

Resolving Regret

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(Handout for the video training: “Resolving Regret,” 87 min, including demonstration)

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What is Regret? Before we attempt to resolve regret, it is important to clarify exactly what “regret” is, and distinguish it from other related or overlapping feelings or emotions. The dictionary definition of regret is: “to remember with pain or longing.” Since someone can remember *any* event with pain or longing, the word “regret” could be applied to a very wide range of events.

However, if you just ask someone to think of something they regret, most people have no trouble coming up with an appropriate experience. Usually it is one in which they either *did* something they now wish they hadn’t done, or they *didn’t* do something they now wish they had. We can regret either an *action* or an *inaction*, (or both). Regret presupposes that we could have done something different.

However, the word “regret” is a nominalization with fuzzy edges that can overlap into disappointment, sadness, grief, remorse or guilt. Some even think that it can indicate shame, embarrassment, annoyance, or depression. Of course one can feel regret *about* being ashamed or embarrassed, etc., but that is different from saying that regret *includes* those experiences (This is a logical level distinction).

Some people use the word “regret” for events over which they had no control. However, if we assume that the word regret only applies to events in which the person could have taken some action, it would be more accurate to use the word “sadness” “disappointment” or “grief” for those events, and use “regret” *only* for events in which the person could have taken some action, and has some responsibility for what happened.

Remorse can be understood as very intense “bitter” regret. The word remorse originates from the Latin *remordere*, “to bite again.” (Wasn’t once enough?)

Regret often overlaps with guilt, whenever an action or inaction also harmed someone else. However, many people regret events that *only* harmed themselves, and had little or no impact on others. So the word regret can be best applied to an action—or inaction—that had a negative impact on the person themselves, and use the word “guilt” for those actions or inactions that harmed others. Since guilt also requires personal responsibility, “survivor’s guilt” in which someone had no responsibility for the harm done to those who did not survive, is an inappropriate use of the word “guilt,” which also requires that the person could have done something about it.

From the above, we can summarize the essential aspects of regret:

1. Someone had an opportunity to act (or not),
2. The act (or failure to act) affected them,
3. The consequences of the act (or failure to act) violated their own values, outcomes or goals.
4. They felt bad in response to this.

To summarize, ***regret is a unpleasant feeling resulting from thinking about***

some action or inaction that had a negative impact on the person themselves.

Given the foregoing definition, how could you work with someone troubled by regret? What NLP methods or understandings could you use to resolve regret?

“For of all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these: ‘It might have been.’ ”
—John Greenleaf Whittier

Introduction This is a preliminary draft outline, to be reviewed further, and probably modified and expanded. These processes are based to a large extent on research by Thomas Gilovich and Victoria Medvec, authors of the clearest and most useful and comprehensive psychology articles I have ever read!

1. “The Experience of Regret: what, when, and why.” *Psychological Review*, 1995, Vol. 102, No. 2, pp. 379-395.

2. “The Temporal Pattern to the Experience of Regret” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1994, Vol 67, No. 3, pp. 357-365.

Overall Frame: Since we make hundreds of decisions every day, and we can’t be right in all our decisions, regret is inevitable when things turn out differently than we hoped or expected. Most of us have many regrets that don’t bother us, but we may have some that still make us feel bad, and intrude and interfere with our living. Regret has several different aspects, and a given person may have already attained balance with some of them, while others may still be unresolved. Accordingly there are several different possible interventions that may be useful, depending on which aspect(s) is (are) unresolved.

You can simply try out the processes below, either with yourself or someone else, and find out how you experience them, unbiased by preconceptions. But if you would prefer to have more background understanding about regret first, you could read the “Discussion” section that begins on page 6 of this handout.

A. Preliminary Balancing Intervention

This can be very useful as an initial “large chunk” intervention to bring some overall balance (at a high logical level) as a prelude to doing any or all of the more specific and detailed balancing interventions (at lower logical levels) that follow. This is particularly useful if someone is very upset or self-judgmental.

1. **Regret** “Think of the decision that you still regret—whether it is something that you did or didn’t do. Notice how you represent that experience in an image. . . .”

Now set aside this image of regret temporarily. . . .”

2. **Satisfactory decisions** “Think of six decisions or actions that you are very satisfied with, one at a time, and notice how you represent each of these experiences in an image, and the good feelings that you experience in response to each. . . .”

3. **Set up** “Place your images of these six satisfactory decisions in a circle of fairly large circles in front of you, leaving an empty circle of the same size in the center. . . .”

4 **Integrate** “Now place your image of the decision you currently regret, into the open circle in the center, and make sure that it is in the same plane as the other images. Look at all seven images together as a group, and find out how this changes your

feelings. . . .”

“Looking back, I have this to regret, that too often when I loved, I did not say so.”

