

## 17: Overcome Regret

*“Never look back unless you are planning to go that way.”*

—Henry David Thoreau

There’s nothing like the sharp sting of regret to keep you stuck in the past and mess up your life. Regret is a tough nut to crack and is definitely a self-esteem robber. It is only human to have regrets, and in hindsight almost all of us would have made some different choices “back then.” Regrets can irritate you like grains of sand in your shoe. They form a collective, persistent voice that adds fuel to the fire that destroys self-esteem—beating you up and keeping you down. Your regrets can be a great teacher to help you improve yourself and your choices moving forward, but if you have low self-esteem, you will be less likely to use regrets as motivating rather than debilitating. Regrets not only deplete us of self-esteem, but they also give rise to anxiety and depression. Regrets keep us stuck in the past, causing us to endlessly rework old issues that can never be changed. They lurk in the recesses of our mind, like a slow poison leaking into every day of our lives.

Psychologist Neal Roese (2005) offers four general common areas of regret:

1. Regrets about educational choices
2. Regrets about career choices
3. Regrets about love

#### 4. Regrets about parenting

Roese emphasizes that regrets are not all bad—in fact, they can be quite productive if you focus on lessons learned and new actions built on a foundation of regrets. He makes the distinction between *productive* and *unproductive* regrets. He urges us to use regrets as a springboard to take different action now, building on regrets rather than being crippled by them. In essence, we can use regret to remind us that we can do better instead of scold us that we should have done better.

**How about you? Are you plagued by regrets that interfere with you living in the now? Are you ready to take control of your regrets today and embrace them to move past them?**

## GIVE IT A TRY

How would life be different for you if you were able to truly embrace your flawed, imperfect self? Learning strategies to build on your regrets rather than get buried under them will help you move forward to embrace your greatness.

**Step 1:** Following Roese's lead, let's turn unproductive regrets into productive regrets. Label two columns on a blank sheet as shown on the next page. In the first column list the regrets that keep plaguing you. In the second, write down some ideas on how to make those regrets productive based on committing yourself to actions *now*.

## Embrace Your Past

Unproductive Regret	Productive Regret
<i>I chose the wrong career.</i>	<i>I can explore new alternatives and choices now, like going back to school or getting more training.</i>
<i>I screwed up my marriage.</i>	<i>I am learning valuable lessons about how to control my anger and treat others more assertively. I'm already a much more nurturing and calmer parent and friend, and I will be healthier in my relationships going forward.</i>
<i>I burned many bridges with people close to me.</i>	<i>I will be careful to be kind to those close to me now, accept responsibility for hurting them, and act better now.</i>

**Step 2:** To further work on overcoming unproductive regrets, reflect on these questions and write out your answers:

- *Can you forgive yourself for not having the foresight to know what is now so obvious in hindsight? Why or why not?*
- *How can your life change if you commit to focusing on being motivated by your regrets rather than being defined and debilitated by them?*
- *What have you learned from the lessons your regret has taught you?*

**Step 3:** Be patient with yourself as you work through your regrets, and revisit this activity regularly. Continually refine your tangible goals to make them specific calls to action. As you work to let go of your regrets, remember to never give your past more power than your present.

**What is your plan to turn your unproductive regrets into more productive ones? Isn't it about time to give yourself another shot and leave your regrets behind?**