets. This is due to the increased cognitive sophistication that comes with age—the ability to imagine what could be or could not be and to measure ourselves (and others) by hypothetical or imaginary possibilities. As we get older during childhood and adolescence we begin to realize a wide range of possible worlds—possible choices—and we increase our risk for disappointment. Ironically, regret is a developmental milestone—one that we might wish we didn't have to deal with.

Regrets and Culture: Are There East–West Differences?

There are cultural differences in what people regret. For example, American students have more regrets about *personal situations* (for example, achievement and education), while Japanese students have more regrets about *interpersonal situations* (relationships and family). Similar results were found comparing Western with Taiwanese participants. This difference in regret between Americans and Asians reflects the fact that American—and Western—culture places a greater emphasis on individual identity and achievement, whereas Asian culture is more collectivist and places greater emphasis on cooperation and coordination. The Western tradition appears to emphasize greater focus on individuals and their actions, whereas Asian culture emphasizes the interpersonal context. This may explain the differences between cultures in what people regret most—individual choice and achievement among Westerners, interpersonal relationships among Asians.

What about Careers and Regret?

Fortune magazine interviewed entrepreneurs about their biggest regrets. Although it was not a scientific study, they found that leading businesspeople listed the following as major regrets: not utilizing time well, not learning from failures, relying only on talent rather than what can be taught, not asking for help, saying no to growth, being hard on themselves, waiting too long, not knowing their limitations, and not delegating enough. In a survey of 836 adults of all ages, the following investment regrets were the most common: saving for retirement too late, putting off investing in stocks, and not buying a stock. The *Harvard Business Review* interviewed 30 professionals between age 28 and 58 about their most common career regrets. They found that these people were most likely to regret taking a job just for the money, not quitting earlier, not starting their own business, not being more productive in school, and not acting on their hunches about careers.

So, there are cultural, age, and gender differences in regret, and we may end up holding on to regrets for years—even decades. But is regret always such a bad thing? Let's look at how regret can hurt us—or help us—by exploring how it works.

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