

Beyond Regret

Letting Go of the Life You Didn't Live

by Cassie Jewell, LPC, LSATP

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This booklet is educational and is not a substitute for mental health treatment or medical advice. If you are experiencing significant psychological distress or are in an unsafe situation, seek assistance from a qualified professional.

Introduction

If you've ever found yourself lying awake at night replaying a decision you wish you had made differently, you're not alone.

Perhaps you regret a relationship that ended, a career opportunity you passed up, money you spent, words you wish you hadn't said, or chances you never took. Maybe you wonder where your life would be today if you had chosen a different path. These thoughts can be painful, and for some people, they become so persistent that they make it difficult to fully appreciate the life they have today.

The truth is, regret is one of the most universal human emotions. Every meaningful decision involves giving up other possibilities, and it's only natural to wonder how life might have unfolded had we chosen differently. In fact, the ability to reflect on the past is one of the very things that helps us learn, grow, and make better decisions in the future.

Regret itself isn't the problem.

The problem begins when regret stops being a teacher and becomes a permanent place to live.

Instead of helping us learn from the past, it keeps us trapped there. We replay conversations, second-guess our decisions, compare our lives to imagined alternatives, and criticize ourselves for mistakes we can no longer change. Over time, regret can quietly erode our confidence, relationships, happiness, and willingness to move forward.

Fortunately, it doesn't have to stay that way.

Moving beyond regret doesn't mean pretending the past never happened or convincing yourself that everything worked out for the best. It means developing a healthier relationship with the past—one that allows you to learn from your experiences without becoming imprisoned

by them. Some regrets can still lead to meaningful action, while others require acceptance, forgiveness, and letting go. The key is learning the difference.

In the pages that follow, you'll explore why regret occurs, how it affects your emotional well-being, and practical, research-informed strategies for moving forward. You'll also have the opportunity to reflect on your own experiences and identify ways to stop letting yesterday shape tomorrow.

Because while you can't rewrite your past, you can decide what role it plays in your future.

Welcome to *Beyond Regret*. The goal isn't to erase your regrets. It's to move beyond them—to reach a place where they no longer control your decisions, relationships, or quality of life.

Regret Self-Assessment

How Much Is Regret Holding You Back?

Think about the past month. For each statement, choose the response that best describes you.

0=Never

1=Rarely

2=Sometimes

3=Often

4=Almost always

Thoughts

_____ I frequently replay past decisions in my mind.

_____ I often wonder, "*What if I had made a different choice?*"

_____ I have difficulty letting go of past mistakes.

_____ I compare my current life to the life I imagine I could have had.

_____ I find myself wishing I could go back and change the past.

Emotions

_____ Thinking about past decisions makes me feel sad or discouraged.

_____ I blame myself for things I cannot change.

_____ My regrets affect my confidence.

_____ I feel ashamed about choices I've made.

_____ I struggle to forgive myself for past mistakes.

Behavior

_____ Regret keeps me from making new decisions.

_____ I avoid taking risks because I'm afraid I'll regret them.

_____ I procrastinate because I worry about making the wrong choice.

_____ My regrets interfere with enjoying the present.

_____ I have difficulty celebrating my accomplishments because I focus on past mistakes.

Relationships

_____ I often think about relationships that ended or opportunities I missed.

_____ Regret causes tension in my relationships.

_____ I compare my current relationships to imagined alternatives.

Overall

_____ Regret affects my overall happiness.

_____ I feel emotionally stuck because of things that happened in the past.

_____ I would like to spend less time dwelling on the past.

Scoring

Add your scores together.

0–15 Regret Isn't Controlling Your Life

You experience regret like most people do, but it doesn't appear to dominate your thoughts or behavior. Continue learning from your experiences while staying focused on the present.

16–35 Mild to Moderate Impact

Regret is beginning to influence your emotions or decisions. Some of the strategies in this guide may help you spend less time looking backward and more time moving forward.

36–55 Significant Impact

Regret appears to be affecting multiple areas of your life, including your emotions, confidence, or decision-making. Working through the exercises in this booklet may help you develop a healthier relationship with the past.

