

# INSIGHT



## Open the Door to a Fresh Start by Learning the Lessons of Regret

We all have regrets. Big or small, recent or rooted in a long ago incident, these are regrets we mostly wish we didn't have. We wish we hadn't made that choice, taken or not taken that life-changing action, behaved that way.

But 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.

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 Paths to Mutual Respect and Genuine Intimacy

*A good marriage is created when each spouse appoints the other as "guardian of his/her solitude," to quote a line from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke.*

*And it's this kind of committed partnership that forms the basis for mutual respect and genuine intimacy. Here are 10 ways to contribute to the development of that kind of deep, satisfying intimacy.*

- 1. Bring up difficult subjects.**
- 2. Listen with openness** to feedback.
- 3. Attempt to elicit a fuller range of feelings** during discussions and disagreements.
- 4. Respect your partner's desire** for greater distance or closeness as expressing a need for comfort—not a personal rejection.
- 5. Listen without comment** during disagreements, despite strong feelings being stirred.
- 6. Maintain perspective.** See you partner as a human, not a deity or demon.
- 7. Be honest with yourself.** True intimacy with another can't really happen until we are intimate with ourselves.
- 8. Dare to expose your imperfections and fears.**
- 9. Avoid depending on your partner to fulfill all your needs.**
- 10. Don't use affection, sex and loving behavior to reward or punish.**

*Rilke reminds us of the connection between intimacy and a healthy ability to maintain what's separate: "Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings an infinite distance continues to exist, a wonderful living side-by-side can grow up if they succeed in loving the distance between them, which makes it possible to see each other whole and against a wide sky!" \**

## A Letter From

*Non F. Schmitt*



To be emotionally vulnerable is to risk pain. That's why so many of us have constructed emotional shields and masks—we want to protect ourselves from potential harm.

Yet, as the page 3 article discusses, when we constantly hide behind this emotional armor, we can lose touch with our feelings. Ultimately, that separates us from authentic connection to one another and—most critically—to ourselves. As it turns out, we can actually be strong by being vulnerable

Intimate relationships are where we often feel at our most vulnerable. We are afraid of rocking the boat, of being criticized, of being seen as stupid and flawed. Ultimately, we're afraid of not being loved. But, as the Top 10 shows, true, lasting and rewarding intimacy requires that we dare to be honest about who we are.

Sometimes, when we feel vulnerable and exposed, we may partake in self-defeating behaviors, as discussed on page 4. Unfortunately, those very behaviors tend to inhibit inner freedom.

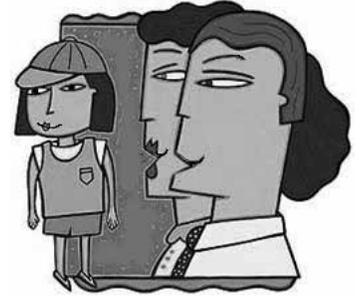
Real listening to ourselves can help, just like it helps children, when their parents truly listen. If you're a parent, the quiz this issue is a great way to assess how well you are listening to your children.

Please don't hesitate to call if you'd like to talk about these or any other matters.

## Are You Unwittingly Hindering Communication?

We want to help our children when they come to us with a problem. So we console, interpret, advise, distract or praise. Or we interrogate, lecture, moralize or order. We might even blame, criticize, ridicule, shame or withdraw.

However, all of these responses are problematic—whether with our children or with the adults in our lives. They often serve to stop the communication of real feelings and the development of individual solutions. Take the quiz below, adapted from the classic Parent Effectiveness Training, by Dr. Thomas Gordon, to assess your listening skills.



### True False

- 1. I let my children feel their difficult feelings, knowing that comments such as "Everyone goes through this" deny the strength of their feelings.
- 2. I listen for the need beneath the words and respond to that.
- 3. I check in to see if I've understood something in the way my child intended to mean it. When I do, I try to keep my own feelings, opinions and guidance out of it.
- 4. When my child tells me something, I try to respond with either noncommittal phrases (such as "I see") or with an invitation to say more (such as "Go ahead, I'm listening").
- 5. I notice that when I listen to my children's problems (rather than make suggestions or give advice), my children often come up with their own excellent solutions.
- 6. When I hear out my children fully, they are often much more willing to listen to my thoughts and ideas.
- 7. When I let my children express their feelings openly and completely, the feelings often seem to disappear quickly.
- 8. If I don't have the time to listen to my child right at that moment, I say so and make time for it later.
- 9. I've learned to trust that my children can find good solutions to their problems on their own.
- 10. I understand that my children are separate, unique individuals, and that their feelings and perceptions are not necessarily the same as mine.
- 11. When I stay away from moralizing, interpreting, ordering and advising, I find that I learn a lot more about my children. Sometimes, I even learn from my children.
- 12. I know that just listening doesn't always bring about immediate change and that it's sometimes OK to leave things on an inconclusive or incomplete note.

