



Embrace Your Past

LEARNING FROM IT INSTEAD
OF LIVING IN IT

Do you find that you have trouble coping with your day-to-day life without being pulled down by thoughts about the past? Do you feel like the past is an anchor, weighing you down from enjoying life fully today? If you are like most people plagued with self-doubt and low self-esteem, the answer to these questions is likely yes. But one thing's for sure—the past never changes. The past leaves us with two choices: learn from it or live in it.

Low self-esteem breeds thoughts that get stuck on repeat in your head about the regrettable choices, mistakes, or failures you think you've made. If you keep pondering, churning, and regurgitating the same old stuff, you are demonstrating the digestive process of a cow chewing its cud. The cow actually does digest food by regurgitating the same food over and over again in the *physiological* process called *rumination*. This is the origin of the word for the *psychological* process of rumination—reviewing past mistakes, obsessive thoughts, missed opportunities, regrettable actions and choices...regurgitating the same stuff over and over and over again.

If you find that you spend too much time looking back on your choices and actions—reviewing what was, what could have been, or what should have been—then you will never be able to fully live today. After all, what's done is done—*over*. There's a long list of things we can repeatedly mull over. The only hope to move forward is to focus more on what's left rather than on what we lost or left behind. This transitions us from post-traumatic stress to post-traumatic growth.

Embrace Your Past

Are you ready to stop giving your past more power than your present? Don't you deserve to free yourself from the chains of your past and allow yourself to experience your life fully *now*?

16: Forgive the Past

“Forgiveness is giving up the hope of a better past.”

—Lily Tomlin

In life there are no shortages of injustices to collect. There are no shortages of opportunities to feel like you’ve been wronged, taken advantage of, overlooked, treated poorly, and subject to careless treatment. Despite the many variations of wrongs that we can be subject to—backbiting at the office, being the unsuspecting casualty of a family feud, mistreatment by a friend or lover, rude put-downs by others, emotional distancing or betrayal by your spouse or someone close to you—the question inevitably remains: *“Now what?”*

Some people never get there—they never get to *“Now what?”* or *“What’s next?”* because they are still too stuck in *“Why?”* They spin their wheels reworking yesterday and what should have happened, getting stuck in the land of *“woulda, coulda, shoulda.”* I have found all too many clients tending to choose self-righteous indignation over acceptance, and grudges over forgiveness, digging themselves even deeper into the unfairness of it all. Unfortunately, this negativity only serves to fast-track them for a life of anger and discontent.

It is a common misperception that forgiveness is all about the other person, because it is really about yourself. It is about you having the conviction to refuse to be defined by past hurts.

Forgiveness is ultimately about moving on from the victim role and refusing to be defined by bitterness rather than condoning the actions of others.

How about you? Are you ready to stop being a collector of injustices and move ahead, albeit bruised but wiser?

GIVE IT A TRY

A large part of the work of forgiveness involves changing your own personal story—not the reality, just your interpretation of it.

Step 1: If you feel like you are held back in life by grievances, grudges, and anger, start by writing down your story. Write how you've felt unfairly treated by people or by life. Here are some questions to help you reflect:

- *How were you hurt?*
- *How has it affected you even today?*
- *How does it hold you back from enjoying life, trusting others, and opening yourself up to new experiences?*
- *How do you think things should have gone?*
- *How would your life be different if some of these things never happened or merely happened differently?*
- *What about the past makes it just too hard to “get over”?*

Step 2: Analyze what you've written:

- *What do you notice? Do you see yourself more as a victim in life than a victor?*
- *Are you too focused on how right you were and how you did not get a fair shake?*
- *Are you waiting for others to make amends—to apologize or be different—for you to reach some peace?*
- *Do you realize you can forgive them even if they're not sorry—and just not go back for more?*

Step 3: As you look over your answers, reflect on what is keeping you stuck in bitterness, making you a victim of the past. Then, considering your answers to all of the questions above, rewrite your story to make yourself less like a victim of your past and more open to forgiveness and healing. For example, if you wrote, *They were such jerks*, rewrite a new version of that statement: *People sure can be hurtful.*

Step 4: Look at your rewritten story and ask yourself if it is in the voice of a victim or the voice of a victorious survivor. If you find that your story is still steeped in bitterness, fine-tune it again to reflect resiliency and courage.

Isn't it time to change your story? Remember, forgiveness is about *your* healing—it is not about who is right or what is fair. It is just about you not being a hostage to the past anymore.

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*.

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?

18: Move from “Why?” to “What’s Next?”

“Do not say, ‘Why were the old days better than these?’ For it is not wise to ask such questions.”

—Ecclesiastes

When I ask new clients what they want to get out of therapy, I am often struck by how many of them answer that they want help to figure out “why” something has happened. It’s as if they think that is the magic bullet that will make them well; but in reality, it’s only part of the answer, because it focuses on the past and not on solutions.

There are endless “why” questions we could pose:

“Why is he so shy?”

“Why didn’t she listen to me?”

“Why did that happen to me?”

“Why was I so foolish?”

“Why can’t I get my life together?”

“WHY, WHY, WHY?”

Imagine for a moment being a passenger in a car when the driver, your friend, ran a stop sign, resulting in an accident in