

# Embrace your regrets and move forward, psychologist says

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Have regrets? Don't push them away. Harness them and move on as a smarter person, says Neal Roese, a professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Roese tackles the sometimes touchy topic in his new book "If Only: How to Turn Regret Into Opportunity" (Broadway Books/Random House).

Roese, in everyday language, uses easily recognizable examples from his own experiences, from recent politics and history, and from literature and the movies. He gives perspective by putting the examples into the context of the last 15 years of research, including his own.

Regrets, in the language of psychology, are "the emotional offspring of counterfactuals, which represent information contrary to the facts and come in two forms," Roese says. "One allows people to learn that a path not taken in a situation may have been a wiser choice, and, therefore, they can improve their performance in later situations. The other is uplifting because they realize an alternative action could have been worse.

"From counterfactuals comes recognition of possibilities, out of regret comes hope for the future, and the essence of human cognition is a set of interlocking mechanisms designed to identify, understand, and fix the problems, both big and small, that appear constantly along the road of life," Roese wrote in the introduction to his book. Counterfactuals, he continues, have "the power to push individuals towards regeneration and renewal."

Marlon Brando's character in "On the Waterfront," for example, is deeply torn and, in turn, motivated by regret over his bowing to mob pressure and deliberately losing a boxing match. "I could have been a contender instead of a bum, which is what I am," dockworker Terry Malloy says. His big regret drives him to work for change.

Regret is rooted to counterfactual thinking, Roese says.

Regrets, he says, "provide benchmarks for reality ... they influence our beliefs about how one thing causes another to occur." They can power the imagination, for better or worse, when people ponder what if something went another way. What if Hitler had won the war? If only I told her that I loved her? What if President Kennedy had lived? If only I had sold my Enron stock earlier. I wish I had listened to my mother.

Counterfactuals, he says, allow people to channel their insights. A series of studies done in the last 15 years, according to Roese, found four main areas in which average Americans place regrets. Consistently, people wish they could go back and change their approaches to, in order, education, career, intimacy and parenting.

"This list is essentially a summary of the biggest traps, pitfalls and mistakes into which people like you might blunder," Roese wrote. "The list therefore offers a cautionary note, signaling which areas of life in which to exercise the greatest care."

In new research, Roese has found that the opportunity for improvement influences regret. When opportunity disappears, brain mechanisms work actively to mitigate regret, but when opportunity persists, regret pushes people toward corrective action. The research explains why education is the No. 1 regret of Americans. "You can always go back to school," he said.

While mild regret is useful for driving new action, he said, severe regret “can be the first step toward mental illness.” Research has shown that most people eventually return to pre-tragedy levels of satisfaction, but some people suffer long-term emotional distress and depression. “Unfortunately, the newest research linking counterfactual thinking to depression contain little insight into how best to treat depression,” Roesse wrote.

Throughout the book, Roesse illustrates how recent research challenges long-held assumptions. For years, the wisdom was, get over regrets and move on.

“Regret is good,” he wrote. “Regret serves a necessary psychological purpose.”

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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