

Handout 9.1: Common Myths About Regret

Myth 1: Regret is bad and unproductive in our lives.

To the contrary, regret (within reason) is a very important psychological reaction we have as humans, and it helps us to be productive members of society. In fact, one of the hallmarks of people with antisocial personality disorders, who populate our prisons, is the absence of regret and a tendency to blame others while not learning from mistakes.

Thus, we need regret in order to take responsibility for wrongful actions and to do better in the future. The problem comes when regret is extreme and debilitating, robbing us of self-esteem and well-being. It exists on a continuum, but a healthy degree of regret is vital to a well-functioning life. The key is to have your regret work to improve you rather than hinder you.

Myth 2: Regret is rarely productive.

Regret can be divided into two categories: productive regret and unproductive regret. Unproductive regret leads to self-berating and emotional paralysis due to an all-pervasive "I-should-have-known-better" attitude.

The problem is that you can't change the past, and what's done is done. The best way to move past this no-win situation is to use lessons learned to make the regret productive, using it as a springboard for making better choices going forward. One of the greatest stings in life is that of regret, and by turning that sting into improved insight and action, we can actually increase our self-esteem instead of diminishing it.

Myth 3: Regret and Guilt are interchangeable.

Although they can often be intertwined, there is a very definite difference between guilt and regret. Regret can be quite healthy and is what's behind the words "I'm sorry." Taking responsibility for words you wish you didn't say or actions you wish you didn't do is a normal human reaction and necessary for character building and growth.

Guilt, however, runs deeper and tends to be less objective and rational. It entails a sense of shame and is much more emotionally intense and harder to move past. It robs us of self-esteem and a sense of self-

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worth, and is often caught up in our imagination. While regret is generally felt for past actions that are regarded as forgivable, guilt is typically steeped in unresolved internal shame-based perceptions that rarely pass the test of objective reality.

The word *remorse* comes from the Latin word meaning “to bite again” and is a deep form of guilt that causes people to keep hurting themselves. Whereas regret can be a response of mild disappointment, remorse over a “wrong” or a regrettable action weighs heavily on the heart and mind.

Myth 4: Regret is mostly about wrong paths taken.

Although regret is often a reaction to our words and actions, many times regret is actually a reaction to a nonaction and a road not taken:

“I wish I had worked harder in school.”

“I wish I had gone into another profession.”

“I wish I’d made more friends when I was in college.”

“I wish I had gotten married.”

“I wish I had never gotten married.”

“I wish I was more appreciative of the freedom I had when I was younger.”

“I wish I told her how much I loved her when I had the chance.”

These are examples of regrets of inaction. Neal Roese, in his book *If Only: How to Turn Regret Into Opportunity* (2005), writes about the inevitability that most of us will spend at least some time thinking about “what might have been” and urges his readers to use this information as a guide to changing their present life. He also regards regret as a great motivator to look for “opportunities knocking” in the present, while pointing out that regret is one the greatest propellers of action and can help motivate us to be more proactive in our lives *now*.