

DANIEL H. PINK

Author of the #1 New York Times bestselling Drive

**THE
POWER
OF
REGRET**

A crumpled white paper ball is centered in the lower half of the cover. The text is overlaid on the paper ball.

**How Looking
Backward Moves
Us Forward**

Also by Daniel H. Pink

Free Agent Nation

A Whole New Mind

The Adventures of Johnny Bunko

Drive

To Sell Is Human

When

THE POWER OF REGRET

*How Looking Backward
Moves Us Forward*

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Daniel H. Pink

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1. The Life-Thwarting Nonsense of No Regrets

“Regret is not dangerous or abnormal, a deviation from the steady path to happiness. It is healthy and universal, an integral part of being human. Regret is also valuable. It clarifies. It instructs. Done right, it needn’t drag us down; it can lift us up.”

2. Why Regret Makes Us Human

“In other words, the inability to feel regret—in some sense, the apotheosis of what the ‘no regrets’ philosophy encourages—wasn’t an advantage. It was a sign of brain damage.”

3. At Leasts and If Onlys

“Two decades of research on counterfactual thinking exposes an oddity: thoughts about the past that make us feel better are relatively rare, while thoughts that make us feel worse are exceedingly common. Are we all self-sabotaging masochists?”

4. Why Regret Makes Us Better

“Don’t dodge emotions. Don’t wallow in them either. Confront them. Use them as a catalyst for future behavior. If thinking is for doing, feeling can help us think.”

5. Regret on the Surface

“Human life spreads across multiple domains—we’re parents, sons, daughters, spouses, partners, employees, bosses, students, spenders, investors, citizens, friends, and more. Why wouldn’t regret straddle domains, too?”

6. The Four Core Regrets

“What’s visible and easy to describe—the realms of life such as family, education, and work—is far less significant than a hidden architecture of human motivation and aspiration that lies beneath it.”

7. Foundation Regrets

“Foundation regrets begin with an irresistible lure and end with an inexorable logic.”

8. Boldness Regrets

“At the heart of all boldness regrets is the thwarted possibility of growth. The failure to become the person—happier, braver, more evolved—one could have been. The failure to accomplish a few important goals within the limited span of a single life.”

9. Moral Regrets

“Deceit. Infidelity. Theft. Betrayal. Sacrilege. Sometimes the moral regrets people submitted to the surveys read like the production notes for a Ten Commandments training video.”

10. Connection Regrets

“What gives our lives significance and satisfaction are meaningful relationships. But when those relationships come apart, whether by intent or inattention, what stands in the way of bringing them back together are feelings of awkwardness. We fear that we’ll botch our efforts to reconnect, that we’ll make our intended recipients even more uncomfortable. Yet these concerns are almost always misplaced.”

11. Opportunity and Obligation

“The four core regrets operate as a photographic negative of the good life. If we know what people regret the most, we can reverse that image to reveal what they value the most.”

Part Three. REGRET REMADE

12. Undoing and At Leasting

“But with regrets of action, I still have the chance to recalibrate the present—to press Ctrl+Z on my existential keyboard.”

13. Disclosure, Compassion, and Distance

“Following a straightforward three-step process, we can disclose the regret, reframe the way we view it and ourselves, and extract a lesson from the experience to remake our subsequent decisions.”

14. Anticipating Regret

“As a universal drug, anticipated regret has a few dangerous side effects.”

Coda. Regret and Redemption

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“Though we would like to live without regrets, and sometimes proudly insist that we have none, this is not really possible, if only because we are mortal.”

James Baldwin, 1967

Part One
REGRET RECLAIMED

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1.

The Life-Thwarting Nonsense of No Regrets

On October 24, 1960, a composer named Charles Dumont arrived at the posh Paris apartment of Edith Piaf with fear in his heart and songs in his briefcase. At the time, Piaf was perhaps the most famous entertainer in France and one of the best-known singers in the world. She was also quite frail. Although she was just forty-four years old, addiction, accidents, and hard living had ravaged her body. She weighed less than a hundred pounds. Three months earlier Piaf had been in a coma because of liver damage.

Yet despite her wispy presence, she remained notoriously mercurial and hot-tempered. She considered Dumont and his professional partner, lyricist Michel Vaucaire, who had joined him on the visit, second-rate musical talents. Earlier in the day, her secretary had left messages trying to cancel the meeting. Piaf initially refused to see the men, forcing them to wait uneasily in her living room. But just before she went to bed, she appeared, swaddled in a blue dressing gown, and relented.