56–80 Feeling Regretful

Regret may have become one of the primary lenses through which you view your life. The good news is that regret doesn't have to define your future. While the past cannot be changed, your relationship with it can. If regret is causing significant distress or interfering with your daily functioning, consider talking with a mental health professional in addition to working through the strategies in this guide.

Chapter 1: Signs That Your Regret is Negatively Impacting You

Nearly everyone has one decision they wish they could undo. A relationship they didn't leave. A career they never pursued. Words they wish they could take back.

While regret is universal, many people don't realize that it can quietly become one of the greatest barriers to happiness. The goal isn't to erase regret. It's to keep it from becoming the lens through which you see your entire life.

Regret is the emotional response we experience when we believe our own choices—or lack of action—prevented us from achieving a better outcome. It often arises when we look back on an opportunity and think, *I should have done something differently*.

Because every life involves difficult decisions and missed opportunities, regret is nearly universal. Research suggests that people's deepest regrets tend to center on a handful of major life domains, including education, career, romantic relationships, parenting, personal growth, and the experiences they never pursued. These regrets are often accompanied by self-blame. Instead of viewing the past with compassion, we criticize ourselves for the decisions we made, the risks we avoided, or the person we believe we should have been.

Over time, this self-criticism can fuel negative thinking, undermine self-esteem, and even contribute to self-defeating behaviors.

While regret can be a powerful teacher, it becomes harmful when it keeps us trapped in the past instead of helping us build a better future.

Rumination is one of the clearest signs that regret has become unhealthy. You replay the situation over and over in your mind, analyzing every detail and imagining what you should have said or done differently. You search for the perfect response or decision that might have changed

the outcome. But the past cannot be edited. Instead of helping you move forward, these repetitive thoughts keep you emotionally stuck, making it difficult to let go and fully engage with the present.

Another sign that regret has become unhealthy is when it begins to undermine your confidence and sense of self-efficacy—the belief that you can handle challenges and influence your future. Instead of seeing a mistake as something you did, you begin to see it as evidence of who you are. If you repeatedly tell yourself, *I always mess things up* or *I can't be trusted to make good decisions*, regret has shifted from helping you learn to damaging your self-image.

An even stronger warning sign is when you cannot forgive yourself. Holding yourself hostage for past mistakes doesn't change what happened; it only prevents you from moving forward.

Regret and self-blame often go hand in hand. When you become trapped in a cycle of blaming yourself for the past, regret can gradually give way to shame. Instead of thinking, *I made a mistake*, you begin thinking, *I am a mistake*. That shift is profoundly damaging.

If you find it impossible to forgive yourself or extend the same kindness and compassion you would offer someone else, regret is no longer serving a healthy purpose. It is eroding your self-worth and taking a toll on your emotional well-being. Healthy regret encourages growth. Toxic regret convinces you that you don't deserve it.

Chapter 2: Reasons You Harbor Regrets

While regret is a normal—and often healthy—part of being human, holding on to regret is what becomes harmful. When regrets linger for months or years, they can begin to shape how you think, feel, and see yourself. In this chapter, we'll explore why some regrets are so difficult to let go of.

One reason is that your brain often treats regret like unfinished business. It has a natural tendency to keep returning to unresolved experiences, searching for meaning, resolution, or a different ending. Until it feels a sense of closure, your mind may continue replaying the past, even when doing so only prolongs your suffering.

Another reason regrets are so persistent is that our brains are wired to learn from mistakes. From an evolutionary perspective, remembering painful experiences helped our ancestors avoid repeating them. If touching a poisonous plant or trusting the wrong person had serious consequences, remembering that mistake increased the chances of survival. The problem is that the same mental system that helps us learn doesn't always know when to stop. Instead of reviewing a mistake once or twice and moving on, it can replay the same memory hundreds of times, long after there is anything left to learn.

Part of what makes regret so sticky is that it is built on the psychological illusion of control: counterfactual thinking. Our minds love to construct "what if" scenarios, convincing us that if we had just chosen path B instead of path A, the outcome would have been flawless. We compare our messy, lived reality to a idealized, hypothetical version of the past where everything turned out right. We forget that the choices we made were shaped by limited information, emotional strain, and the exact circumstances of that moment, choosing instead to judge our past selves with the unfair clarity of 20/20 hindsight.