— George Bernard Shaw

Gathering information about structure (content free)

1. **Identify regret** Think of a regret, a decision that that makes you feel bad when you think of it now, or that interferes with your life in some other way. . . .

2. **Did do, or Didn't do?** When you think about this regret, is it primarily about something you *did* do, or something that you *didn't* do? (It can also be both, but usually someone will attend primarily to one or the other.)

3. **Contrastive Analysis** Now think about a regret of the same type (*did* do or *didn't* do (or both) that you *don't* feel bad about; you may still regret it, but you have a feeling of neutrality or balance when you think of it. Compare these two experiences in all sensory modalities and submodalities, in order to determine the structure of each. Pay particular attention to the location of images in your personal space, the scope of experience, the time frame, and any other key differences between the representations of these two regrets. . . .

This information about structure can be used to change the experience of regret directly, as in the first intervention below, or it can be used to test the effectiveness of other interventions. For instance, the image of regret is often close and large, while balanced regret is distant and small. If you do an intervention, and the image of regret spontaneously moves farther away and becomes smaller, that indicates that it has been changed in a useful way.

Alternative Interventions

A. **“Map across” submodalities** Change the representation of the unpleasant regret so that it matches the structure of the balanced regret. This may require adding in images of other experiences in order to balance the regret, and you may need to satisfy objections to doing this.

B. A conversational process

“Can you think of something you did that you greatly regretted at the time, and some time later you realized with relief that what you wanted to have happen would have been a dreadful mistake? . . . (pause for access) . . .

“Can you imagine that at some future time you might have the same kind of realization about what you now regret? . . . (pause for response) . . .

(If they respond with, “I know that won't happen!” ask them, “Can I see your fortune-telling license.”)

“What kind of information would allow you to have that change of perspective from regret to relief right now? . . . (pause for access) . . .

“Imagine that you actually did get that kind of information, now, and experience what that is like. . . .”

“Thinking about that decision now, notice any useful or positive consequences that have happened in your life because you made the choice you did. . . .”

(Even when this sequence doesn't bring resolution, it provides at least a momentary experience, within the "as if" frame, of how a change in information can resolve regret, and it is likely to elicit useful information—including objections—which will be useful in choosing and carrying out further interventions.)

"Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a wonderful stroke of luck." —The Dalai Lama

C. Identify and future-pace learnings

1. **Elicit Learning** Review that action or inaction to find out what you can learn from it. "What else can you learn about this regret that could be useful in guiding you in acting more appropriately and resourcefully in the future? . . ."

"What values would have been satisfied if you had acted differently in that situation? . . . Let's assume for a moment that particular opportunity is no longer available. How could you satisfy those same values in your life right now and in the immediate future?" For instance, you regretted not being more honest in past relationships; how could you be more honest in your current relationships?

2. **Rehearse** "Imagine actually using your learnings to satisfy your values in a similar future situation, notice what you do differently as a result, and find out how well that works. . . ."

3. **Commit** "Make a definite commitment to apply one or more of these learnings in several imagined situations in the near future, at a specific time or place. . . ."

This redirects attention from what *can't* be done in the *past*, to what *can* be done in the *present* or *future*.

D. Take corrective action

1. **Action** "What could you do now or in the immediate future, to remedy the situation you regret, or at least make it better, in the real world?" If your regret is about something that you didn't do, perhaps you could still do it, or something like it, do something that would satisfy the same values, etc. For instance, you regret not having exercised in the past, what kind of exercise could you do now? . . .

2. **Rehearse** "Imagine actually taking one or more corrective actions in the near future, to find out how well that works. . . ."

3. **Commit** "Make a definite commitment to take one or more of the corrective actions you have considered in the near future at a specific time and place. . . ." This redirects attention from what *can't* be done in the *past*, to what *can* be done in the *future*.

To resolve regret ecologically, it is important to carefully examine if what you regret "missing out on" is actually something worth wanting, i.e. worth regretting. Often what you didn't do—learn a language, or how to play a musical instrument, go to college, etc.—would have required a large commitment of time and effort, and this would also have required *not* doing many other things that you value and enjoy. You didn't do it then because you chose to do other things that were more important to you instead.

It can also be helpful to bring the real choice involved into the present, and get clear on what you really value most, by asking the question, "Could I still do X now?" and "Do I want to do X now?" "Why or why not?" Often you *could* still do what you

didn't do, but other things continue to be more important to you. Changing the time frame from the past to the present makes it clear when this is simply a matter of your priorities and choices now, rather than a lost opportunity in the past. It could be useful to carefully reexamine your priorities now, and find out if you want to choose differently. Either way, it is no longer regret about what you can't undo.

"When one door closes, another opens; but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us."