She'd hear one song, she told them. That's it.

Dumont sat down at Piaf's piano. Sweaty and nervous, he began playing his music while softly speaking the lyrics Vaucaire had written.^[1]

Non, rien de rien.

Non, je ne regrette rien.

No, nothing at all.

No, I regret nothing at all.

She asked Dumont to play the song again, wondering aloud whether he'd really written it. She assembled a few friends who happened to be visiting to hear it. Then she gathered her household staff for a listen.

Hours passed. Dumont played the song over and over, more than twenty times, according to one account. Piaf telephoned the director of L'Olympia, the premier Parisian concert venue, who arrived just before dawn to hear the work.

Non, rien de rien.

Non, je ne regrette rien.

C'est payé, balayé, oublié.

Je me fous du passé.

No, nothing at all.

No, I regret nothing at all.

It's paid, swept away, forgotten.

I couldn't care less about the past.

A few weeks later, Piaf sang the two-minute, nineteen-second song on French television. In December, when she performed it as the rousing final number of a concert that helped rescue L'Olympia from financial ruin, she received twenty-two curtain calls. By the end of the following year, fans had purchased more than one million copies of her "Je ne regrette rien" record, elevating her status from chanteuse to icon.

Three years later, Piaf was dead.

○ ne cold Sunday morning in February of 2016, Amber Chase awoke in her apartment in the western Canadian city of Calgary. Her then-boyfriend (and now-husband) was out of town, so the previous evening she had gone out with some girlfriends, a few of whom had slept over. The friends were talking and drinking mimosas when Chase, propelled by some combination of inspiration and boredom, said, "Let's go get tattooed today!" So, they climbed into the car and rolled to Jokers Tattoo & Body Piercing on Highway 1, where the resident artist inked two words on Chase's skin.

The tattoo Chase got that day was nearly identical to the one Mirella Battista decided on five years earlier and 2,400 miles away. Battista grew up in Brazil, and moved to Philadelphia in her early twenties to attend college. She relished her adopted city. While in school, she landed a job at a local accounting firm. She made lots of friends. She even forged a long-term romantic relationship with a Philly guy. The two seemed headed for marriage when, five years into the relationship, she and the boyfriend broke up. So, nine years after arriving in America, and looking for what she called a “reset button,” she moved back to Brazil. However, weeks before returning, she had two words tattooed just behind her right ear.

Unbeknownst to Battista, her brother, Germanno Teles, had gotten a nearly identical tattoo the previous year. Teles became enamored of motorcycles as a boy, an affection his safety-conscious physician parents neither shared nor supported. But he learned everything he could about motorcycles, saved his *centavos*, and eventually purchased a Suzuki. He loved it. Then one afternoon while riding on the highway near his Brazilian hometown of Fortaleza, he was hit from the side by another vehicle, injuring his left leg and limiting his future riding days. A short time later, he had the image of a motorcycle tattooed just below the knee of his injured leg. Beside it were two words in script arching alongside the path of his scar.

The tattoo Teles got that day was nearly identical to the one Bruno Santos would get in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2013. Santos is a human resources executive who doesn't know Chase, Battista, or Teles. Frustrated at his job, he walked out of the office one afternoon and headed directly to a tattoo parlor. He emerged with a three-syllable phrase imprinted on his right forearm.

Four people living on three continents, each with tattoos that bear the same two words:

NO REGRETS.

A DELIGHTFUL BUT DANGEROUS DOCTRINE

Some beliefs operate quietly, like existential background music. Others become anthems for a way of living. And few credos blare more loudly than the doctrine that regret is foolish—that it wastes our time and sabotages our well-being. From every corner of the culture the message booms. Forget the past; seize the future. Bypass the bitter; savor the sweet. A good life has a singular focus (forward) and an unwavering valence (positive). Regret perturbs both. It is backward-looking and unpleasant—a toxin in the bloodstream of happiness.

Little wonder, then, that Piaf’s song remains a standard across the world and a touchstone for other musicians. Artists who have recorded songs titled “No Regrets” range from jazz legend Ella Fitzgerald to British pop star Robbie Williams to the Cajun band Steve Riley & the Mamou Playboys to American bluesman Tom Rush to Country Music Hall of Fame inductee Emmylou Harris to rapper Eminem. Luxury car brands, chocolate bars, and insurance companies all have championed the philosophy by using Piaf’s “Je ne regrette rien” in their television ads.^[2]

And what greater commitment to a belief system than to wear it literally on your sleeve—like Bruno Santos, who had the ethic enshrined in black lowercase letters between the elbow and wrist of his right arm?