Another reason we hold on to regret is our tendency to imagine that the alternative outcome would have been much better. We mentally rewrite history, picturing the career that would have been more fulfilling, the relationship that would have lasted, or the opportunity that would have changed everything. What we rarely imagine are the challenges, disappointments, and trade-offs that would have accompanied that alternative path. Because the life we didn't live exists only in our imagination, it often becomes unrealistically perfect.

Regret also persists because it gives us the illusion of control. As strange as it sounds, repeatedly thinking, *If only I had...*, can feel safer than accepting that some events were influenced by uncertainty, bad luck, or circumstances beyond our control. Believing that a single different choice would have produced a perfect outcome can be painful, but it also allows us to feel that the world is predictable. Accepting that life is uncertain—and that even good decisions sometimes lead to disappointing outcomes—is often much harder.

Finally, many people hold on to regret because they mistake it for responsibility. They believe that letting go means excusing their mistakes or pretending they never happened. We often cling to past mistakes or missed opportunities because, on a subconscious level, we believe that holding onto the pain proves we care, that we've learned our lesson, or that we're paying a self-imposed penance.

Letting go can feel dangerously close to letting ourselves off the hook—as if forgiving our past selves means condoning what went wrong. In this way, regret becomes a moral anchor, keeping us tied to a version of reality where we retain control over the narrative, even if that narrative causes us constant friction. In reality, accepting the past is not the same as approving of it. You can acknowledge that you made a poor decision, take responsibility for its consequences,

and still choose to stop punishing yourself. Self-forgiveness doesn't erase accountability; it makes growth possible.

The goal, then, is not to eliminate regret entirely. Healthy regret can teach us valuable lessons and motivate us to make better choices in the future. The challenge is recognizing when regret has outlived its usefulness. Once you've learned what it has to teach, continuing to replay the past rarely provides new insight. It simply keeps you emotionally tied to a chapter of your life that has already been written.

Chapter 3: The Cost of Holding On

When regret becomes a constant companion rather than an occasional visitor, it begins affecting far more than your thoughts. Chronic regret can take a toll on your emotional well-being, physical health, relationships, and daily behavior. While everyone experiences regret from time to time, living in a constant state of *if only* can gradually erode your quality of life.

Emotional Consequences

One of the first casualties of chronic regret is your emotional well-being. Instead of learning from the past and moving forward, your mind becomes trapped replaying the same events over and over again.

This pattern, known as rumination, keeps your brain searching for answers that no longer exist. You replay conversations, revisit decisions, and imagine countless alternative endings. Unfortunately, each replay rarely brings new insight. Instead, it drains your mental energy, making it harder to concentrate, solve problems, and stay present.

Over time, regret can also chip away at your self-compassion. Healthy regret says, *I made a mistake*. Unhealthy regret says, *I am a mistake*. Rather than viewing a poor decision as one moment in your life, you begin to see it as evidence of your worth.

The shift from guilt to shame can contribute to depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of hopelessness.

Some people eventually stop taking emotional risks altogether. After enough painful disappointments, they conclude that the safest option is simply not to try. They avoid making decisions, pursuing goals, or opening themselves up to new opportunities because another regret feels unbearable. Unfortunately, this emotional withdrawal often creates even more regret in the future.

Physical Consequences

Regret doesn't just live in your mind—it affects your body as well.

Every time you relive a painful memory, your brain reacts as though the threat is happening again. Your body's stress response activates, releasing stress hormones designed to help you deal with immediate danger.

While this response is helpful during genuine emergencies, it becomes harmful when it remains activated for months or years because you're repeatedly replaying the past.

Over time, chronic stress can contribute to headaches, muscle tension, fatigue, digestive problems, and poor sleep. Many people notice they lie awake at night replaying old conversations or decisions, making it difficult to fall asleep or stay asleep. Others experience stomach problems because the digestive system is particularly sensitive to ongoing psychological stress.

Research has also linked chronic stress with increased inflammation, elevated blood pressure, and a weakened immune system. Although regret itself doesn't directly cause these conditions, living in a constant state of emotional stress can certainly contribute to them.