—Alexander Graham Bell

E. *Balancing positives and negatives in the situation that you regret*

This intervention is divided into two alternatives, depending on the client's focus of attention, but the fundamental process is the same—to create balance by eliciting what is *not* attended to, and integrating it with what is *already* attended to.

Alternative A (something you *did* do)

Regret about what you did do results from the unwanted consequences. These consequences are usually actual, known, specific, and finite. Since most people are focused on these, they tend *not* to notice the benefits that resulted from the same decision, causing imbalance. The five steps below are different ways to regain balance; even when the earlier steps don't bring change, they lay a foundation for later steps that do.

1. ***Elicit and integrate the benefits of what you did.*** Think of several different *benefits* that resulted from that same action you regret, one by one. These benefits could either be tangible benefits in the real world around you, including other opportunities that became available to you as a result of the action you took. Or it could be some useful changes in yourself or your thinking. For instance, one result might have been that it motivated you to be much more careful in making decisions, and this avoided problems later. . . .

Now place your images of these benefits *together with* your images of the unpleasant consequences, and find out if that changes your feeling response to that event. . . .

2. ***Elicit and integrate the possible unpleasant consequences of what you wish you had done.*** Think of several possible *unpleasant consequences* of what you wish you had done instead. As above, this could include consequences in the real world, or some useful impact on you as a person. . . .

Now put these unpleasant images together with the pleasant images of what you wish you had done, and find out if that changes your feeling response to that event. . . .

3. ***Integrate the benefits.*** Now put together your images of the benefits of what you actually did, and the benefits of what you wish you had done, and find out if that changes your feeling response to that event. . . .

4. ***Integrate the unpleasant consequences.*** Next put together your images of the unpleasant consequences of what you actually did, and the possible unpleasant consequences of what you wish you had done, and find out if that changes your feeling response to that event. . . .

5. ***Integrate the benefits and unpleasant consequences of both what you did and what you wish you had done.*** In a large grid made of four squares, straight in front of you, place your images of the benefits and unpleasant consequences of what you did

do and what you wish you had done, and notice if that changes your feeling response to that event. . . .

“A man is not old until regrets take the place of dreams.”

—John Barrymore

Alternative B (something you *didn't* do)

When regret results from something that you *didn't* do, the regret results from imagining the lost opportunity, and all the desirable consequences that you think would have happened if you had done it. These consequences are usually hypothetical, invented, vague, and potentially infinite. Since there is no limit to the wonderful things that someone can imagine, this representation can be very extensive, is often idealized, and may become more elaborate over time. Most people don't think of any of the many things that could have gone *wrong* if they had taken that action, causing imbalance. The five steps below are different ways to regain balance; even when the earlier steps don't bring change, they lay a foundation for later steps that do.

1. ***Elicit and integrate the potential unpleasant consequences of what you wish you had done.*** Think of several different *unpleasant consequences* that could have resulted from what you wish you had done, and notice how you represent them, in both modalities and submodalities. . . .

Now place your images of these unpleasant consequences *together with* your images of the benefits of what you wish you had done, and find out if that changes your feeling response to that event. . . .

2. ***Elicit and integrate the benefits of what you actually did.*** Think of several benefits that resulted from what you actually did, including the desirable opportunities that made possible. . . .

Now put your images of these benefits together with the unpleasant consequences of what you did, and find out if that changes your feeling response to that event. . . .

3. ***Integrate the benefits.*** Now put your images of the benefits of what you actually did together with your images of the benefits of what you wish you had done, and find out if that changes your feeling response to that event. . . .

4. ***Integrate the unpleasant consequences.*** Next put your images of the unpleasant consequences of what you actually did together with your images of the unpleasant consequences of what you wish you had done, and find out if that changes your feeling response to that event. . . .

5. ***Integrate the benefits and the unpleasant consequences of both what you wish you had done and what you did.*** In a large grid made of four squares in front of you, place your images of the benefits and unpleasant consequences of what you did and wish you had done, and find out if that changes your feeling response to that event. . . .

Discussion

Modern pluralistic societies have *far* more choices than traditional monolithic societies, so we have many more opportunities to choose poorly and regret it—and the future will likely bring even more choices and opportunities! There are many aspects of regret that are very helpful to understand in order to work skillfully and thoroughly with the basic patterns described above.

Many people experience a “trade off” between their professional career and personal relationships; those who spent more time on one, often regret not spending more time on the other. This points out a very important fact that many people tend to ignore in regard to regret: *Every* decision you make, and *every* action you take, opens the door to certain opportunities, and closes the door on others. *Every* action implies a corresponding inaction, and vice versa. Accordingly, even an action that turns out well requires foregoing alternate choices that might have turned out even better. Some people who make excellent choices nevertheless torture themselves by thinking about alternatives that *could have* been even better, always regretting what they did!