If thousands of ink-stained body parts don’t convince you, listen instead to two giants of American culture who shared neither gender, religion, nor politics but who aligned on this article of faith. Leave “no room for regrets,” counseled positive thinking pioneer the Rev. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, who shaped twentieth-century Christianity and mentored Richard Nixon and Donald Trump. “Waste no time on . . . regret,” advised Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the second woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, who practiced Judaism and achieved late-in-life goddess status among American liberals.^[3]

Or take the word of celebrities if that’s your jam. “I don’t believe in regrets,” says Angelina Jolie. “I don’t believe in regrets,” says Bob Dylan. “I don’t believe in regrets,” says John Travolta. And transgender star Laverne Cox. And fire-coal-walking motivation maestro Tony Robbins. And headbanging Guns N’ Roses guitarist Slash.^[4] And, I’d bet, roughly

half the volumes in the self-help section of your local bookstore. The U.S. Library of Congress contains more than fifty books in its collection with the title *No Regrets*.^[5]

Embedded in songs, emblazoned on skin, and embraced by sages, the anti-regret philosophy is so self-evidently true that it's more often asserted than argued. Why invite pain when we can avoid it? Why summon rain clouds when we can bathe in the sunny rays of positivity? Why rue what we did yesterday when we can dream of the limitless possibilities of tomorrow?

This worldview makes intuitive sense. It seems right. It feels convincing. But it has one not insignificant flaw.

It is dead wrong.

What the anti-regret brigades are proposing is not a blueprint for a life well lived. What they are proposing is—forgive the terminology, but the next word is carefully chosen—bullshit.

Regret is not dangerous or abnormal, a deviation from the steady path to happiness. It is healthy and universal, an integral part of being human. Regret is also valuable. It clarifies. It instructs. Done right, it needn't drag us down; it can lift us up.

And that is not some gauzy daydream, a gooey aspiration concocted to make us feel warm and cared for in a cold and callous world. That is what scientists have concluded in research that began more than a half century ago.

This is a book about regret—the stomach-churning feeling that the present would be better and the future brighter if only you hadn't chosen so poorly, decided so wrongly, or acted so stupidly in the past. Over the next thirteen chapters, I hope you'll see regret in a fresh and more accurate light, and learn to enlist its shape-shifting powers as a force for good.

We shouldn't doubt the sincerity of people who say they have no regrets. Instead, we should think of them as actors playing a role—and playing it so often and so deeply that they begin to believe the role is real. Such psychological self-trickery is common. Sometimes it can even be

healthy. But more often the performance prevents people from doing the difficult work that produces genuine contentment.

Consider Piaf, the consummate performer. She claimed—indeed, proclaimed—that she had no regrets. But a quick review of her forty-seven years on earth reveals a life awash in tragedy and troubles. She bore a child at age seventeen, whom she abandoned to the care of others and who died before turning three. Did she not feel a twinge of regret about that death? She spent one portion of her adult life addicted to alcohol and another addicted to morphine. Did she not regret the dependencies that stifled her talents? She maintained, to put it mildly, a turbulent private life, including a disastrous marriage, a dead lover, and a second husband she saddled with debt. Did she not regret at least some of her romantic choices? It's difficult to picture Piaf on her deathbed celebrating her decisions, especially when many of those decisions sent her to that deathbed decades before her time.

Or take our far-flung tattooed tribe. Talk with them just a little and it's clear that the outer expression of “No regrets”—the performance—and the inner experience diverge. For example, Mirella Battista devoted many years to a serious relationship. When it collapsed, she felt awful. And if she had a chance for a do-over, she likely would have made different choices. That's regret. But she also acknowledged her suboptimal choices and learned from them. “Every single decision brought me to where I am right now and made me who I am,” she told me. That's the upside of regret. It's not as if Battista erased regret from her life. (After all, the word is permanently marked on her body.) Nor did she necessarily minimize it. Instead, she optimized it.

Amber Chase, who was thirty-five when we talked over Zoom one evening, told me, “There's so many wrong turns you can take in life.” One of hers was her first marriage. At age twenty-five, she married a man who, it turned out, “had a lot of issues.” The union was often unhappy, occasionally tumultuous. One day, with zero notice, her husband disappeared. “He got on a plane and left . . . and I didn't know where he was for two weeks.” When he finally called, he told her, “I don't love you anymore. I'm not coming home.” In a blink, the marriage was over. If she had to do it over again, would Chase have married the guy? No way. But

that unfortunate move propelled her journey to the happy marriage she has today.

