How To Overcome Regret, According to Science

Directions:

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading. **Mark up the text with questions and comments.**
3. Write a **one-page reflection** on your own sheet of paper.

The Week – Eric Barker

August 4, 2014

What hurts more than those pangs of regret? It's one of the worst feelings in the world, right?

But I've got a surprise for you — regret can be a good thing. In fact, sometimes you enjoy it. Sound crazy?

When researchers asked people to score the upside of many different emotions, regret actually beat out *pride*.

Both regret and disappointment, however, scored much more favorably than anger, guilt, or sadness, surpassing even pride, a positive emotion — showing that individuals do see a value in regret. [[*Mastering the Art of Quitting: Why It Matters in Life, Love, and Work*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00E257TTO/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B00E257TTO&linkCode=as2&tag=spacforrent-20&linkId=QF5FHAQGUK4UHJ5V)]

Why? Even though it's very unpleasant, we see value in regret. We can learn from it.

But can't we learn *without* the godawful nagging pain? That's the real question. And the answer is we can.

But we need to understand how regret works before we can beat it. Let's get some answers.

What do we regret the most?

**The research shows we consistently regret** [**missed opportunity**](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2011/12/what-do-we-regret-most-why/)**.**

Education, career, relationships… our errors in these domains loom so large because of all the possibilities that might have changed our lives.

A second thing the research confirms is that the old saw is true: [you're more likely to regret the things you didn't do](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2012/02/what-are-we-most-likely-to-regret/).

Indeed, in the long run, people of every age and in every walk of life seem to regret not having done things much more than they regret things they did, which is why the most popular regrets include not going to college, not grasping profitable business opportunities, and not spending enough time with family and friends. [[*Stumbling on Happiness*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000GCFW0A/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B000GCFW0A&linkCode=as2&tag=spacforrent-20&linkId=SYNMCRRPAMGUXC32)]

And it's amazing how consistently these two principles prove out.

But why are the things we don't do so much more painful over time than the things that we actually follow through with?

There's a reason…

**You have a psychological immune system.**

Your brain doesn't want you overwhelmed with regret 24/7. So it conspires to help you. What does it do?

It rationalizes. We humans are [rationalizing machines](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2013/03/interview-nyt-bestselling-author-dan-ariely-talks/).

So when you do something stupid, you feel bad but part of your brain immediately starts digging for silver livings:

*I should have left that terrible job sooner… but staying there I really learned a lot about myself.*

We all do it and it helps us get by. But what happens when you don't do something stupid? When you don't do anything at all?

It's hard to learn from experience *when there is no experience*. It's harder to generate silver linings for things you never did.

Harvard happiness expert [Dan Gilbert explains](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000GCFW0A/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B000GCFW0A&linkCode=as2&tag=spacforrent-20&linkId=SYNMCRRPAMGUXC32):

But why do people regret inactions more than actions? One reason is that the psychological immune system has a more difficult time manufacturing positive and credible views of inactions than of actions… when our inaction causes us to reject a marriage proposal from someone who later becomes a movie star, we can't console ourselves by thinking of all the things we learned from the experience because… well, there wasn't one. [[*Stumbling on Happiness*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000GCFW0A/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B000GCFW0A&linkCode=as2&tag=spacforrent-20&linkId=SYNMCRRPAMGUXC32)]

And later on in life it's often harder to remember why we *didn't* do things than why we *did* do them.

Often we were just scared. But years later that irrational fear fades and we kick ourselves for not taking risks.

For one thing, regrettable inactions are much harder to reframe because, in retrospect, it usually seems eminently clear that the reasons you had for not doing whatever it was…don't seem to hold water over time… [[*Mastering the Art of Quitting: Why It Matters in Life, Love, and Work*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00E257TTO/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B00E257TTO&linkCode=as2&tag=spacforrent-20&linkId=QF5FHAQGUK4UHJ5V)]

So most regrettable things we follow through with will be rationalized away by our helpful brains.

But when we have failed to act, how do we deal with that ache just won't go away?

**How to overcome regret**

The research says you should ask yourself two questions.

**1) Ask yourself, "What can I learn from this?"**

Regret has a purpose. It's like the oil light on the dashboard of your life, telling you something needs to be fixed.

Studies back this up — [regret is more intense](http://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/the_biggest_regret_of_all/) when it's something that we can do something about.

Researchers call regret an "upward counterfactual." That's a fancy term meaning we're comparing the way things are against a better alternative.

And, in moderation, this is a good thing.

Counterfactual thinking opens the door to modifying future behavior by focusing on a revision of the past. [[*Mastering the Art of Quitting: Why It Matters in Life, Love, and Work*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00E257TTO/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B00E257TTO&linkCode=as2&tag=spacforrent-20&linkId=QF5FHAQGUK4UHJ5V)]

Contrast what happened with what you wanted and formulate a lesson about how to do things differently next time.

**2) Ask yourself, "How could it have been worse?"**

An "upward counterfactual" is great for learning but over time it's what creates that nagging ache of regret.

How do we kill the pain now that we've learned our lesson?

This is where we need what researchers call a "downward counterfactual." Ask "*How could things have been worse?"*

[Research shows](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2010/12/how-to-quickly-and-easily-reduce-regret/) this kills the negative feelings associated with regret. Turn disappointment into [gratitude](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2013/09/how-to-live-a-happy-life/).

Take "I can't believe I crashed my car. I'm so stupid." and turn it into "I'm so lucky I didn't die in the accident. How wonderful!"

The combination of these questions is a great one-two punch:

1. We all know people who immediately ask the second without the first. They feel better but don't learn a thing and repeat their mistakes.
2. And we're all guilty of merely asking the first question without the second — just beating yourself up over what you should have done.

That said, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure — how can we stop making new regrets?

**How to avoid regret in the future**

We've learned a bunch of stuff:

1. Our brains rationalize most of the things we do wrong.
2. Regret over the things we follow through with is [rarely as bad as we anticipate](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2012/01/do-we-work-too-hard-to-avoid-regret/) and we get over it [faster than we think](http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2011/12/how-long-will-you-feel-lousy-when-bad-things/).
3. But we can feel terrible pain for years over things that we *don't* do.

Guilt over doing stupid things fades, while research shows [regret over missed fun is much more problematic](http://www.columbia.edu/~rk566/research/Repenting_Hyperopia.pdf) down the line.

The cliches are worth paying attention to: *Seize the day. Take the bull by the horns.*

If you don't — and trust me on this one — you'll regret it.

**Reflection Prompt:**

Does this scientific description of regret and how to overcome it sound reasonable to you? Why or why not?

Does the regret that Oedipus suffers fit into this explanation? Is there something he doesn’t do that causes him to suffer greatly? If not, what is different about his situation?