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MIND

The New Year's Cocktail: Regret With a Dash of Bitters

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The ideal New Year's Eve party would come with a psychological voucher, redeemable the next day for a post-mortem session with friends. A chance to relish the night's humiliations, take bets on who went home with whom, and nominate the guest most in need of therapy, present company included.

An opportunity, that is, to forestall the traditional morning-after descent into self-examination, that lonely echo chamber of what should and could be.

Ghosts roam around down there, after all, and they are the worst kind — alternate versions of oneself. The one who did not quit graduate school, for instance. The one who made the marriage work. Or stuck with singing, playwriting or painting and made a career of it.

Lost possible selves, some [psychologists](#) call them. Others are more blunt: the person you could have been.

Over the past decade and a half, psychologists have studied how regrets — large and small, recent and distant — affect people's mental well-being. They have shown, convincingly though not surprisingly, that ruminating on paths not taken is an emotionally corrosive exercise. The common wisdom about regret — that what hurts the most is not what you did but what you didn't do — also appears to be true, at least in the long run.

Yet it is partly from studies of lost possible selves that psychologists have come to a more complete understanding of how regret molds personality. These studies, in people recently divorced and those caring for a sick child, among others, suggest that it is possible to entertain idealized versions of oneself without being mocked or shamed. And they suggest that doing so may serve an important psychological purpose.

Researchers find that people think about past foul-ups or missed opportunities in several ways. Some tend to fixate and are at an elevated risk for mood problems. Others have learned to ignore regrets and seem to live more lighthearted, if less-examined, lives. In between are those who walk carefully through the minefield of past choices, gamely digging up traps and doing what they can to defuse the live ones.

A 2003 study at Concordia University in Montreal and the University of California, Irvine, for instance, suggested that young adults who scored high on measures of psychological well-being tended to think of regretted decisions as all their own — perhaps because they still had time to change course. By contrast, older people who scored highly tended to share blame for their regretted decisions. "I tried to reach out to him, but the effort wasn't returned."

With age, people apparently detoxified their regrets by reframing them as shared misunderstandings, a retrospective touching-up that in many cases might have been more accurate.

In a series of studies, Laura A. King, a psychologist at the [University of Missouri](#), has had people write down a description of their future as they imagined it before a life-altering event, like divorce. She has found that those who are able to talk or write about this lost future without sinking into despair or losing hope tend to have developed another quality, called complexity.

Complexity reflects an ability to incorporate various points of view into a recollection, to vividly describe the circumstances, context and other dimensions. It is the sort of trait that would probably get you killed instantly in a firefight; but in the mental war of attrition through middle age and after, its value only increases.

Here is how a woman from Dallas described the impact of an early and devastating divorce, in one of Dr. King's studies:

"I feel fortunate in a backhanded way to have experienced misfortune as a young woman. I feel it taught me humility ... and the ability to regroup. ... Life is good but not lavish. It's hard work and we have to give each other a hand once in a while."

Another woman in the same study, who had scored lower on a measure of complexity, described her life after divorce: "What good is anything without someone to share it with? My current goal is only to make enough money to make my monthly bills without withdrawing money from my savings account."

Dr. King has followed groups of people for years and found that this knack for self-evaluation develops over time; it is a learned ability. "To elaborate on loss, to look for some insight in it, is not just what a psychologically mature person does," Dr. King said. "It's how a person matures. That's what the studies show."

Good therapists have long known the value of seeing regretted choices in the context of what has been gained as well as lost. A full-blown career in dance leaves little time for a family, or much else. The reverse is also true, of course. Starting a family with that perfect someone at age 22 makes it hard to tour South America with a guitar on your back. And was he really so perfect?

"The idea is move people away from this element of resentment, the sense that if only my parents this or I had done that, I would have what I want," said Dr. Gary Kennedy, director of geriatric [psychiatry](#) at [Montefiore Medical Center](#) in the Bronx. "That's a dead end."

Even the perspective from which people remember slights or mistakes can affect the memories' emotional impact, new research suggests. A recent Columbia study found that reimagining painful scenes from a third-person point of view, as if seeing oneself in a movie, blunted their emotional sting and facilitated precisely the sort of clearheaded self-perception that Dr. King described.

Widen the screen just a little, in fact, and a particularly prominent and disturbing lost self can be seen as merely one guest in a room full of permutations, good and bad. And each of those selves must have an idealized doppelgänger of its own.

Granted, it may be hard to make the case that one of those is the person capsized on the couch, recovering from last year's last party. But give it a few days. Ghost-busting is possible, but best done without a hangover.