Chase's tattoo even winks at the flimsiness of the philosophy it claims to endorse. Hers doesn't say "No Regrets." It says "No Ragrets"—with the second word intentionally misspelled. The choice was an homage to the movie *We're the Millers*, an otherwise forgettable 2013 comedy in which Jason Sudeikis plays David Clark, a small-time marijuana dealer forced to assemble a fake family (a wife and two teenage kids) to work off a debt to a big-time dealer. In one scene, David meets Scottie P., a sketchy young fellow who's arrived on a motorcycle to take David's "daughter" on a date.

Scottie P. wears a cruddy white tank top that reveals several tattoos, including one that runs along his collarbone and reads, in blocky letters, No Ragrets. David sits him down for a quick talk, which begins with a tour of Scottie P.'s tattoos and leads to this exchange:

DAVID

(pointing to the "No Ragrets" tattoo)

What is the one right there?

SCOTTIE P.

Oh, this? That's my credo. No regrets.

DAVID

(his expression skeptical)

How about that. You have no regrets?

SCOTTIE P.

Nope . . .

DAVID

Like . . . not even a single letter?

SCOTTIE P.

No, I can't think of one.

If Scottie P. ever does muster second thoughts about the words encircling his neck, he wouldn't be alone. About one of every five people who get tattoos (presumably including people whose tattoos read "No Regrets") eventually regret their decision, which is why the tattoo removal business is a \$100 million-a-year industry in the United States alone.^[6] Chase, though, doesn't regret her tattoo, perhaps because most people will never see it. On that cold Calgary Sunday in 2016, she chose to locate her tattoo on her rear end.

THE POSITIVE POWER OF NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

In the early 1950s, a University of Chicago economics graduate student named Harry Markowitz conceived an idea so elementary it now seems obvious—yet so revolutionary it earned him a Nobel Prize.^[7] Markowitz's big idea came to be known as "modern portfolio theory." What he figured out—if I may oversimplify in the service of getting on with the story—were the mathematics that underlie the adage "Don't put all your eggs in one basket."

Before Markowitz came along, many investors believed the route to riches was to invest in one or two high-potential stocks. After all, a few stocks often produced humongous returns. Choose those winners and you'd make a fortune. Under this strategy, you'd end up picking lots of duds. But, hey, that's just the way investing worked. It's risky. Markowitz showed that instead of following this recipe, investors could reduce their risk, and still produce healthy gains, by diversifying. Invest in a basket of stocks, not just one. Broaden the bets across a variety of industries. Investors wouldn't win big on every pick, but over time they'd make a lot more money with a lot less risk. If you happen to have any savings parked in index funds or ETFs, modern portfolio theory is the reason why.

Powerful as Markowitz's insight is, we often neglect applying its logic to other parts of our lives. For example, human beings also hold what amounts to a portfolio of emotions. Some of these emotions are positive—for

example, love, pride, and awe. Others are negative—sadness, frustration, or shame. In general, we tend to overvalue one category and undervalue the other. Heeding others' advice and our own intuitions, we stuff our portfolios with positive emotions and sell off the negative ones. But this approach to emotions—to jettison the negative and pile on the positive—is as misguided as the approach to investing that prevailed before modern portfolio theory.

Positive emotions are essential, of course. We'd be lost without them. It's important to look on the bright side, to think cheerful thoughts, to detect light in darkness. Optimism is associated with better physical health. Emotions like joy, gratitude, and hope significantly boost our well-being.^[8] We need plenty of positive emotions in our portfolio. They should outnumber the negative ones.^[9] Yet overweighting our emotional investments with too much positivity brings its own dangers. The imbalance can inhibit learning, stymie growth, and limit our potential.

That's because negative emotions are essential, too. They help us survive. Fear propels us out of a burning building and makes us step gingerly to avoid a snake. Disgust shields us from poisons and makes us recoil from bad behavior. Anger alerts us to threats and provocations from others and sharpens our sense of right and wrong. Too much negative emotion, of course, is debilitating. But too little is also destructive.^[10] A partner takes advantage of us again and again; that snake sinks its teeth into our leg. You and I and our upright, bipedal, large-brained sisters and brothers wouldn't be here today if we lacked the capacity, occasionally but systematically, to feel bad.

And when we assemble the full lineup of negative emotions—sadness standing next to contempt perched beside guilt—one emerges as both the most pervasive and most powerful.

