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**Beyond Regret: Letting Go, Stepping Up, Moving Onwards**  
By Avil Beckford

If you could turn back the *hands of time* and make amends for an earlier mistake, a major one, would you? And, have you been fixated on this mistake, perhaps had many sleepless nights over it? Judging by the amount of research conducted on regret over the years, these questions should not be taken lightly. The ability to disengage from regrets, especially as we grow older, is paramount since research by Dr. Carsten Wrosch and Dr. Isabelle Bauer from Concordia University revealed that holding on to regrets can affect health.

“Regrets are a double-edged sword,” says Wrosch. “They can instigate adaptive behaviors aimed at changing issues that people are unsatisfied with. However, when people hold on too long to regretted events that they can no longer change, regrets may elicit psychological distress and increase cortisol secretion, thereby making a person more vulnerable to developing physical illness,” he adds.

Regret, a feeling of deep sorrow over an option that was or was not taken some time in the past, implies a fault in personal action. Self recrimination is a component of regret: you should have done it differently.

#### About The Author

Avil Beckford is an accomplished writer, researcher, and analyst with over 15 years experience. Her strong service orientation, dedication to learning and exploring new ways of improving her own life as well as the many she touches, has underpinned her success to date.

A published author, her new book, *Tales of People Who Get It* is a culmination of her life experience. It has often been said of Avil that her life informs her work. She has also created a companion workbook *Journey to Getting It*.

Avil’s many readers look forward to Ambeck Edge, her company’s regular e-Newsletter that is a rich resource those interested in self-improvement, as well as those professionals who struggle with life issues.

To understand what people regret most, and why, Neal J. Roese and Amy Summerville from the University of Illinois analyzed 11 studies that ranked people’s regret and found that the top six biggest regrets in life for Americans center on, in descending order, education, career, romance, parenting, self-improvement, and leisure. The study also revealed that regrets of inaction last longer than regrets of action in part because they reflect greater perceived opportunity.

During the long research required for my book *Tales of People Who Get It*, I asked thirty-four highly accomplished individuals from Canada, the United States, Switzerland, Sweden, Jamaica and South Africa “What is a major regret that you have had in life?” Their responses reflect the different perspectives on regret. Here are some of their responses:

- “My career has been good to me, but there have been opportunities to move outside the company. I have asked myself what would have

happened if I had worked for one firm for 10 to 15 years and then moved on to another and experienced a different environment...

- If I have a regret, it would be striking a better balance between fact finding and decision making
- If there is anything that I regret, is that I really didn't understand earlier in my career the kinds of situations that would allow me to flourish, and the importance of aligning my interests with my strengths
- My biggest regret is my lack of formal education. I have an honours degree in history and an honorary doctorate. I wish that I had at least a Masters degree
- Probably not doing my PhD, I would really love to do that. If I won a million dollars today, the first thing that I would do is my PhD
- My major regret in life is not realizing sooner that life is about how you work, deal and interact with other human beings. Before I figured this out, I treated people I worked with and those on the streets with unkindness and inconsideration
- People who are sitting in their offices at 10:00 p.m. trying to finish a report that is so important, should ask themselves if five years from now if they are going to have any recollection of what was so important about the report
- There are two regrets that I have in life. The first I am resolving this year, and it's that I have never traveled.... The second regret is that I have never had a long-term relationship...
- I believe we only regret the things in life we DON'T do, not the things we do
- I have NO regrets...not a single one. Everything that has happened to me, every decision that I have made, has led me to where I am now...
- My religion is to live and die without any regret. In life the way I look at it is that I have zero regret. I live my life the way I imagine it would be if I knew it was my last day
- No regrets! I've been blessed with a unique life -- from childhood up until now. If I did have any, they are all gone by now -- they've disappeared from my memory."

Two years later, revisiting the data with more evolved eyes, and the wisdom that comes through the passage of time, I have made the following observations:

- The major regrets in life center on career/business, education, relationships, and the self (having the confidence to trust their instincts and being wiser when younger)
- Over 30 percent of interviewees either have no regrets, or review regrettable events as lessons learned and opportunities disguised
- 84 percent of people who had a major regret, were sorry for things that they had not done
- Only men had regrets about their education: furthering their education, studying harder and paying closer attention to what they studied
- Some interviewees used their regrets as a catalyst for change in their lives
- People with purposeful goals have no regrets because they do what's important to them
- Individuals came to terms with their regrets, either by rectifying the situation or by simply letting go

### **The problem with regret**

Regret holds us back from being the best we can be. Instead of living in the moment, time is spent ruminating about what could have been.

