PSYCHOLOGY & HUMAN NATURE

The Power of Regret

by Daniel H. Pink

Everyone says live with no regrets. Pink says regret, used right, is one of your best teachers.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **Regret is healthy, universal, and useful - feeling is for thinking.**

Everyone capable of mental time travel feels regret. It clarifies what matters and instructs us; the goal is not to ban it but to confront it without wallowing.

02 **Under the surface, nearly all regrets share four deep structures.**

Whatever the topic - family, career, money, health - almost every 'if only' is a foundation, boldness, moral, or connection regret in disguise.

03 **Foundation regrets: 'If only I'd done the work.'**

Skipped savings, study, and health care compound quietly, then hit 'gradually, then suddenly.' Small responsible choices early build the stable platform everything else stands on.

04 **Boldness regrets: 'If only I'd taken that chance.'**

We regret chances not taken far more than chances that failed - in Pink's American Regret Project, inaction regrets outnumbered action regrets nearly two to one.

05 **Moral regrets: 'If only I'd done the right thing.'**

The smallest category, but among the most painful and longest-lasting. Most people want to be good, so when in doubt, do the right thing.

06 **Connection regrets: 'If only I'd reached out.'**

The largest category of all. Relationships rarely explode - they drift. And we overestimate how awkward reaching out will be and underestimate how glad people are to hear from us.

07 **The four regrets are a photographic negative of the good life.**

Read in reverse, they show what humans value most: a stable foundation, chances to grow, being good, and love. Your regrets are a map of the life you actually want.

08 **For a regret about something you did: undo it, or at least it.**

First try to repair the damage - apologize, make amends. If you cannot undo it, 'at least' it: find how it could have been worse and what good still came of it.

09 **Work any regret through disclosure, compassion, and distance.**

Say or write the regret out loud to relieve it. Treat yourself as you would a friend. Then zoom out - view it as a neutral observer - to extract the lesson without the shame.

10 **Do not minimize regret. Optimize it.**

Trying to avoid all future regret backfires - we overestimate how bad regret will feel, and fear of it makes us timid. Satisfice on small decisions and save your care for the big ones.

11 **On decisions that touch the four core regrets, project yourself into the future.**

Ask which choice your future self will thank you for: the one that builds stability, takes a sensible risk, does the right thing, or connects with others. Choose that one.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

Daniel Pink challenges the popular creed of 'no regrets.' Drawing on seventy years of research plus two studies of his own - the American Regret Project, a survey of 4,489 U.S. adults, and the World Regret Survey, which collected more than 16,000 regrets from people in 105 countries - he shows that regret is one of the most common emotions humans feel, and one of the most useful when handled well. His motto: feeling is for thinking.

Regret runs on counterfactuals - the mind's ability to imagine what might have been. 'If only' thinking stings now but teaches for later; 'at least' thinking comforts now but rarely improves anything. Over a lifetime, the balance tilts clearly: people regret what they did not do far more than what they did, because action regrets can be explained and repaired while inaction regrets stay open forever.

Beneath the surface topics, almost every regret fits one of four core types. Foundation regrets come from failing to do the work - saving, studying, caring for your health. Boldness regrets come from playing it safe instead of growing. Moral regrets come from doing the wrong thing. Connection regrets, the largest group, come from letting relationships drift. Together the four form a photographic negative of the good life: stability, growth, goodness, and love.

The final part of the book is a toolkit. For regrets of action, undo them if you can - apologize, make amends - and if you cannot, 'at least' them. For any regret, use self-disclosure, self-compassion, and self-distancing to turn pain into instruction. And for the future, use his Regret Optimization Framework: satisfice on trivial decisions, but on choices touching the four core regrets, project yourself forward and pick the option that builds foundation, boldness, goodness, or connection.

DO THIS WEEK

This week, name one connection that has drifted - a friend or family member you miss. Pink's research says you are overestimating the awkwardness and underestimating how glad they will be to hear from you. Send one short, warm message today, like 'I was thinking of you and wanted to say hi.'

By Daniel H. Pink, first published 2022 (full title: 'The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward'). Read it if you want to turn past mistakes into a guide for better decisions and fewer regrets ahead.