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*"If you don't learn
constantly, you don't grow,
and you will wither."*
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Live life with no regrets. That's what we're always being told. 'No regrets' is a mantra of only looking forward, never back. But research suggests that this mindset could do more harm than good, often keeping us locked into a repeat cycle of mistakes and misjudgements. So maybe it's time to throw away the 'no regrets' philosophy and start viewing regret as something to be embraced, rather than feared.

In his book *The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward*, author Daniel H. Pink argues that regret is an integral part of being human, and – when utilised properly – can help us make better decisions, perform better at work, and deepen our sense of purpose.

According to Pink, genuinely not feeling any regret could be a sign of bad psychological health. He also draws on research from his World Regret Survey, where he has collected responses from over 19,000 people in 105 countries.

NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS, OLD YEAR'S REGRETS

With the end of the year approaching, we may reflect on things that we wish we'd done differently in the past 12 months, and perhaps set intentions or resolutions for the new year. Approaching this and other milestone moments with self-compassion and without judgement is the key to maintaining a healthy relationship to past regrets.

One strategy that Pink suggests is embracing the idea of writing 'Old Year's Regrets' as a precursor to any new year's resolutions. Pink writes, "Look back on the year that's about to end, and list three regrets Make undoing the 'action regrets' [things you did, but wish you hadn't], and transforming the 'inaction regrets' [things you wish you had done but didn't] your top resolutions for the year."

Is there a way you can make amends in the new year for a past regret? Make an apology? Reconnect with someone? Pay off a debt?

LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

Learning lessons is important to ensuring we don't repeat our mistakes and can be a way to harness the power of regret, rather than sweeping it under the carpet.

Journaling, at any time of year, can help you gain clarity on regrets, and make sense of how you can utilise them for the future. Dr Lillian Nejad, a clinical psychologist who has spent over 25 years working with clients with mental health concerns, says, "It can be really helpful to just write down what happened, what you wish you had done differently. What were the factors involved that led you to making the choice, and then what will you do differently in the future if



NO REGRETS?

Although it's often painted as the enemy of joy, research suggests that when reframed in the right way, embracing our regrets could perhaps offer the secret to living a happier and more fulfilled life.

WORDS BY JO JUKES

you find yourself in a similar situation? So, you're not just stuck in the past. You're also thinking about the present and the future."

Learning lessons from regret is something that Jenny De Lacy has learned to embrace for the better. Based in Melbourne, De Lacy received a recent diagnosis of ADHD in her fifties. She immediately had regrets – not sticking up for herself earlier when raising her concerns with medical experts and not asking for the support that she felt she needed sooner. She also experienced regret over not being more assertive or self-advocating more for issues around solo parenting, and her divorce. Not wanting to dwell on the past, Jenny initially took a 'no regrets' approach. Until she started working with an ADHD coach, who changed her perspective.

De Lacy explains, "[The coach] encouraged me to think about those stories or moments that would normally make me feel regret. The purpose was [to explore the question], 'What does that mean now?' How can you look at that and make choices now, for better self-advocacy? Or play to your strengths? How can that feeling, or that story, or that moment the regret is attached to,

have a positive impact now? And that was a really important mindset shift. I feel like that's been a real game changer."

PERFORM BETTER

There's a reason that regret can help us perform better at work. In *The Power of Regret*, Pink references a study in which social psychologists studied negotiators who'd had their first offer accepted. They asked them to rate how much better they could have done if only they'd made a higher offer. Pink writes that "the more they regretted their decision, the more time they spent preparing for a subsequent negotiation". When we reflect and identify what we could have done better, we try to work smarter and harder in future.

Not only has De Lacy learned lessons, but through accepting and validating her regret, she's actively made different choices that have helped her perform better in her business. Acknowledging regret about how she let others dictate her way of working in the past has helped De Lacy make better decisions and be more assertive in the present. The phrase 'That's not going to work for me' now rolls off her tongue when



“‘WORRY TIME’ HELPS YOU CONTROL THE AMOUNT OF TIME YOU SPEND THINKING ABOUT YOUR REGRETS.”

DR LILLIAN NEJAD

needed, at times when she previously would have buckled to other's expectations or ways of working. She's also found the confidence to apply for business awards as a result.

AVOID RUMINATION

But it can be a delicate balancing act of embracing regret, while not tipping over into rumination. According to Dr Nejad, rumination is characterised by never going into problem-solving or resolution at all. It's focusing solely on the 'if only' or 'what if' moments, or being stuck in a cycle of guilt, shame, or resentment. One way to prevent a spiral into the negative aspects of regret is to

set aside time to feel and focus on your regrets. "Persistently dwelling on past decisions transforms regret into rumination," says Dr Nejad. "This not only intensifies feelings like sadness and guilt but also heightens risks for anxiety and depression."

One strategy to prevent this is what Dr Nejad calls 'worry time'. This involves putting aside between 15 minutes and one hour (no longer), at the same time each day, to focus on worrying. Dr Nejad recommends doing this in the early evening, not too close to bedtime, but if early evening is not possible then pick a regular time that works with your schedule. As you create a new 'mind habit', try gradually reducing the duration of this exercise to no more than 15 minutes each day.

Dr Nejad explains, "Anytime your regrets surface outside of your worry time, you note it down and tell yourself you will address it during your worry time. Then in your worry time, you focus on your worries and regrets. This strategy helps you control the amount of time you spend thinking about your regrets and can provide you with the space to think about helpful ways to deal with your regrets."

Setting an alarm can help you keep to your scheduled time frame, and there are apps that can also offer support or structure.

THE THINGS YOU DON'T DO

And although the hashtag #NoRegrets has racked up over 4.4m posts on Instagram, research suggests that Australians may not be as carefree and footloose with this mentality as social media suggests.

A study carried out in 2019 by Australian research company McCrindle surveyed over 1,000 Australians about regret. When asked whether they'd have regrets if they died tonight, almost nine out of 10 said they do have regrets. McCrindle's research also found that one of the leading categories of regret was that of not doing something, of not pursuing dreams or living life to the fullest; perhaps giving validity to the saying 'It's the things you don't do that you regret most'.

The World Regret Survey echoes this sentiment. For Australia and New Zealand, The World Regret Survey shows mostly regrets related to not taking action. Regrets listed include: 'Not telling someone how I felt for them'; 'Not completing post-grad education' and 'Not standing up for myself at work'.

But when thinking about regrets when we didn't do something or feel we missed an opportunity, self-compassion can go a long way. If you're feeling down about a regret, consider what you'd say to a friend who expressed this to you. Would you chastise them and pass stern judgement, or would you treat them with understanding and kindness? Speak to yourself with the same compassion.

So next time you feel the urge to proclaim you have 'no regrets', stop and consider whether regret is something to be embraced, rather than dismissed. Regrets serve a purpose, they play an important role in self-reflection, becoming more self-aware, and motivating us to not repeat mistakes in future.

As Pink writes, "Regret is also valuable. It clarifies. It instructs. Done right, it needn't drag us down; it can lift us up." Because looking in life's rear-view mirror may be key to keeping us moving forward in the right direction. 🎬



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One of actress Meryl Streep's very few regrets is the years she spent dieting. She offers up some insights on beauty, ageing, motherhood and sexism.

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