Regret.

The purpose of this book is to reclaim regret as an indispensable emotion—and to show you how to use its many strengths to make better decisions, perform better at work and school, and bring greater meaning to your life.

I begin with the reclamation project. In Part One—which comprises this chapter and the next three—I show why regret matters. Much of this

analysis taps an extensive body of scholarship that has accumulated over the last several decades. Economists and game theorists, working in the shadow of the Cold War, began studying the topic in the 1950s, when obliterating the planet with a nuclear bomb was the ultimate regrettable act. Before long, a few renegade psychologists, including the now legendary Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, realized that regret offered a window into not only high-stakes negotiations but the human mind itself. By the 1990s, the field widened further, and a broad group of social, developmental, and cognitive psychologists began investigating the inner workings of regret.

These seventy years of research distill to two simple yet urgent conclusions:

Regret makes us human.

Regret makes us better.

After I've reclaimed regret, I'll move to divulging its contents. Part Two, "Regret Revealed," rests in large part on two extensive research projects of my own. In 2020, working with a small team of survey research experts, we designed and carried out the largest quantitative analysis of American attitudes about regret ever conducted: the American Regret Project. We surveyed the opinion and categorized the regrets of 4,489 people who comprised a representative sample of the U.S. population.^[*] At the same time, we launched a website, the World Regret Survey (www.worldregretsurvey.com), that has collected more than sixteen thousand regrets from people in 105 countries. I've analyzed the text of those responses and conducted follow-up interviews with more than 100 people who submitted regrets. (On the pages between chapters, as well as in the text itself, you'll hear the voices of participants in the World Regret Survey and peek into every corner of the human experience.)

With these two massive surveys as the base, the seven chapters of Part Two examine what people truly regret. Most academic research on the topic has categorized regrets by the domains of people's lives—work, family, health, relationships, finances, and so on. But beneath this surface I found a deep structure of regret that transcends these domains. Nearly all regrets fall

into four core categories—foundation regrets, boldness regrets, moral regrets, and connection regrets. This deep structure, previously hidden from view, offers new insights into the human condition as well as a pathway to a good life.

Part Three, “Regret Remade,” describes how to turn the negative emotion of regret into a positive instrument for improving your life. You’ll learn how to undo and reframe some regrets to adjust the present. You’ll also learn a straightforward, three-step process for transforming other regrets in ways that prepare you for the future. And I’ll explore how to anticipate regret, a behavioral medicine that can help us make wiser decisions but that should also come with a warning label.

By the time you reach the end of the book, you’ll have a new understanding of our most misunderstood emotion, a set of techniques for thriving in a complicated world, and a deeper sense of what makes you tick and what makes life worth living.

“I regret pawning my flute. I loved my flute in high school, but when I got to college and was broke I pawned it for thirty dollars and never had the money to go back and get it. My mother worked so hard to pay for that instrument when I was in beginner band and I loved it so much. It was my prized possession. I know it sounds silly because it’s a ‘thing,’ but it represented so much more—my mother supporting me and making payments on an instrument we couldn’t afford, hours and hours of practice learning to play, happy memories with my closest friends in marching band. Losing it is something I can’t change and I have a recurring dream about it.”

Female, 41, Alabama

//

“I regret rushing to marry my wife. Now, three kids later, it is difficult to go back in time, and divorce would break up and hurt my kids too much.”

Male, 32, Israel

//

“When I was a child, my mother would send me to a small local store for a few grocery items. I frequently would steal a candy bar when the grocer wasn’t looking. That’s bothered me for about sixty years.”

Female, 71, New Jersey

Why Regret Makes Us Human

What is this thing we call regret?

For a sensation so easy to recognize, regret is surprisingly difficult to define. Scientists, theologians, poets, and physicians have all tried. It is “the unpleasant feeling associated with some action or inaction a person has taken which has led to a state of affairs that he or she wishes were different,” say the psychotherapists.^[1] “Regret is created by a comparison between the actual outcome and that outcome that would have occurred had the decision maker made a different choice,” say the management theorists.^[2] It is “a feeling of unpleasure associated with a thought of the past, together with the identification of an object and the announcement of an inclination to behave in a certain way in the future,” say the philosophers.^[3]

If the precise definition feels elusive, the reason is revealing: regret is better understood less as a thing and more as a process.

TIME TRAVELING AND STORYTELLING

This process begins with two abilities—two unique capacities of our minds. We can visit the past and the future in our heads. And we can tell the story of something that never actually happened. Human beings are both seasoned time travelers and skilled fabulists. These two capabilities twine together to form the cognitive double helix that gives life to regret.

