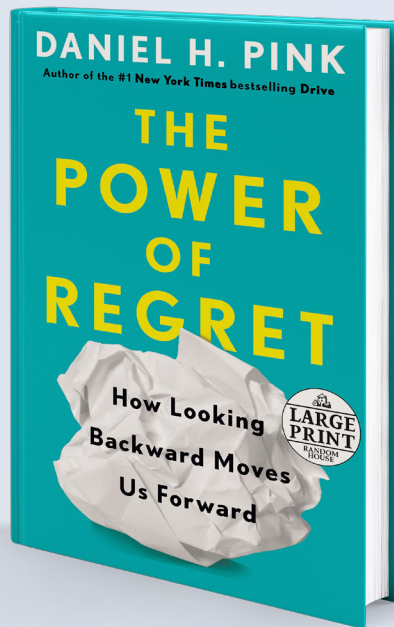


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The Power of Regret

How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward

By Daniel Pink

Daniel Pink is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of seven books -- including his latest, *The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward*. His books have sold millions of copies around the world, been translated into forty-two languages, and have won multiple awards. He lives with his family in Washington, DC.

Looking Back to Move Forward

We live in a world where many people extol the benefits of living regret-free. The theory behind this ethos is that to live without regrets means we accept that every action we have taken has led us to where we are and who we are today. The concept is so prevalent that many people burn the phrase, “no regrets” onto their bodies as a tattoo. Author Daniel Pink, in his newest book, *The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward*, confronts this idea, and comes to the conclusion that regrets, properly conceptualized and utilized, are actually beneficial and can point us to what we need to do in order to live the good life.

Pink defines regret as the feeling a person gets when people believe their present would be better had they made a different choice in their past. Focusing only on positive emotions and drowning out the negative ones can detrimentally affect a person’s life and potential. Pink’s goal in his book is to advance the claim that regret is a necessary emotion and that, if used correctly, can help us course correct and create better futures. If used incorrectly, however, it can lead to either overwhelmingly negative feelings or to stagnation and fear of decision making.

Regrets Make Us Human

For Pink, regret is part of what makes us human. This is because in order to regret something, we have to perform two separate cognitive feats: we need to both go back in time and go into the future. In other words, in order to experience regret, a person must look at their present and experience some dissatisfaction. The person then must cognitively travel back to the past and mentally change some action before then projecting themselves back into the future to see how his or her life would look different had that revised action actually occurred. This is not something beings with lesser formed intellects can perform. That being said, it’s such a crucial aspect of being human that not being able to experience regret in this way can signal a problem in a person’s psyche.

This is just the beginning of regret, however. In order for a person to experience regret rather than sadness or despair, they must compare their present circumstances with the alternative imagined circumstances and determine that the alternative is better. They then must assign blame.

For regret to occur, the person must feel that the outcome was determined by actions they took, not by a twist of fate. To extrapolate on Pink's ideas, a person might experience regret if they left a stove running and their house burned down. They would experience sadness, perhaps, but not regret had a wildfire come and burned their house down.

The Nature of Regrets

Pink then begins his discussion of the nature of regrets. He describes counterfactual thinking which occurs when our minds are able to concoct circumstances that never actually existed in real life. In other words, we can imagine other possible outcomes. Some of these scenarios he describes as "at least." With "at least" thinking, a person sees an outcome and looks at other possible worse outcomes. This leads the individual to think "At least that didn't happen." These are also called downward counterfactuals. On the flip side, people can come to an "if only" counterfactual. With this scenario, a person looks at a negative outcome and thinks of what better circumstances they would be faced with if only they acted differently in this past. This is called an upward counterfactual.

Despite people's dislike of the feeling of regret, Pink claims three benefits can arise from the emotion:

1. It can improve decision making. This happens because past regret can slow down our decision making as well as help us make different decisions in the future.
2. It can improve performance. Regret can do this by increasing persistence. A large part of this is because people want to avoid the "if only" feelings associated with regret. This can help a person if the regret was their own or even if it was a hypothetical regret of a fictional person. In other words, a person might read a story of someone who experienced regret, and then they become more persistent in their own actions in order to avoid feeling the same way.
3. It can deepen meaning. Regrets can help people make more positive decisions in their present. The example Pink gives is of a woman who regretted not spending enough time listening to the stories of grandparents in the past. Now that the grandparents are gone and the regret has set in, the person makes sure to hear the stories of her own parents, so she does not have that regret as time passes.

Pink describes different attitudes people have towards feelings, and he comes to the conclusion that with regrets, the best option is to understand that feeling is for thinking. He believes that if people acknowledge their feelings, think about them, and use these thoughts to make better decisions in the future, people will create better outcomes. If a person ignores feelings, they can be led into delusion. If they indulge them and value them for only what they are, they can fall into despair. If they use them and think about them, however, these negative feelings can aid us in our future decision making.

Type of Regrets

Pink and his colleagues launched the World Regrets Project. As part of this project, they have recorded the regrets of over sixteen thousand people over 105 countries. Through analyzing these regrets, Pink has come to believe that while the surface level of many regrets looks different, the regrets share a deep structure. Looking at the deep structure of the regrets, he came up with four main regrets people have: foundation regrets, boldness regrets, moral regrets, and connection regrets.

