Life without regrets? [1]

Dear Alice,

Do you believe in going from one relationship that did not work to another, without regrets? How come some people can change their lives without looking back? Is it possible to grow old without regrets?

J

Answer

Dear J,

What does "regret" mean to you? For many, to regret is to choose to feel badly about a past event: a decision made in haste, an opportunity not pursued, words spoken or not spoken, the course and outcome of a relationship. For some, regret comes about when it seems like if a different path had been taken, we could have spared ourselves, or someone else, unnecessary pain. It often comes with feelings of sadness, loss, or guilt about a wrong. In contrast, regret can be replaced by more positive emotions and actions, such as reflection and an opportunity to learn. Here is an example:

Past event: You just ended a six-month relationship because the two of you spent most of your time arguing about everything from what movie to see to what was said during your last argument. You both made an effort to coexist more peacefully, but, in the end, you just couldn't get along. After month one, you had an idea that the two of you were like oil and water, but you stuck it out because you're not too keen on being single.

The Regretter would think this way: I'm sorry I ever got into that relationship in the first place... I wasted six months of my life on something that I knew probably wasn't going to fly... If I had just listened to my instincts early on, I could have had five more months to find Mr./Ms. Right.

The Learned Opportunist would say: We worked hard for six months to get along more amicably... I'm far better now than I was back in May at asserting myself and compromising... and those first signs that the future of our union was bleak are reminders for me to pay more attention to my instincts the next time around.

Notice that the Regretter's lingo is littered with "would haves/should haves/could haves," while the Learned Opportunist focuses on the benefits of the experience with an eye on how to
improve future bonds. Could the Opportunist's "crime" be using the "power of positive thinking" a bit too much? Maybe. The Learned Opportunist can annoy us to no end, making us keenly aware of our inability to let go of things that didn't go the way we had hoped or planned. Suddenly it may feel like we're carrying regrets around like a sack of potatoes — sometimes without trashing them even long after they've rotted.

A healthy mix of both mental styles might be a comfortable combination. It seems impossible that anyone could truly pop into a new relationship without considering past ones? at least unconsciously. In fact, staying aware of what's worked and what hasn't in our pasts is one of the keys to improving skills and judgment. No regrets becomes a no-good attitude when it keeps us from learning from our mistakes, or it's used to weasel out of taking responsibility for one's actions. Many adopt this mindset, knowingly or not, to achieve their professional and personal goals, or, perhaps, because it's too difficult to deal with one's "weaknesses" and "mistakes" and how others are affected by what we say and do.

Although much of how we handle these situations is habitual (and perhaps based on what we've seen growing up,) it is possible to develop a balanced way of thinking about past life events. Talking with friends, a mentor, or older relatives, you can learn different approaches to use when confronted by two paths or the realization that "hind sight is 20/20".

Alice!
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