Consider this regret, one of the many thousands submitted in the World Regret Survey:

I wish I had followed my desire to get a graduate degree in my chosen field instead of giving in to my dad's wishes and then dropping out of that program. My life would be on a different trajectory now. It would be more satisfying, fulfilling, and would have given me a greater sense of accomplishment.

In just a few words, this fifty-two-year-old woman from Virginia pulls off a stunning feat of cerebral agility. Discontent with the present, she mentally returns to the past—decades earlier, when she was a young woman contemplating her educational and professional path. Once there, she *negates* what really happened—giving in to her father's wishes. And she substitutes an alternative: she enrolls in the graduate program *she* prefers. Then she hops back in her time machine and hurtles forward. But because she's reconfigured the past, the present she encounters when she arrives is vastly different from the one she left moments earlier. In this newly remodeled world, she's satisfied, fulfilled, and accomplished.

This combination of time travel and fabulism is a human superpower. It's hard to fathom any other species doing something so complex, just as it's difficult to imagine a jellyfish composing a sonnet or a raccoon rewiring a floor lamp.

Yet we deploy this superpower effortlessly. Indeed, it is so deeply imprinted in human beings that the only people who lack the ability are children whose brains haven't fully developed and adults whose brains have been beset by illness or injury.

For example, in one study, developmental psychologists Robert Guttentag and Jennifer Ferrell read a story to a group of children that went something like this:

Two boys, Bob and David, live near each other and ride their bikes to school each morning. To get to school, the boys take a bike path that circles a pond. Bikers can ride around the right side of the pond or the left side. Both paths are the same distance and are equally smooth. Every day, Bob takes the path around the right side of the pond. Every day, David takes the path around the left side of the pond.

One morning, Bob, as usual, rides around the right side of the pond. But overnight, a tree branch has fallen into the path. Bob collides with the branch, falls off his bike, hurts himself, and is late to school. The left side of the path was fine.

That same morning, David, who always takes the left path, decides instead to ride around the right side of the pond. David also hits the branch, is tossed off his bicycle, gets hurt, and arrives late to school.

The researchers then asked the children, “Who would be more upset about deciding to ride along the path that went around the right side of the pond that day?” Bob, who takes that path every day, or David, who usually rides on the left side but today decided to ride on the right side? Or would they feel the same?

The seven-year-olds “performed very similarly to adults on the measures of the understanding of regret,” Guttentag and Ferrell write. Seventy-six percent of them understood that David would likely feel worse. But the five-year-olds showed little understanding of the concept. About three-fourths of them said the boys would feel the same.^[4] It takes a few years for young brains to acquire the strength and muscularity to perform the mental trapeze act—swinging between past and present and between reality and imagination—that regret demands.^[5] That’s why most children don’t begin to understand regret until age six.^[6] But by age eight, they develop the ability even to anticipate regret.^[7] And by adolescence, the thinking skills necessary to experience regret have fully emerged.^[8] Regret is a marker of a healthy, maturing mind.

It is so fundamental to our development and so critical to proper functioning that, in adults, its absence can signal a grave problem. An important 2004 study makes that plain. A team of cognitive scientists organized a simple gambling game in which participants had to choose one of two computerized roulette-style wheels to spin. Depending on where the arrow landed on their chosen wheel, they would either win money or lose money. When participants spun a wheel and lost money, they felt bad. No surprise. But when they spun a wheel, lost money, and learned that if they’d chosen the other wheel, they’d have *won* money, they felt *really* bad. They experienced regret.

However, one group didn't feel any worse when they discovered that a different choice would have produced a better outcome: people with lesions on a part of the brain called the orbitofrontal cortex. "[T]hey seem to experience no regret whatsoever," neuroscientist Nathalie Camille and her colleagues wrote in the journal *Science*. "These patients fail to grasp this concept."^[9] In other words, the inability to feel regret—in some sense, the apotheosis of what the "no regrets" philosophy encourages—wasn't an advantage. It was a sign of brain damage.

The pattern is similar for other diseases of the brain, neuroscientists have found. Several studies present participants with a straightforward test like this:

Maria gets sick after visiting a restaurant she often visits. Ana gets sick after eating at a restaurant she's never visited before. Who regrets their choice of restaurant more?