Actions and inactions There are a number of very significant differences between regret about *actions* and *inactions*, which are useful to understand. All the broad generalizations below—except for comments regarding submodalities—are backed up by research by Gilovich and Medvec, referenced above. Men and women do not differ significantly in regard to any of the statements below, and all these generalizations will have important exceptions. Even when the generalizations are wrong, the *principles* underlying them will still be valid, and they can alert you to aspects that you might otherwise ignore, and guide you in what you may need to do to adapt the interventions described above.

When asked about their *biggest* regret, approximately 75% of people think of something that they *didn't* do. There is a tendency for older people to regret inactions somewhat more than younger people, presumably because older people are likely to have fewer future opportunities to take action.

1. *Specific event vs. category of events*

Regret about an *action* tends to be about a *specific event* in a *small* scope of time. “I wish I hadn't gotten drunk and made a fool of myself.” It is usually very clear what to do different in the future, and what kind of corrective action would be appropriate.

Regret about *inaction* is often about a *category* of events, and often involves *self-development*: failure to study, travel, learn a sport, etc. that would have required a much larger scope in time, and would have taken much more effort. For instance, “I wish I had spent more time with my children” would have required *many* actions at many different times, and this would have required *not* doing a wide range of other activities that you did do. Some inactions are truly lost opportunities in a limited time frame, but many would require a much longer commitment of time and effort. When the inaction *could* still be corrected later in life, the “regret” may actually be about continued inaction in the *present* rather than the past, and it is likely to be thought of more often. This is the basis for refocusing attention to the present, described in the latter part of intervention D. “You could still do this; what stops you from taking corrective action *now*?” Exploring the inaction in the *present* can be much more useful than reviewing it in the past.

2. *Specific motive vs. categorical motive*

The motive or cause for an *action* is usually specific, concrete and easily understood: frustration, anger, lust, tunnel vision, etc.

The motive for an *inaction* is usually much more general, categorical, and harder to understand or justify later: fear of the unknown, inhibition, lack of self-confidence, etc.

3. *Intensity of feeling*

Regret about something you *did* do tends to be more intense immediately after the

event, because the unpleasant consequences are represented in the intense submodalities of “reality” that are close in time (big, bright, close, etc.), and because we are more likely to attend to unpleasant consequences than pleasant ones.

Regret about something you *didn't* do tends to be less intense immediately after the event, because the pleasant consequences are usually represented in submodalities of “unreality” (distant, transparent, blurred, faded etc.) typical of something that is lost.

4. *Corrective action to reduce or eliminate regret*

People are more likely to take corrective action in regard to something they did do, because of the greater intensity of feeling, because it is clearer what the corrective action would be, and because the corrective action usually would be easier to accomplish because it would take relatively little time and effort. The passage of time often makes it less possible to take corrective action, and this tends to be true for both action and inaction.

5. *Change of intensity with time*

Regret about something you *did* do tends to *decrease* with the passage of time, as the memory becomes more distant and faded, and because corrective action is easier to take and is more often taken.

Regret about something you *didn't* do often *increases* with the passage of time, as you think of *additional* benefits that might have resulted from the missed opportunity. As you compare your idealized images of “what might have been” with the reality of what you did do, you are much more likely to notice problems or unpleasant consequences in your present reality than in the missed opportunity.

The passage of time tends to create dissociation, which decreases the perceived effort that would have been required by the alternative to an inaction, and time also tends to minimize the perceived intensity of the motive for the inaction, increasing regret. “It would have been easy to overcome my hesitation and do that; why didn't I just do it?”

6. *Attention to benefits and problems*

People are much less likely to notice the benefits that resulted from an action, and much less likely to think of the problems that might have resulted from an inaction, causing imbalance. In particular, they are less likely to notice the “opportunity costs” that would have been necessary if they had taken a different action—the time, the effort, and foregone opportunities that would have been required by that alternate choice.

Summary

Resolving regret is a matter of finding out how someone is unbalanced in how they are attending to:

1. Their *actions* and *inactions*, and how they are “two sides of the same coin.”
2. The *benefits* and *unpleasant consequences* of each,
3. The *past* rather the *present* and *future*.

Eliciting and attending to what the person is ignoring, and then putting those images *together* with what they are already attending to, creates integration, and brings balance. Finally, future-pacing all these understandings to *future* decisions and actions can minimize regret in the future.

“Knowing the ways in which evaluations of events are likely to be different in the future than they are now, allows one to bring a bit of the future to the present, and

therefore enables one to make current decisions (to venture forth or to hold back) with an increased awareness of both temporal perspectives.”

—Thomas Gilovich and Victoria Medvec, (1, p. 394)

“Twenty years from now, you’ll regret the things you didn’t do, rather than the things you did do. So cast off the bow lines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.” — Mark Twain

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