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How to Stop Living in Regret

By Dawn Calleja, Reader's Digest Canada

Everyone has regrets, but it's not healthy to dwell on them for too long. These tips will help you get past the woulda, coulda, shouldas keeping you up at night.



PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

Woulda, coulda, shoulda

Farrah* stood on the porch, stunned. Lying on the grass, surrounded by their closest friends, was her husband of seven years, staring longingly into the eyes of a female coworker who had become part of their social circle. Farrah, who lives in Vancouver and is in her 40s, had known for at least a year that something was off in her marriage. Her husband chatted constantly about his new colleague, but Farrah dismissed it as an innocent crush. “I believed he would never cheat on me,” she says.

Looking back now, eight years after the fact, it’s obvious to her that he was having an affair. At the time, however, Farrah couldn’t even admit it to herself, let alone call him out. And so the relationship dragged on for another year, with Farrah experiencing chronic pain and fatigue—her body seeming to know what was coming before her brain did.

The end, when it finally came, was ugly. And almost immediately, she began to beat herself up. “I regretted not valuing myself enough to ask the hard questions, and I regretted the time I wasted,” she says. In her darkest moments, her regret even extended back a full decade, to when they first got together. Why did she let the relationship bloom when she knew they had so little in common? What might her life have looked like if she’d never met him?

Feeling regret is a normal part of life, but wallowing in the woulda-coulda-shouldas can lead to anxiety and depression—and prevent you from moving forward. Here are some tips to train your brain to move on.

Give your past self some slack

In the field of psychology, regret is known as “downward counterfactual thinking”—reimagining a past where the decisions we make lead to the best possible outcomes.

“When people engage in regretful thinking, they don’t think, ‘If I’d gone out with that guy, he might’ve been a serial killer,’” says Dr. Simon Sherry, who leads a personality research team at Dalhousie University in Halifax. “They think, ‘He could’ve been the love of my life.’”

Sure, the best-case scenario might’ve come true. But just as likely it wouldn’t have—and besides, you probably had some very good reasons at the time for

going another way. Maybe you were too young to accept that marriage proposal or too broke to pursue that master's degree. Unfortunately, we tend to lose that perspective when we're in brood mode. "Regret is using what we know now to look back and punish ourselves for decisions we made back then," says Dr. Natasha Williams, a Toronto-based clinical psychologist.

Although it can be difficult to do, it's crucial to be compassionate toward your past self and, as Williams puts it, "take off the knapsack of responsibility."

Focus on the now

Only a couple generations ago, we lived in a world of very few choices. You grew up and did pretty much what your parents did.

"The problem these days is that we have seemingly limitless possibilities, and opportunity creates regret," says Sherry. Should I have studied engineering instead of history? Should I have gone travelling instead of settling down and starting a family? It doesn't help to see your friends posting images of their best lives on social media, causing what Sherry calls "upward social comparison" (and kids call FOMO, or fear of missing out).

But ruminating on the past is counterproductive. It leads to inaction, since regretful people are often too busy surrendering to retrospective self-loathing to get off the couch. One immediate antidote is to get moving: go to the gym, pick up a guitar, tackle a complex recipe. The point is to keep your brain too busy to obsess—after all, it's hard to brood while gasping your way through a 5K, says Sherry.

Practising mindfulness—a form of meditation that encourages you to allow your regretful thoughts to pass in and out of your head without getting stuck there—is another way to do away with anguish about the past. "Mindfulness is almost the antithesis of regret, in that you make a deliberate effort to direct your attention to the present moment," says Sherry.

Learn from your mistakes

While regrets can be enormously painful, they can also provide a powerful motivation for self-improvement. "Over time, regret can become less intense because those feelings trigger you to do something about it," says Dr. Mike Morrison, a professor at King's University College.

In many cases, it's not too late to satisfy a long-standing itch: you can go back to school, take another crack at that novel or mend fences with an old friend even after many years. The toughest regrets are ones that aren't so easily fixed, however—say, wishing you hadn't put in 70-hour workweeks at the cost of watching your kids grow up. In those cases, Morrison suggests engaging in “positive reframing,” like vowing to spend more time with your grandkids. “There are ways any regret can have some potential future value,” he says.

This is where the word “but” can come in handy. “You need to get to a space where you can say, ‘I regret what I did, but here's how I'm addressing it and moving forward,’” says Williams. “When I'm ready to get into another relationship, I can use those regrets to help identify red flags and flip the script.”

That's what Farrah did. With the help of a therapist, she spent two years processing where she went wrong and figuring out how to avoid making the same mistakes in her next relationship. Part of that work included making a list of the values she considered to be most important in a partner. High among them: an ability to have open and honest communication about difficult subjects—something she and her husband had never done well.

When she met her current partner, she soon knew he was right for her. He's not perfect, of course—who is?—but he was open to talking about his feelings and sharing his vulnerabilities. They've been together for five years. “It's not that it's not hard, because we still have disconnects,” says Farrah. “But we talk about them, and that makes all the difference.”