Most healthy people immediately know the answer is Ana. But people with Huntington's disease, an inherited neurodegenerative disorder, don't see the obviousness. They just guess; they land on the correct response no more often than chance.^[10] It's much the same among people suffering from Parkinson's disease. They, too, fail to deduce the response you probably intuited instantly.^[11] The effect is especially devastating for schizophrenia patients. Their illness scrambles the complex thinking I've been describing, creating a reasoning deficit that impairs the ability to comprehend or experience regret.^[12] Such deficits are so pronounced in so many psychiatric and neurological diseases that physicians now use this impairment to identify deeper problems.^[13] In short, people without regrets aren't paragons of psychological health. They are often people who are seriously ill.

Our twin abilities to travel through time and to rewrite events power the regret process. But the process isn't complete until we take two additional steps that distinguish regret from other negative emotions.

First, we compare. Return to the fifty-two-year-old woman from the survey, the one who wishes she'd followed her own educational desires rather than her father's. Suppose she were suffering simply because her

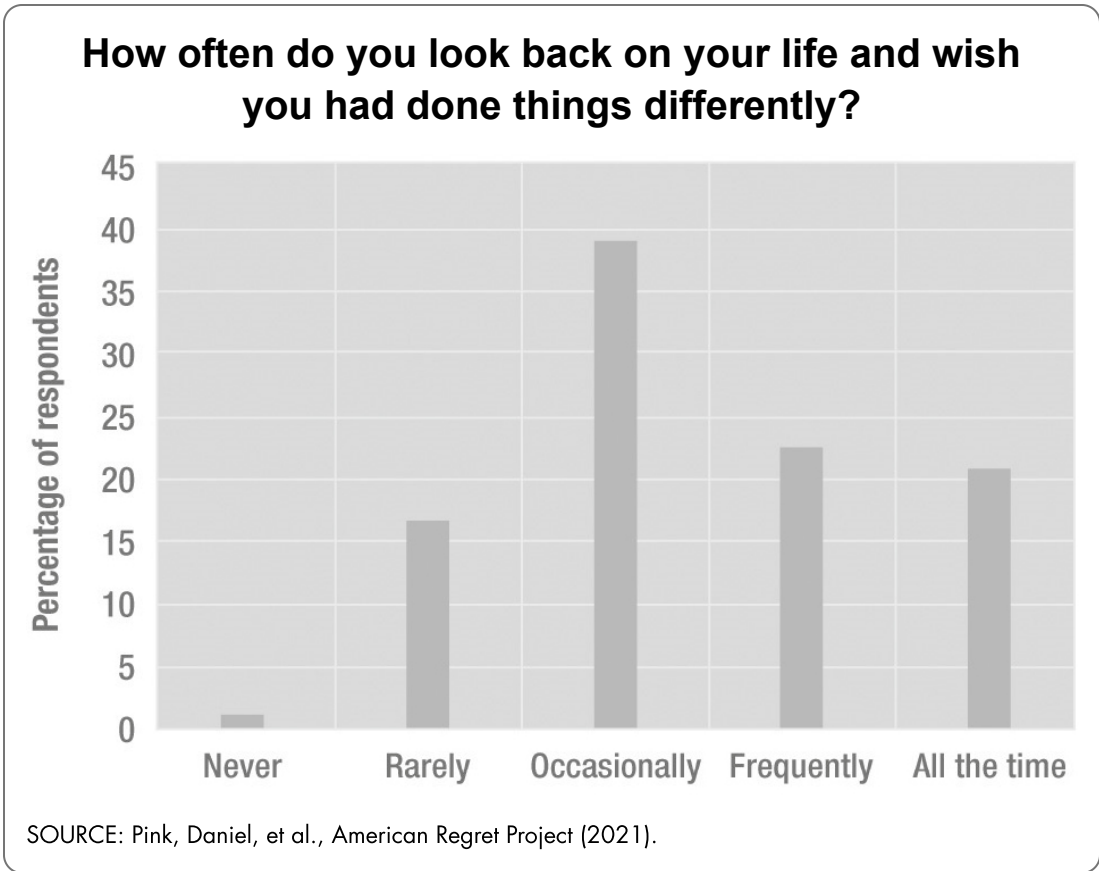
current situation is miserable. That alone doesn't constitute regret. That's sadness, melancholy, or despair. The emotion *becomes* regret only when she does the work of boarding the time machine, negating the past, and *contrasting* her grim actual present with what might have been. Comparison lives at regret's core.