The first type of regret he discusses is foundation regrets. These regrets concern such actions as not saving enough money for the future and not taking care of one's health. The human need not being met with a foundation regret is a need for stability. This need for stability crosses multiple different facets of human life including the physical and financial lives of people. These "regrets arise from our failures of foresight and conscientiousness." The basis for a lot of these regrets is temporal discounting. In other words, we overvalue the present and undervalue the future. These regrets involve placing too much emphasis on areas where there is no lasting value. One key aspect of foundational regrets is that they compound. This means that small daily choices can add up to large negative effects in the long run. Pink cautions, however, against what he calls the foundation attribution error. If people fall into this erroneous thinking, they are likely to attribute failures to personal faults or decisions. While this may be the case, some of our failures stem from situations outside of our control. The main lesson to be learned from foundation regrets is to plan ahead.

The next type of regret Pink explores is boldness regrets. These regrets arise when we do not take an action that we later wish we had. These regrets could involve a single instance where we did not act boldly, or they can accumulate over a lifetime of small decisions. The main need not being met with boldness regrets is growth. Many people's boldness regrets involve not speaking up when they believe they should have. "The pain of boldness regrets is in the pain of 'what if?'" Pink goes on to explain that people regret inaction more than action. Pink believes this is because when we act, we know what has happened, and we don't have to ask "what if?". The lesson to be learned from boldness regrets is to speak up and take risks.

The third regret Pink discusses is moral regrets. These regrets occur when we do not act according to our belief of what is right and what is wrong. With moral regrets, the need we are deprived of is a feeling of goodness. Moral regrets are difficult to pinpoint because people vary so greatly in their definitions of morality. Only 10% of the deep structure regrets were moral regrets, but when they occurred they were especially painful. Of the regretted moral breaches people expressed regret over, the five greatest were as follows:

1. Harm such as bullying
2. Cheating
3. Disloyalty



The lesson to be learned from moral regrets is to do the right thing.”

4. Subversion or disrespect for authority
5. Desecration which involves regrets about degrading the sanctity of something.

The lesson to be learned from moral regrets is to do the right thing

The final deep structure regret Pink explores is connection regrets. These regrets form when we have failed to maintain connections with people important to us. The human need not being met with these regrets is the need for love. Connection regrets can be broken down into two categories: closed door and open door regrets. Closed door regrets occur when a person has died and no further connection is possible. Open door regrets occur when there is still a possibility to do something about the relationship. Some of these connection regrets occur because of a conscious decision or a rift that occurs. Others occur when people simply drift apart. People, unfortunately, become fearful about fixing connection results because they overestimate how annoyed the other party might be and underestimate the probability that they would welcome the contact. “The lesson of closed doors is to do better next time. The lesson of open doors is to do something now.”

What to Do Now

If regrets are a natural part of human life, what can we do in order to maximize the benefits they can provide to us while minimizing the psychological harm? Pink lays out a two step process. First, we should undo the regrets if possible. “[P]eople are much more likely to undo regrets of action rather than of inaction.” One reason for this might be because action regrets often stem from one harsh incident whereas inaction regrets elicit less extreme and instant emotional discomfort. When looking to undo a regret, a person can offer an apology or try to make current decisions that mitigate the negative effects of past decisions.

Second, we can “at least” the situation. In other words, we can look at the situation and look to see what could be worse if we had performed another action. We can also look for the silver lining in what has occurred. While these will not change our current situation, both can help mitigate the emotional distress we feel when we cannot undo a regret.

There are three things we can do to help ourselves take the feeling of regret, intellectualize it, and turn it into positive action. The first is self-disclosure. When we put feelings into words, we can understand them better and deal with them more effectively. This can be either disclosure to another person or self-disclosure through writing. The phrase Pink uses is “relive and relieve” to discuss the power of self-disclosure.

Next, people need to focus on self-compassion. Pink discusses harm that can come from focusing just on self-esteem. At its worst a focus on self-esteem can lead to narcissism and a lack of empathy. He prefers fostering self-compassion which involves treating ourselves like we would treat other people. If another person messes up, we are often more kind to them than we are to ourselves. He sees a focus on self-compassion as having the benefits but not the drawbacks of focusing on self-esteem.

Finally, he encourages self-distancing. This helps people “analyze and strategize” about their regrets. One way a person can do this is through space, by positioning oneself as a fly on the wall witnessing the regret. The second way to do this is through time. When we do this, we look to the future to determine how we will feel about a regret a month, a year, or even fifty years into the future. The third way to self distance is through language. We can do this by referring to ourselves, in our thoughts, by our first name or by third person pronouns.

Pink’s main warning about regret is to not allow ourselves to dwell too much in anticipatory regret. Looking at how we may or may not feel regret in the future can help us make decisions in the present. If we spend too much of our mental space anticipating regret, however, we can paralyze ourselves. To remedy this, Pink urges us to see if a potential regret would fall into one of the four deep structure categories of foundation: regrets, boldness regrets, moral regrets, or connection regrets. If a certain action could trigger one of these regrets, we should put some time and attention into making the decision. If it does not involve one of the deep structure areas, then we can take the decision less seriously.

Pink has surveyed and analyzed the surveys of thousands of people. From these surveys, he and his colleagues have come to understand the underlying structure of regrets. Understanding these regrets can help people come to peace with their past and make better decisions in the future. Pink offers some concrete ways for how a person can do this. Instead of extolling a “no regrets” lifestyle, a person can then use their actual regrets from the past to form a better future.

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