Behavioral Consequences

Regret also changes the way we behave.

Many people become indecisive, fearing that every choice could become another future regret. Even relatively minor decisions begin to feel overwhelming because they carry the weight of imagined consequences.

Others become overly cautious. They avoid applying for jobs, ending unhealthy relationships, asking someone out, relocating, or pursuing long-held dreams—not because these

opportunities aren't worthwhile, but because the possibility of making another mistake feels too threatening.

Some people respond by becoming perfectionists. They believe that if they can make the "perfect" decision, they'll never experience regret again. Unfortunately, perfection is impossible, and striving for it often increases anxiety rather than reducing it.

Others engage in subtle forms of self-sabotage. Feeling unworthy of happiness or success, they unconsciously undermine opportunities that could improve their lives, reinforcing the very beliefs regret has created.

Social Consequences

The effects of regret often extend beyond the individual.

People burdened by unresolved regret may withdraw from family and friends, becoming emotionally distant or preoccupied with the past. Conversations repeatedly return to old mistakes, missed opportunities, or painful memories, making it difficult to fully engage in the present.

Regret can also damage trust. Someone who regrets a past relationship may struggle to trust a future partner. Someone who regrets a career decision may lose confidence in their ability to make important life choices. Over time, this loss of trust can limit relationships, isolate people from others, and make it harder to build a fulfilling life.

Regret Doesn't Have to Define You

The good news is that regret doesn't have to become a permanent way of living. The goal isn't to erase the past or pretend mistakes never happened. It's to learn what regret has to teach, take responsibility where appropriate, forgive yourself, and invest your energy in the life you still have the power to shape.

The healthiest people aren't those who never experience regret. They're the ones who know when it's time to stop looking backward and start moving forward. In the next chapter we'll examine healthy ways of coping with regret.

Chapter 4: Strategies for Letting Go

Fortunately, you don't have to carry regret forever. While the past cannot be changed, your relationship with it can. The following strategies can help you let go of what no longer serves you, learn from your experiences, and move forward with greater confidence and peace.

Decide Whether the Regret Is Actionable

The first question to ask is: *Can I do anything about this now?*

If the answer is yes, shift from regret to problem-solving. Apologize. Repair the relationship. Go back to school. Change careers. Start saving money. Regret has served its purpose if it motivates constructive action.

If the answer is no, continuing to replay the event is unlikely to change anything. The task becomes acceptance rather than correction.

Separate Guilt from Shame

Ask yourself:

Did I make a mistake? (Guilt)

Or have I concluded that I am a mistake? (Shame)

Healthy guilt says, "I did something I wish I hadn't."

Shame says, "There's something fundamentally wrong with me."

Growth begins when you challenge shame instead of reinforcing it.

Practice Self-Compassion

Imagine a close friend made the exact same mistake.

- What would you tell them?
- Would you call them a failure?

- Or would you acknowledge their pain while encouraging them to move forward?

Try offering yourself the same compassion. Research consistently shows that self-compassion is associated with lower depression, less rumination, and greater resilience.

Challenge the Perfect Alternative

Ask yourself:

Am I assuming the life I didn't choose would have been perfect?

What problems would probably have existed there too?

What evidence do I actually have?

The mind tends to compare your real life—with all its imperfections—to an imaginary life with none.

That's an unfair comparison.

Focus on What You Learned

Instead of asking,

"Why did I do that?"

ask,

"What has this experience taught me?"

Regret becomes useful when it changes future behavior.

Once the lesson has been learned, continuing to punish yourself serves little purpose.

Practice Acceptance

Acceptance doesn't mean approving of what happened.

It means acknowledging reality instead of fighting it.

You cannot change yesterday.

You can only decide what kind of person you want to be today.

Stop Feeding Rumination

When you notice yourself replaying the same event:

Ask whether you're learning something new.

If not, gently redirect your attention to the present.

Some people find it helpful to schedule a 15-minute "worry period" each day. If regret appears outside that window, remind yourself you'll think about it later. This often reduces compulsive rumination. Others find ways to distract themselves from their thoughts. Focus your mind and energy on a project with positive aspects instead of past regrets.

