

Making Medicine of Our Regrets

There is no such thing as a life without any regrets. We all have them. They may be small or large, recent or rooted in a long ago incident. Perhaps what most of us also have in common is wishing we didn't have them, wishing we hadn't made that choice, taken or not taken that life-changing action, or behaved inappropriately.

Perhaps we should not wish them away so quickly. Regret, according to Neal Roese, Ph.D., author of *If Only: How to Turn Regret Into Opportunity*, is an essential mental skill. "Regret is useful," Roese writes, "for signaling to people that it's time to change their strategy." When we allow our regretted choices to inform us and affect our behavior, they can be seen not only in the context of what is lost, but also what could be gained, and can serve as motivation to move forward.

Living with nagging regret as our daily companion, however, can become a burden that restricts our future and corrodes our self-esteem and emotional well-being. Even small regrets diminish our contentment and keep us from living in the present. In the case of crippling regrets, the results can be devastating. Psychologists have linked severe regret with a wide variety of mental and physical disorders, including sleep and mood problems, migraines, and skin conditions.

Making Medicine of Regret

The pain of regret can be eased by taking certain steps:

Clearly examine the regret. Step back from the feelings and determine why you did what you did. How can you learn from your error? Was there

even an error to begin with? Did your action or non-action cause real harm to yourself or others? Is your dwelling on regret causing more harm than the action/inaction did?

If you regret a path not chosen, imagine how your life might be if you had chosen that path. Now, think of all the joys in your current life that you wouldn't have if you had taken the other path.

Grieve, if necessary. Fully experiencing the feelings of regret will help you move forward. Tell the truth about your powerlessness to change the past, and empower yourself in the present by making peace with the regret. Write it down, burn the paper or bury it in the earth, and then forget about it.

Accept the way it is. Recognize what you have learned and let it be final. Anything you have done is forgivable. Remember you're not alone; we've all made mistakes!

Do something about it. If the circumstances warrant it, ask for forgiveness and make amends. Take responsibility for anything you could have handled better. If you can, reverse the regretted behavior. No matter what your age, go back to school or pick up that trumpet you gave up after high school. Plan that trip to Australia. Say "I love you" to your sibling.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "Make the most of your regrets.... To regret deeply is to live afresh." No matter how many years later, learn the lessons of your regrets, redirect your course or not—and open the door to a fresh start. *

"We often look so long and regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us."

—Alexander Graham Bell

10 Ways to Heal Through Creativity

When working through issues or recovering from trauma, it's helpful to engage your heart and unconscious mind. Here are some creative pursuits for assisting the healing process.

1. Visual art. Painting, sculpting, drawing...all can give shape to the images in your unconscious.

2. Drama. Dialogue with inner characters to discover their motives. Role-play to gain insight into the stories of your life. Create new outcomes to empower your new, emerging self.

3. Collage. This is especially helpful for creating the vision of who and how you want to be.

4. Poetry. Poet Mary Oliver says that a poem is "like a coiled spring, waiting to release its energy in a few clear phrases." Poetry can crystallize feelings that lie under the surface.

5. Dance. The body has a wisdom all its own; moving it according to inner impulses helps access new information.

6. Music. Playing an instrument, no matter how well, can be meditative, relaxing and emotionally soothing.

7. Play. Try imaginative play with figurines, improv games, or laughter for no reason at all. Playing can release stuck energy and open up channels for healing.

8. Creative writing. Write stories about your life—or journal—to uncover how you really feel and imagine new possibilities.

9. Mask-making. What do your inner characters look like? Mask-making can bring them to life, allowing you to interact with them.

10. Singing. Singing can be a balm to soothe hurts or a loudspeaker for the soul. Open up your voice and see what comes out. *

A Letter From

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As we head into another season, it's a good time to think about our own growth. Are we reaching forward with joy and optimism? Or are we still dormant, our wonderful lives not yet risked?

One of the culprits holding us back may be the regrets we carry. Small or large, they can zap us of energy to move forward. But it doesn't have to be that way. The cover article explores how you can use regret to make those changes you desire, pursue that never-forgotten dream, or make peace with the choices you did make, realizing that you would make them all over again.

