

PUT YOUR REGRETS IN THE PROPER PLACE

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

It is not uncommon for people to reflect on various regrets they have had in their lives. Perhaps, through deep introspection, people believe they might become a better person by enumerating all the things they should or should not have done. However, there is little research evidence to suggest that reminding oneself about regrets will lead to any productive or positive outcome. In fact, I have a strong belief to the contrary. I believe there is no useful reason for focusing on past regrets. Because this belief has served me well throughout my adult life, I have a motto that I often share with friends and clients: “Live a life of no regrets.”

Like all imperfect human beings, I, too, have had regrets, but I have a firm conviction that regrets are a waste of mental, emotional, and spiritual energy. Regrets, are lethal “if only’s, woulda’s, shoulda’s, coulda’s.” I believe regrets dampen one’s spirit and focus one’s energy on negativity. Dwelling on regrets serves no useful purpose. And regrets cannot be undone.

Regrets associated with Depression

How bad is it to focus on past regrets? Metaphorically, regrets seem to grow like mold when allowed to flourish from too much mental attention in dark recesses of our mind. Regrets have an inherently tacky surface, somewhat like flypaper, trapping one’s energy in negativity, self-recrimination, self-remorse and can ultimately lead to despair and depression. Listen to anyone who is depressed and you’ll hear them talk about things they wish they hadn’t done, things they wish they had done, choices they wish they had never made, etc. Depressed speech is characterized by a focus on the past that cannot be changed and a feeling of hopelessness about the future, which will only bring more of the same---more regrets.

If I asked you to imagine someone with masochistic tendencies, you’d probably imagine someone who appears to enjoy self-inflicted physical pain. However, many people who dwell on past regrets are engaging in a subtle form of mental masochistic behavior. They are constantly punishing themselves with harsh criticism about what they did or didn’t do and these thoughts will eventually spiral the individual into some degree of depression. If you find yourself dredging up old mistakes of commission or omission in your life, you may be punishing yourself for errors you can’t repair. Has such behavior truly helped to improve your life? Has this self-punishment fixed past mistakes? Is this focus on regrets actually shaping you into a better person?

Regrets are like Internet Spam

When clients become fixated on talking about or obsessing about things they regret, I encourage them to forgive and let go of the past. To help put “regrets” in some helpful perspective, I like to present an analogy from our modern times. I equate regrets with Internet Spam---something not worthy of being opened or read. Regrets, like spam, are

unsolicited and might contain a lethal virus that is too dangerous to control once opened and read. Obsessing on regrets can corrupt more productive, optimistic thought patterns.

Planning is different from Regretting

We can acknowledge past mistakes in a useful manner by learning from them and making plans to behave differently in the future. Regrets aren't like this. Regrets are obsessively thinking about all past wrong doings or missed opportunities and becoming mired in a sense of victimization and hopelessness. When we let go of regrets, we are able to move into forgiving ourselves and forgiving others. Forgiveness is a positive state of mind that encourages us to act more mindfully in the future.

Over the years, I've refused to give regrets any airtime in my mind. For instance, when regrets occasionally sneak into my gray matter, I quickly and consciously distract myself by switching to a different mental channel, focusing on more important and worthwhile thoughts. These thoughts might be a refocus on the present moment or perhaps some meaningful plans for the future. And of course, there are always the thoughts of gratitude that will nurture our mind and spirit.

If you too, find little usefulness in dwelling on life's regrets, I encourage you to delete such thoughts as quickly as they show up in my mind. The power of choice is a wonderful gift that only conscious human beings possess. Choose wisely what you focus on.

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