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Life's Biggest Decisions

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The 6 Most Common Regrets People Experience

Research reveals life's most common regrets.

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Reviewed by Devon Frye



KEY POINTS

- Intense, long-term regrets often stem from poorly made big life decisions.
- The biggest regrets tend to relate to social relationships, research suggests, while the most enduring regrets tend to be for actions not taken.
- Regrets can potentially be avoided by making decisions consistent with your values.



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Have you ever made a decision that you later regretted? You're not alone.

Most people are familiar with that feeling of emptiness mixed with a hint of

...moments in which you did something different and things turned out better.

Although many regrets are small and quickly forgotten—such as the stupid comment you made on social media—there are some regrets that endure. They become salient “sliding door” moments for which you can easily envision a better storyline for your life.

Reflecting on the most enduring regrets is important because they usually link back to big life decisions. Each of us is in control of these decisions—so we can potentially avoid the worst regrets by having a plan. But what are the decisions we’re most likely to regret, and why?

What Do We Regret?

One way that we can learn about life’s biggest regrets is to directly ask people.

A nationally representative study, which asked 270 Americans to describe a significant life regret, found the most commonly reported regrets involved romance (19.3%), family (16.9%), education (14.0%), career (13.8%), finance (9.9%), and parenting (9.0%) (Morrison & Roese, 2011).

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Another way that we can learn about life's biggest regrets is to listen to those who care for the dying. These carers, who spend much of their time in discussion with those in their last act, have a unique perspective.

Perhaps the most well-known example is Bronnie Ware, an Australian palliative carer who wrote a book called *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*. In it, she describes the five most common wishes she heard from her soon-to-depart clients.

- *I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.* Stringently adhering to cultural norms at the expense of your own passions will result in disappointment and bitterness.
- *I wish I hadn't worked so hard.* Time is non-refundable so if you spend it working, then you can't spend it doing more meaningful things.
- *I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.* It is only by being open and honest about your thoughts and feelings can you form genuine bonds with other people.
- *I wish I'd stayed in touch with my friends.* It is dispiriting to be disconnected from those who truly understand you and accept you as you are.
- *I wish I had let myself be happier.* The expectations and opinions of others should not prevent you from being

What Leads to Regret?

A number of features increase the likelihood that a decision will lead to regret.

Feelings of regret in the long-term are more likely for decisions involving inaction; that is, choosing not to do something (Gilovich & Medvec, 1994)—for example, that overseas job you never took or that person you never had the courage to ask out. This kind of regret is enhanced by our imagination, which compares the real world with visions of the best alternative world. You can never know how things would have turned out but your mind can easily paint a rosy picture.

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Decisions resulting in poor outcomes produce greater regret when it is harder to justify those decisions in retrospect (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002). Some decisions are made quickly, without consulting others or thinking through the options and their possible consequences. When these decisions turn out poorly, you are more likely to lament how easily you could have done something differently.

the person you want to be is guided by your values, which reflect the things that are important to you. Some value power, others conformity, others security. Whatever it is, decisions that compromise your values expose you to the risk of regret.

Take-Homes

There are a few important take-homes from this discussion. First, the most enduring regrets relate to social relationships. Humans have a biological need to belong and decisions that threaten this sense of belonging are particularly fraught with risk. Nurture your relationships.

Second, the most intense regrets are for decisions that are hard to justify in retrospect. To avoid regrets, it is important to make decisions that are consistent with your personal life rules and values. Even if things turn out poorly, you will know why the decision made sense for you at the time.

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Third, the biggest regrets tend to relate to the things you *didn't* do, perhaps because you were scared or were too busy working. It's easier to course correct after taking action than time travel and pursue opportunities you left behind. Give things a go.

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References

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Gilovich, T., & Medvec, V. H. (1994). The temporal pattern to the experience of regret. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67(3), 357.

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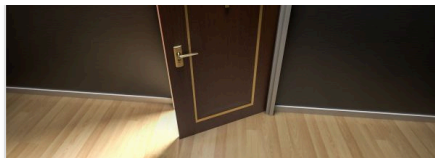
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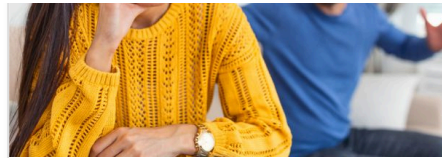
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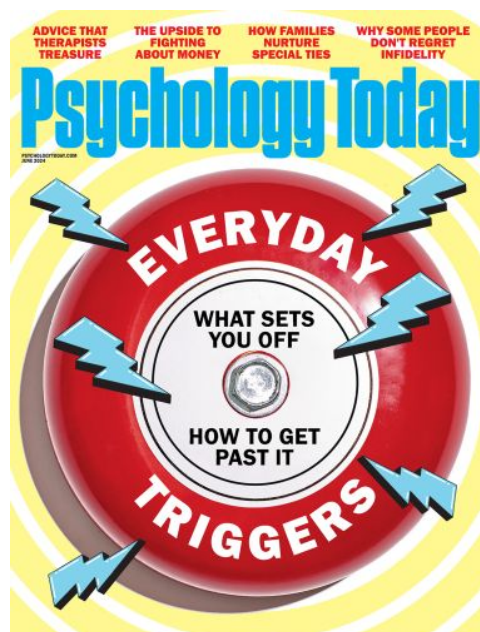
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