

# Letting Go of the Past

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All of us at some time, have probably had a difficult time letting go of the past because we have been held back by some unfinished business. We may regret choices we have made or feel guilty about our past actions. As long as regret and guilt are unresolved, it is difficult to move forward. As we look into the New Year, it is important that we do it through resolution of the past.

Regret is an emotion that feels similar to depression or sadness. It also feels like guilt, but it isn't the same thing. Sometimes a wave of regret seems to come out of nowhere. We must be careful that the older we get, we are not consumed by regret. "Youth is a blunder, Manhood a struggle; Old Age a regret." (Disraeli). We might become aware of it when we lose something or someone, or when we meet someone from our past. It is a common feeling in our culture for several reasons.

First, we have too many choices. Since we have so many options, there are many more opportunities to regret the paths we *didn't* take. Second, there are endless possibilities. Another factor causing many of us to feel regret is that in the American culture, there is a belief that life has no limits. Our culture has an insatiable appetite for new experiences, adventure, and newness. When faced with the reality that certain things will not work out or change, we can find it hard to accept. Third, there seem to be no rules. Along with all of these options, our lives have become confusing because there are few guidelines for what choices we should make in career or relationship paths.

Fourth, we value self-sufficiency. Our American culture has always valued independence. Somehow, we all get the message that it is better if we achieve our goals on our own, without the help of anyone else. The problem is that when we cannot accept support from others, we become isolated. Living a completely self-sufficient life violates the basic human need for relationship.

Fifth, we expect instant gratification. Many people escape the pressures of daily life through drugs and alcohol. There are messages everywhere suggesting that we can use alcohol and drugs to relax, escape, have fun, and be sexy. When this becomes a lifestyle, it often results in consequences that one can only regret: drunk driving, accidents, death and injury, relationship problems, poor attendance at work, or being fired.

The sixth regret is constant comparisons. When we compare our lives with others, it's easy to feel regret. Most of us expect ourselves to have it all together. We learn to act as if we are in control and compare ourselves with our friends, coworkers, neighbors, and the characters on television. When we don't look as good as they do, we may feel like failures. We have a list of "shoulds" inside our heads-things we expect ourselves to be able to do. When these have not been done we can experience guilt that also can hold us back from moving on in life.

If we want to move beyond the things in the past that are keeping us stuck-our own unfinished business-we will need to acknowledge them and tell the truth about them. We may not necessarily have to take any action; sometimes just writing or talking about it is enough to lessen its impact. We can write about it in a private journal or talk about it with a trusted friend or counselor. Here are some places to look for our unfinished business to unstick ourselves from bondages of the past: risks I should have taken; people I treated badly; people who treated me badly; something I did to someone; not doing something I should have done; messes I need to clean up; things I should throw away; projects I've started but have not finished; projects I want to start; things I want to change; things I want to stop doing; experiences I want to have; feelings I have not expressed; secrets I don't want to keep any longer.

Issues like these can be like anchors that keep us from getting our lives underway. It is important to take care of the dead weight in our lives that not only takes up our energy, but also holds us back from experiencing life to its fullest. Even though our youth may reflect blunders and our adulthood struggles, our mature years do not have to be programmed for regret. Here are some suggestions for pulling up the anchors in our lives. First, make a commitment to regularly do things for others. Second, develop abilities to listen, be nurturing and connected to others. Third, seek to be more kind, generous, and giving to others. Fourth, when bothered by something we did make a list of steps we need to take to make it right and start doing them one small step at a time to rectify the situation. Fifth, admit we were wrong and write a letter to the other person taking responsibility for our own behavior, asking for forgiveness, and seek to make things right. In essence, the process of letting go of the past is through resolving issues, opening up our lives as well as reaching out and connecting with others and new life goals. May each of us experience fresh wind as we lift the anchors and set our sails in 2010.

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