The people in my research who indicated that they have no regrets have unique ways at looking at life, which is beneficial to all. Bad things happen to everyone, but it is the way that we view the situation, that determines whether to regret or not to regret. Here are some views on why we should not regret:

- “Would there be things that I would do differently if I had to do it over? I look back at my life and everything that happened, and there was always a reason behind it. I just know that whatever happens was meant to happen. It is for my higher good, it is for me to move forward to the next chapter of my life
- Things go wrong that I regret, but when I look back with perspective I do not ever regret anything. No matter what it is, I realize that there is something potent to take from the experience
- I have done everything that I set out to do and more... I also teach what I have learned
- All of life comes with its highs and its lows. It's not possible to have your highs without your lows. So I can't think of any regrets, because for me the lows in my life, enriched and strengthened me to achieve my highs

- If I look back on my life and everything that has happened, I can't really say that I would have done anything differently than what I have done. I don't dwell on things that went badly, I tend to look forward and say that everyone has good and bad things happen to them
- I believe that every experience has honed and shaped me to be the person that I am today
- You always think about what might have been, but I have learned to go with the cards that I have been dealt.”

If you have regrets, how do you let go or simply undo them? A compilation of strategies harvested from several regret research studies (including mine) presented below can help anyone to reduce the pang of regret.

### **Some Key Strategies to Reduce the Pang of Regret**

- Write about your regrets - journaling helps you to release them
- Set purposeful goals in life so that you are working toward the things that are most meaningful and important to you
- Compare your regrets with your peers - thinking that other people have regrets that are as severe, or more severe than your own helps you to put them into perspective and let them go
- Undo the regret if it was an inaction that did not have a final outcome (For example you regret that you did not learn to play the piano, take lessons now even though you may be too old to be a concert pianist, you could still entertain family and friends)
- Re-evaluate the outcome of the regret and focus on the lessons learned
- Use the regrettable event as a catalyst for change
- Before making decisions, especially major ones, gather as much information as possible, look at the pros and cons, then make your decision. This process reduces the chances for feelings of regret
- When you are making a decision, project into the future and ask yourself if you would regret any of your choices. Based on your response choose accordingly
- Make a habit of living in the moment, a pre-existing tendency to dwell upon missed opportunities can lead to more regrets

The Regret Scorecard found on the next page makes you aware of your present situation about any regrets that you may have. After you have taken the test and rated yourself, there is a more comprehensive assessment, the Regret Disengagement Worksheet, which will help you to undo or let go of your regrets.

There is no quick fix to disengaging from your regrets, and you may need to seek professional medical advice. But these self-assessments are tools that can move you in the right direction. Before starting, it is important to keep in mind that to get maximum benefit, you do need to be as honest with yourself as you possibly can to make the exercises really work. Investing your time and energy on these exercises requires commitment.

## Regret Scorecard

To help you clearly understand your current situation, try the Regret Scorecard. Rate your reactions to each pair of phrases. Decide where you lie on the scale from 1 to 10. Add up your total from each column.

I am completely dissatisfied with the choices I have made in my life	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I am completely satisfied with the choices I have made in life
I am no where close to where I thought I would be in life	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I am exactly where I thought I would be in life
I am completely unhappy with where I am in my life right now	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I am completely happy with where I am in my life right now
I wish the events that were beyond my control had happened differently	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	The events that were beyond my control have made me the unique person I am today
I feel great sorrow when I make poor choices in life	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I always look at the lessons learned when I make poor choices in life
If given the choice, I would take a completely different path in life	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	If given the choice, I would do exactly what I have done in my life
When regrettable events occur in my life I hold on to them	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	When regrettable events occur in my life I easily let them go
I always blame myself when things go wrong	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I never blame myself, but instead evaluate the situation to do better next time
I spend a lot of time thinking if only...	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I never spend time thinking if only...
I always feel pain and despair when I look back on my life	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	I never feel pain and despair when I look back on my life
ADD COLUMN TOTALS											YOUR SCORE _____

If you scored 80 or above, you have a positive outlook on life and are able to easily disengage from regrets. If you scored between 50 and 80, you need to do some work. If you scored under 50, it's time to re-evaluate your life and work on letting go of the things you regret.

The Regret Disengagement Test helps you to live a life with little or no regrets. **To purchase the assessment and take concrete action click here.**

**For more ideas**, and if you love stories, read the responses of the 34 people profiled in *Tales of People Who Get It* <http://stores.lulu.com/store.php?fAcctID=670937>.

Be sure to check out Avil Beckford's website at <http://www.ambeck.com>

Check out Ambeck Edge newsletter archive or access other white papers at <http://www.ambeck.com/resources.html>

**To learn more about regret** refer to the following articles:

Zeelenberg, Marcel & Pieters, Rik (2007). A Theory of Regret Regulation 1.0. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 17(1), 3-18

van Harreveld, Frenk, van der Pligt, Joop & Loran Nordgren (2008). The relativity of bad decisions: Social comparison as a means to alleviate regret. *British Journal of Social Psychology* (2008), 47, 105-117

Roese, Neal J. & Summerville, Amy. University of Illinois. What We Regret Most . . . and Why. *PSPB*, Vol. 31 No. 9, September 2005 1273-1285