Make Amends When Possible

If your regret involves hurting someone else:

- ☐ Apologize sincerely.
- ☐ Accept responsibility.
- ☐ Repair what you can.

Even if forgiveness isn't offered, knowing you've done what you reasonably could often brings relief.

Reinvest in the Present

Regret steals attention from the life you're living.

Ask yourself:

- What matters to me now?
- What kind of person do I want to become?
- What's one small step I can take today?

You cannot build tomorrow while living entirely in yesterday.

Create a New Story

Many people tell themselves stories like:

"I ruined my life."

"It's too late."

"Everything would have been better if..."

Try replacing those with more balanced narratives:

"I made the best decision I could with what I knew then."

"That chapter shaped me, but it doesn't define me."

"I still have opportunities ahead of me."

Changing the story doesn't erase the past, but it changes how the past influences your future.

One of the biggest misconceptions about letting go of regret is that it means forgetting what happened. It doesn't. It means carrying the memory without carrying the burden.

You can remember your mistakes, learn from them, and even wish things had gone differently without allowing them to define who you are. The goal isn't to erase the past. It's to stop letting the past write the rest of your story.

You don't honor your past by living there. You honor it by allowing it to make you wiser—not smaller.

Chapter 5: The Gifts of Regret

At first glance, regret seems like an emotion we should eliminate. It hurts. It reminds us of our mistakes and missed opportunities. It can leave us wondering what might have been. But despite its painful reputation, regret isn't the enemy. In many ways, regret is one of the emotions that helps us grow the most. Without it, we would be far more likely to repeat the same mistakes throughout our lives.

One of regret's greatest gifts is that it promotes learning. When we experience regret, our brains naturally begin asking questions: *What went wrong? What could I have done differently? What will I do next time?* This process of reflection helps us make better decisions in the future. In fact, research suggests that people who experience regret in a healthy way often become better problem-solvers because they use past mistakes as information rather than as evidence of personal failure.

Regret can also clarify what truly matters. Sometimes we don't fully appreciate our values until we've acted against them. A parent who regrets spending too many evenings at the office may realize that family is more important than career advancement. Someone who regrets staying in an unhealthy relationship may discover just how much they value respect, honesty, and emotional safety. In this way, regret functions like a compass. It points us back toward the life we genuinely want to live.

Another gift of regret is that it can increase empathy. People who have made painful mistakes often become less judgmental and more compassionate toward others. They understand what it's like to fail, disappoint someone, or wish they could have a second chance. That perspective can make them better friends, partners, parents, and professionals. Many counselors,

physicians, teachers, and leaders draw upon their own regrets to better understand the struggles of the people they serve.

Perhaps the greatest gift of regret is that it reminds us we still care. We regret the things that mattered to us—our relationships, our dreams, our integrity, our health, our families. Regret is often evidence that our values are alive and well. The pain we feel reflects the importance of what was lost or what we hoped life would become. Rather than viewing regret as proof that we've failed, we can view it as proof that our lives have meaning.

The challenge, then, is not to eliminate regret but to use it wisely. Healthy regret looks backward just long enough to gather the lesson before turning its attention to the future. Once regret has taught you what you needed to learn, its job is finished. The greatest way to honor your regrets isn't to relive them forever—it's to let them shape the person you become next.

Final Thoughts

Regret is part of the human experience. No one reaches the end of life without wishing they had said something differently, taken a chance, or chosen another path. The goal isn't to live a life free of regret—that isn't possible. The goal is to develop a healthier relationship with it.

Your past has shaped you, but it does not have to define you. Every mistake you've made contains a lesson, every disappointment carries the potential for growth, and every day offers another opportunity to choose differently. You cannot rewrite yesterday, but you can influence tomorrow.

As you close this booklet, remember that healing begins the moment you stop asking, *"How can I change the past?"* and start asking, *"What can I do with the life I have today?"* That simple shift transforms regret from a prison into a teacher.

Give yourself permission to learn. Give yourself permission to forgive. Most importantly, give yourself permission to move forward.

The next chapter of your life has not been written yet. Make it one you'll be proud to look back on.