Transforming our relationship with food is the thrust of the article on page three. How did something so vital to our survival become the enemy? The article looks at the epidemic of eating disorders and offers several ways that all of us can come into harmony again with food.

Also in this issue are 10 creative approaches to healing that you might like to try, as well as the quiz, which can help you discover if your assumptions about people and life are getting the better of you. On the back page is a set of strategies for coping better, and easing the pain, during times of adversity.

*Best wishes for a season of renewed vigor, peace of mind, and the strength to handle anything that comes your way! **

Are Your Assumptions Undermining You?

It's natural for us to instantly and automatically generate beliefs or assumptions about other people and our environment. Most likely it's a throw-back to our reptilian brain, which constantly scans to see if we are safe or in danger. Some assumptions are useful and necessary—such as assuming that night will follow day. However, other assumptions can undermine our well-being, our level of connection with others, and our overall success in the world. Take a look at the following questions to discover if your assumptions are undermining you:



True False

Set 1

- 1. I base what I believe is possible on past experiences I've had.
- 2. I assume I already know what I do and do not like and therefore stick to what I know.
- 3. I tailor what I say and do based on expressions I see on other people's faces.
- 4. I don't tell certain people what I think or feel because I already know what they will say.
- 5. I can pretty well size people up within minutes of meeting them and then know what to expect.
- 6. How I relate to people is influenced by the way they look, dress and speak.
- 7. My opinions of others are influenced by what kind of work they do and where they are from.

Set 2

- 1. I regularly examine the assumptions I have about myself to determine whether my beliefs are holding me back.
- 2. I know that my truth is not necessarily other people's truth.
- 3. When I have an assumption about someone, I check it out with that person first before acting based on what I think is true.
- 4. I make time to clear the air with my loved ones and work-mates so that we don't just assume we're on the same page.
- 5. I consciously endeavor to open my heart to people I think are different from me—and am delighted when I discover we have more in common than I had imagined.
- 6. I make an effort to learn about differing beliefs and try to keep an open mind.
- 7. I cultivate curiosity as a way to counteract my natural human tendency to make assumptions.

If you answered true more often in Set 1 and false more often in Set 2, you may wish to examine how your assumptions are undermining your relationship with yourself, others, and life in general. Please don't hesitate to call if you'd like to explore this issue further.

Food Doesn't Have to Be a Four-Letter Word

Fat. It's what many women and some men tend to see in the mirror. Like Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, people with eating disorders inhabit an alternate reality, perceiving themselves as "fun house" reflections sporting thunder thighs and prominent girth—even if this image holds nary a grain of truth.

The pressure to look good is no secret; it's bred into us from birth. Advertising especially targets prepubescent girls, hawking make-up and designer clothes. An Exeter University survey found that by the time they're teens, more than half of all girls say their appearance is the prime concern of their lives.

Not every teen who diets to fit society's definition of beautiful will develop an eating disorder. According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD), eating disorders are caused by a complex interaction of genetics, psychological issues, and social factors, such as a culture that promotes thinness above all else. Eating disorders are, however, an epidemic:

- Seven million women and one million men suffer from an eating disorder.
- 86 percent are afflicted before they turn 20.
- Only half say they've been cured.

How Has Food Become the Enemy?

Kim Chernin, author of *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity*, calls it a cultural crisis: in our perpetual struggle to meet the Madison Avenue definition of beauty, we lose ourselves. It's also a survival issue: food, like shelter and love, is one of our most basic human needs. If we feel we have little control over anything else in our lives, at least we can control our bodies by starving them.

For many of us, with or without eating disorders, food is a stand-in for love. People who have grown up in dysfunctional families may eat to hide their loneliness and to ensure that love keeps a safe distance. One man began gaining weight as he began losing family members. By the time both his parents and his older brother had died, he was more than 100 pounds overweight, with kitchen cabinets stockpiled against further pain.

When real love—the kind that can heal our wounds—shows its face, it can become easier, and safer, to reach for the Rocky Road.



