

REGRETS ARE GOOD FOR YOU

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*Stuck in a rut of
wishing you'd
done things
differently?
It's hard to
break free,
but processing
regrets can help
us move forward*



PSYCHOLOGY NOW

WORDS CLARE BOWIE

Ever wish you'd left the house earlier, reworded that email or stopped short of being cajoled into a full head of highlights? We all have regrets, big and small, and the good news is that we should be giving ourselves permission to have them. No more ruminating over what we did or didn't do - the new goal is not to be a victim of the past, and to learn to accept ourselves just as we are.

1 ACKNOWLEDGE REGRETS

Regrets are a common experience and it's unrealistic to believe that life can, or should, be devoid of them. The sorrow over 'fundamental regrets' (relationships, work, health, life choices and so on) can "run deep and feel very intense," says Karin Sieger. The key is to acknowledge their existence and then learn how to manage them. Nobody can sashay through life getting it correct every time, making all the right decisions at exactly the right moments. Of course, there may well be a job or relationship that you still dwell on but, by acknowledging that these feelings exist, you can learn to rationalise their impact by choosing the level of emotional pull they have over you.

DO IT Take back control by giving yourself permission to acknowledge that the regret exists, but detach from the emotional impact you are feeding it with. "Regrets can make us feel stuck and block us from growing and fulfilling our potential," says Sieger. Remind yourself that regrets are human - we all have them.

2 ACCEPT THE PAST

Inflexible thinking can trap us in a cycle of regretting past decisions, according to Windy Dryden. "We blame ourselves for what has happened rather than seeing our behaviour in a wider context and understanding why we took the path we did, based on the information we had at the time." We may have spent years regretting a decision like not going for a new job, deciding not to breastfeed or emigrating to the other side of the world, when the truth is that that decision probably made sense at the time. It's only with hindsight it perhaps falls short of the romantic fixed narrative we had constructed for ourselves; the impossible standards we

have set in our personal or professional lives.

DO IT Dryden suggests we try switching the negative conversations in our heads to productive ones. Instead of 'I should have done that', self-berating, try asking the harder questions, 'I wonder why I did/didn't do that?'. The answers will help you to remove your blinkers, accept your past self and open the door to repair.

3 BREAK THE HABIT

Okay, so you've realised that regrets can be persistent and very convincing. Sieger refers to them as "slippery and seductive," because they draw you in and exhaust your emotional reserves. To help you move on and break the cycle of ruminative regret, Dryden suggests the next step is to "neither engage nor try to eliminate them." Try thinking of something you regret, like a conversation with a friend where you gossiped too much. Don't dwell on all the details, fuelling your frustration and shame. Instead, allow the memory to exist but not consume or rule you.

DO IT If you feel the familiar negative thought pattern seeping in, breathe slowly inwards and think to yourself, 'What can I learn from this?'. Remind yourself of Dryden's words: 'I thought it was right at the time I did it. It may have been bad, but I'm not bad'. Breathe deeply, exhale the negative emotion and choose not to re-engage with it.

4 LEARN FROM REGRETS

Regrets represent our conscience and they can motivate us to take corrective action in the future. Pinpoint what it is that makes you feel regretful, and what traps you keep falling into. Perhaps you drink too much, overspend, or speak without thinking first. Aim to tweak your future responses. Making a poor decision does not mean that you are doomed to permanent failure. As Sieger reminds us, "Regrets can turn into the experiences that help you unfold your potential."

DO IT Practise mindful strategies like counting to ten before reacting in triggering situations. Be aware of the impact of your words. Focus on things you can control, like starting a spending diary or monitoring your alcohol intake.



KARIN SIEGER

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WINDY DRYDEN

Emeritus professor of psychotherapeutic studies at Goldsmiths University, Windy specialises in single-session and very brief interventions. He's written many books, including *Ten Steps to Positive Living* (Routledge).



CANDI WILLIAMS

Candi is the author of *How to be Perfectly Imperfect* (Summersdale).

5 LET YOURSELF OFF THE HOOK

Sieger's most powerful message is that we should forgive ourselves and step away from negative thought patterns by "acting on regrets, responsibly and fairly towards others and most of all towards ourselves." Remind yourself that it's never too late and, if handled correctly, many an important life lesson and positive change can grow out of regrets. Candi Williams reiterates this thought process and describes how limiting it is to try to live a life where everything is 'perfect'. She recommends that we focus on living purposefully rather than perfectly, so that we can reach a place where we no longer "magnify flaws and play down strengths."

DO IT Williams advises us to conserve our energy for positivity rather than wasting energy holding on to pain. "Learn to let go of things that hurt you, no longer serve you or make you question your worth." The release you feel will "give you more time and space to focus on things that really matter - things that bring you happiness, joy and self-love." ■

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