Authentic communication with our children (and friends) has rewards more valuable than a pot of gold. Real listening may be the rainbow bridge we need to get there. If you scored fewer "true" answers than false, you may benefit from improving your listening skills. \*

# How to Turn Fear and Vulnerability Into Strength and Empowerment

Michael doesn't walk, he swaggers. He doesn't talk, he commands. When his children and friends head for the exit, he figures they just don't have the guts to handle such a big, important man. But he has an ulcer and he can't sleep. Lately, he's been having nightmares about being trapped. Deep, deep down, he's afraid he's really a little man after all.

Rosie is terrified of getting older, of her children leaving home, of being alone. These feelings scare her so much, she invents ways not to face her fears. Mostly, she lashes out at others for "making" her feel bad. She wonders why she has so few friends and can't find a mate.

It hurts to admit we are vulnerable. For so many of us, it means we are weak, helpless and open to attack by others or by whatever life throws at us. Our culture demands that we be strong, so we try our best to hide our fears and cover up our weak spots. We don't want to be seen as failures.

But there can be beauty in vulnerability and value in exploring so-called weaknesses. By exploring our "dark" side, we can turn our fears and vulnerabilities into strengths. To paraphrase author Matthew Fox, "Our demons aren't *in* the way; they *are* the way!"

Often, we believe that keeping a stiff upper lip will keep us strong. We hold a tight lid on our fears and pain, but in doing so, we also cover up and lose touch with our feelings. This, in turn, shields our hearts and separates us from our connection to humanity.

Instead, imagine the worst thing that can happen and explore your fears. It is often helpful to work with a therapist to face what it is you believe you are defending yourself against, and then to help you understand, accept and let go.

This is a journey that can be long and difficult, but it's only by facing our vulnerable places—not covering them up or running from them—that we come out the other side.



Being vulnerable actually empowers us. We all have a wound, and when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, we accept that wound and then we can move forward. Our wound is our blessing.

Being vulnerable hasn't been very popular in our society, but this is changing. Words such as "humility" and "gratitude" and "forgiveness" are being used more frequently. They are terms that show a cultural shift towards accepting all human traits, negative and positive, strong and weak.

Author and therapist Beth Miller takes this one step further. In her book, *Resilience: 12 Qualities to Cultivate*, she calls vulnerability "falling apart" and urges that "it is time to bring falling apart into fashion."

Being a student of life means being vulnerable—open to life, to learning, to experiences, to yourself and to emotions. Most of all, it means being willing to accept things as they are.

Being vulnerable comes easier to some than others. Here are some ways to explore being vulnerable:

- Be honest with yourself.
- Look for deeper reasons or motives for your own behavior. Take responsibility for your behavior.
- Take a risk. Start by letting someone you trust know your weak places.
- Be willing to listen to honest feedback.
- Accept the fact that you have anger, and find words to talk about it.
- Let go of guilt and resentment. The past is past. Make amends if needed.
- Accept that you make mistakes. That's part of being human. \*



# Defeating Our Self-Defeating Thoughts

**M**aribel loves her job and her boss. The only thorn is that her boss prizes punctuality and Maribel just can't seem to be on time for anything, whether it's a team meeting or that project that was due last week.

When he was a boy, Alec vowed he'd never be a father like his own father—aloof, critical and emotionally unavailable. Yet, 30 years later, he catches himself constantly judging him for not measuring up.

What Alec and Maribel have in common is self-sabotage. It eats away inside, creating a cycle of self-destruction with the result that we aren't really living the life we want for ourselves.

"If we don't succeed in identifying and owning this sinister part, we can never be free," says Stanley Rosner, author of *The Self-Sabotage Cycle*.

Numerous studies show that women are more prone to lower self-esteem and self-doubting thoughts. This leads to self-sabotaging behavior, such as

1. Being overly passive, fearful or indecisive, so that chances pass us by.
2. Having a chronically chaotic financial situation.
3. Being controlled by depression and anxiety.
4. Being controlled by compulsive behaviors to abuse alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, food, physical exercise, etc. Being compulsively late. Expressing anger inappropriately.
5. Being mistreated by partners and spouses. Being stuck in an unhappy relationship but doing nothing to change the situation. Having a series of unsatisfying relationships.

Recognizing self-defeating thoughts and behavior is the first step to change. The next step is to take responsibility for your thoughts and behavior—so that you control them and they stop controlling you.

Self-observation is a powerful tool against the behaviors that defeat us.

For example, Alec could take his son fishing, taking care to be positive and to stay silent when he feels a criticism rising in his throat. He would have to decide that a good relationship with his son was more important than being "right."

Setting a goal is the next step. Without blame or shame, choose one behavior to change. For example, Maribel could decide not to be late anymore. To do this, she would have to decide that something was more important than being late—a job she loves, for example. After a while, the rewards of being on time could become greater than the self-defeating cycle of being late.

It's not easy to change patterns of self-sabotage, but with time and practice—and a good dose of self-love—it is possible to end a self-defeating cycle and live the life we truly want for ourselves. \*



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