Becoming our true selves is work, although it doesn't have to be painful. Nor does food need to serve as a substitute for the nourishment we crave. Instead, food can be our medicine, as indigenous peoples use this word: that which heals us into wholeness.

Anita Johnston, Ph.D., author of *Eating in the Light of the Moon*, sees a spiritual and emotional hunger that women try to fill with food, when what's needed is a strong connection to the feminine spirit. Johnston uses

myth and storytelling to reconnect women to the natural rhythms of the Earth "that celebrate the power of women's intuitive wisdom—a formidable gift that contemporary women often conceal or suppress (like the natural roundness of their bodies) in order to fit into society's emphasis on the linear, rational, logical mind."

These issues are also being addressed by male leaders such as poet Robert Bly, whose gatherings help men get in touch with their essential

nature, making them less likely to act out their sense of disconnection with food.

The following "conscious eating" cues can help tip the scales in your favor:

Plan ahead. Decide what and when to eat, make a shopping list, and stick to it. Enjoy preparing your food as much as you'll enjoy serving and eating it.

Eat slowly. It takes about twenty minutes for your brain to get the message that you're full. Chew your food thoroughly and put your fork down between bites.

Eat mindfully. Don't watch the news or read while eating. Pay attention to your plate.

Drink plenty of water throughout the day. Studies have shown that a feeling of hunger can actually be thirst, misinterpreted.

Eat three daily meals. It's easy to overeat if you're famished. If you know you'll be on a tight schedule, pack healthy snacks such as raw veggies, fruit, and nuts.

Join or launch a healthy eating circle. Gather with like-minded people to support one another in becoming your authentic selves. 12-Step groups, such as Overeaters Anonymous (OA) and Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous (FA) are good places to start.

If you suspect that you or someone you know has an eating disorder, don't hesitate to call. The problem is unlikely to go away by itself, and early intervention is key to recovery. *

Handling Adversity: You're Stronger Than You Thought

Catastrophic events like 9/11 and the aftermath of hurricane Katrina can knock us to our knees. But personal adversities can pack an equally powerful punch. Our spouse is diagnosed with cancer, our son has a mental breakdown, we lose our home. Often these events seem to come out of nowhere and feel completely unmanageable as we struggle to regain our footing and any semblance of "normal."

But, like great trees, humans can grow stronger when exposed to powerful winds. That is easy to say, we may think, as we recall those who did not grow stronger but instead broke in the wind. How do we increase our inner strength and flexibility so that we not only survive the adversity but thrive? Here are several strategies that can help.

Take responsibility. Look at your role in the situation. Was the event, in fact, predictable? You may have



had more control over the situation than you realized. At the same time, don't take more responsibility than is warranted. If your daughter develops a brain tumor it's not because you did something wrong. Be honest, but don't point fingers, not even at yourself.

Be optimistic and think creatively. Trust that there's a solution to every problem and let your mind soar.

Approach the problem from new and different directions. Perhaps rather than losing your home, you could find a housemate whose rent would make the difference between paying the mortgage or not.

Have courage and speak up. Courage is taking action despite the fear you feel. If your doctor isn't taking you seriously, speak up. Be your own advocate. Tell him or her what you want and need. Don't assume that he or she "should know."

Take the long view. Remember that "this too shall pass." Recount other times when you have overcome challenges. How did you do it? Who or what helped you? Who or what can help you this time?

Maintain a sense of humor. There's truth in the adage: "laughter is the best medicine." Even in the darkest of times, laughter can help ease the pain.

Get support. No one can handle everything alone. When you get that overwhelmed feeling—or even before—reach out. Ask for help. Next time, ask for it sooner. You'll be amazed by how much better you feel.

Don't quit. Persistence may be the greatest human quality that helps us overcome adversity. Draw inspiration from the great heroes of the world—Nelson Mandela, Harriet Tubman, Mahatma Gandhi—people who persisted despite the odds. Remember, you are your own best ally. And you're stronger and more resilient than you thought. *

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A graduate of the University of Maryland with a Master's Degree in Marriage and Family Therapy, I have been in practice since 1994, providing individual, couples and family therapy. My vision is to empower individuals, couples and families to THRIVE even in the face of difficult challenges.