Appendix: Moving Beyond Regret Worksheet

Regret can keep us mentally returning to a decision, mistake, or missed opportunity long after the moment has passed. This worksheet is designed to help you understand what your regret is telling you, separate what can still be changed from what cannot, and decide what you want to carry forward.

1. What do you regret?

Briefly describe the decision, action, or missed opportunity you find yourself returning to.

2. What do you wish you had done differently?

Be specific. What do you imagine you *should* have done instead?

3. What are you assuming would have happened?

If you had made a different choice, what outcome do you imagine would have followed?

4. What don't you know?

We often compare reality with an imagined alternative that turned out perfectly. What problems, disappointments, or unexpected circumstances might have occurred even if you had chosen differently?

5. What did you know then?

Think about the information, experience, resources, emotional state, and circumstances you had **at the time** you made the decision.

6. What do you know now that you didn't know then?

7. Are you judging your past self using information you only gained later?

If so, how?

8. What was outside your control?

Consider other people's decisions, circumstances, timing, resources, health, finances, opportunities, and information you didn't have.

9. What *was* within your control?

Taking responsibility is different from punishing yourself. Identify the part of the situation that genuinely belonged to you.

10. What has this regret taught you?

What do you understand about yourself, your values, relationships, needs, or priorities because of this experience?

11. What would you do differently today?

If you encountered a similar situation now, how would you respond?

12. Is there anything you can still repair?

Could you apologize, make amends, reconnect with someone, correct a mistake, pursue an abandoned goal, or take another meaningful action?

13. If you cannot change the past, what can you change now?

Identify one action that would allow your regret to influence your future rather than simply occupy your thoughts.

14. What would you say to someone you love?

Imagine someone you care deeply about made the same decision under the same circumstances. What would you say to them?

15. Now, what do you need to say to yourself?

Turning Regret into Action

Something I need to accept:

Something I need to forgive myself for:

Something I can still repair or change:

A lesson I want to carry forward:

One action I will take because of what I've learned:

Remember

Moving beyond regret doesn't require deciding that what happened was okay or pretending you would make the same choice again. It means allowing the experience to teach you without allowing it to continually punish you.

You cannot change the decision you made then. You can decide what you do with it now.

Thank You for Reading

Thank you for taking the time to read *Beyond Regret*. I know there are countless books, articles, and resources competing for your attention, and I'm grateful you chose to spend part of your journey with me.

If there's one message I hope you'll carry with you, it's this: your past may have shaped you, but it does not have to define you. Every one of us has regrets. We all have moments we wish we could redo, opportunities we wish we'd taken, or decisions we wish we'd made differently. What matters most isn't whether you have regrets—it's whether you allow them to keep you from fully living today.

My hope is that this booklet has helped you understand that regret can be more than a source of pain. It can also be a source of wisdom. Learn the lesson, offer yourself the same compassion you would extend to someone you love, and give yourself permission to move forward. You deserve a future that isn't held hostage by your past.

Thank you again for reading. I wish you peace, healing, and the courage to embrace whatever comes next.

Warmly,

Cassie Jewell

If this booklet was helpful, consider sharing it with someone who may need it.

About the Author



Cassie Jewell, LPC, LSATP, is a licensed professional counselor, licensed substance abuse treatment practitioner, and clinical supervisor with more than 15 years of experience helping individuals navigate life's most difficult transitions. Throughout her career, she has worked with people facing addiction, grief, trauma, anxiety, depression, and major life changes.

Cassie is passionate about translating psychological research into practical, compassionate guidance that readers can apply to everyday life. Through her writing, she hopes to help people better understand themselves, overcome life's challenges, and create meaningful, lasting change.

To learn more about Cassie, explore additional resources, or stay informed about upcoming books and free content, visit **Cassie-Jewell.com**.

Resources

Article: [What Good Is Regret? | Psychology Today](#)

Article: [10 Tips to Help Deal with Regret and Move Forward with Life](#)

Interview: [Breaking the Regret Cycle — Harvard Gazette](#)

Worksheet: [Overcome-Regret](#)

Worksheet: [Therapists Ultimate Solution](#)

Book: [The Power of Regret | Daniel Pink](#)

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