Second, we assess blame. Regret is your own fault, not someone else's. One influential study found that roughly 95 percent of the regrets that people express involve situations they controlled rather than external circumstances.^[14] Think again about our regretful Virginian. She compares her unsatisfying situation to an imagined alternative and comes up wanting. That step is necessary, but it's not sufficient. What nudges her fully into the realm of regret is the reason that alternative doesn't exist: her own decisions and actions. She's the cause of her own suffering. That makes regret different—and far more distressing—than a negative emotion like disappointment. For instance, I might feel disappointed that my hometown basketball team, the Washington Wizards, didn't win the NBA championship. But because I neither coach the team nor suit up for games, I'm not responsible and therefore can't regret it. I just sulk and wait until next season. Or consider an example from Janet Landman, a former University of Michigan professor who has written widely about regret. One day, a child loses her third tooth. Before going to sleep, she puts the tooth under her pillow. When she awakens the next morning, she discovers that the Tooth Fairy has forgotten to replace the tooth with a prize. The child is *disappointed*. But it's "the child's parents [who] *regret* the lapse."^[15]

Thus we have two abilities that separate humans from other animals, followed by two steps that separate regret from other negative emotions. That is the process that produces this uniquely painful and uniquely human emotion. Although it sounds complicated, the process occurs with little awareness and even less effort. It's part of who we are. As two Dutch scholars, Marcel Zeelenberg and Rik Pieters, put it, "People's cognitive machinery is preprogrammed for regret."^[16]

“AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE”

The result of this cognitive preprogramming is that regret, despite all the exhortations to banish it, is remarkably common. In the American Regret Project, we asked our 4,489-person sample a question about their behavior that intentionally avoided using the r-word: *How often do you look back on your life and wish you had done things differently?* The responses, shown in the chart below, are telling.



Only 1 percent of our respondents said that they never engage in such behavior—and fewer than 17 percent do it rarely. Meanwhile, about 43 percent report doing it frequently or all the time. In all, a whopping 82 percent say that this activity is at least occasionally part of their lives,

making Americans far more likely to experience regret than they are to floss their teeth.^[17]

This finding echoes what researchers have been discovering for forty years. In 1984, social scientist Susan Shimanoff recorded the everyday conversations of a collection of undergraduates and of married couples. She analyzed the recordings and transcripts and identified the words that expressed or described emotions. Then she compiled a list of the emotions, positive and negative, that people mentioned most frequently. Feelings like happiness, excitement, anger, surprise, and jealousy all cracked the top twenty. But the most common negative emotion—and the second most common emotion of any kind—was regret. The only emotion mentioned more often than regret was love.^[18]

In 2008, social psychologists Colleen Saffrey, Amy Summerville, and Neal Roese examined the prevalence of negative emotions in people's lives. They presented participants with a list of nine such emotions: anger, anxiety, boredom, disappointment, fear, guilt, jealousy, regret, and sadness. Then they asked people a series of questions about the role these feelings played in their lives. The emotion that participants said they experienced the most was regret. The emotion they said they valued the most was also regret.^[19]

Subsequent research around the world has produced similar results. A 2016 study that tracked the choices and behavior of more than a hundred Swedes found that participants ended up regretting about 30 percent of the decisions they'd made during the previous week.^[20] Another research effort sampled the experiences and attitudes of several hundred Americans. This survey, which I'll examine more fully in Chapter 5, found that regrets were omnipresent and spread across every realm of life, leading the study's authors to declare that regret "constitutes an essential component of the human experience."^[21]

In fact, I have yet to uncover a study disconfirming the ubiquity of this emotion. (And believe me, I've looked hard.) Scholars in every field, approaching the subject from different directions and using a variety of

methodologies, arrive at the same conclusion: “To live, it seems, is to accumulate at least some regrets.”^[22]

When Michele Mayo was about to turn fifty, she decided to get a tattoo—something to mark the milestone and affirm her convictions. As she mulled over her decision, she thought back to her childhood. The daughter of an American army officer and a French mother, Mayo spent her early years in Germany, where her father was stationed. During holidays, the family would take long drives to visit her grandmother in the French countryside. On those drives, Mayo, her sisters, and her mom would pass the time by belting out her mother’s favorite song.

In 2017, as an early birthday present to herself, she traveled from her home to nearby Salem, Massachusetts, and returned with the skin beneath her right wrist looking like this:



Photo credit: Kathleen Basile

Mayo’s mother was an Edith Piaf fan. And the singer’s words, which the family sang on those long-ago car trips, stuck with her daughter into adulthood. They embodied “how I live my life, how I felt about my life,”