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The Bright Side of a Negatively Perceived Emotion:
Examining the Positive Attributes of Regret,
Types of Regret, and its Beneficial Outcomes

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Abstract

The concept of regret has been widely stigmatized in the sense of its negative implication, which has led to its widespread avoidance. Despite existing literature that promotes regret avoidance along with its common unconstructive perception, this paper posits the notion that regret is an emotion that has positive functionality and can bare beneficial outcomes. Furthermore, this paper provides several definitions for regret, describes regret as an emotion relative to similar emotions, as well as explores the different types of regret—anticipated, non-experienced and experienced and regret.

Battling the Old Adage

The notion for one to live life to the fullest and have little to no regret is an adage toward which most people strive. “No regrets, right?”... is a commonly used rhetorical phrase that is often uttered when referring to particular life-altering situations or turning points; such as right before one jumps out of an airplane, before one decides to enter matrimonial bliss, or right before one goes under the needle for their first tattoo. “No use crying over spilled milk” is another regret-inhibiting expression that is widely utilized to instill the notion of regretting being a waste of time. Thus, it’s a common belief for one to avoid the act of regret throughout his/her life. After all, who wants to spend their time living in the past, surrounding themselves with fantasies of what they could have, should have or shouldn’t have done? Furthermore, what kind of life would it be for one to never wander outside of his/her comfort zone for the mere fear of a future decision that could lead to a consequence for which he/she may regret? These questions paint a rather ill-fated hypothetical scenario for an individual in which regret is negatively portrayed as an unwanted emotion.

On the positive side of the spectrum, regret can also be argued to have certain qualities that can be deemed beneficial. This paper will examine both the negative and positive aspects of regret, as well as make a case for more light to be shed on the bright side of regret. In doing this, this paper will provide several definitions for regret, describe regret as an emotion relative to similar emotions—guilt and depression, as well as explore the different types of regret—anticipated, non-experienced and experienced regret.