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MailOnline

Je ne regrette rien? As if! Why it's better to face up to your regrets

By [Lucy Taylor](#)

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Until recently I had a somewhat je ne regrette rien attitude to life. Yes, I'd taken risks over the years, personal and professional, and made plenty of mistakes.

But instead of dwelling on the roads not taken, I had held on to the belief that it's pointless, as the saying goes, to cry over spilt milk. Everything, I used to tell myself, happens for a reason.

But in the past few months, I've become fixated with the past: things I've done and wish I hadn't, and things I haven't done but wish I had. They range from what is apparently people's most common regret - I wish I'd paid more attention at school and chosen a different career path - to the more specific.



Reality check: Many people find they have more regrets when they reach the age of 40 as there seems to be less time to make amends for a bad career choice or relationship

I wish I hadn't quit that safe and secure job as a teacher for the more competitive, insecure world of journalism. I wish I'd behaved more confidently, less neurotically with previous boyfriends.

I wish I'd been wiser earlier. I wish my parents had pushed me harder. I wish I'd appreciated childhood more, that blissful relatively short period before fear, worry and self-consciousness all set in.

I wish I'd given that handsome doctor my telephone number, instead of smiling coquettishly and telling him I didn't give out my number (in the mistaken belief that pretending not to be interested was the way to a man's heart).

I wish I hadn't wasted so much of my life worrying about things so trivial I can no longer remember them. I wish I hadn't let mutual stubbornness end a long friendship.

And so on and so forth. I felt guilty about some of these and wondered whether it was my (first-time) pregnancy, with its almost extra-terrestrial high levels of hormones (it feels like puberty all over again), that was doing something strange to my brain as well as my body.

In addition, feeling so physically sick and tired has left me unable to do much other than lie on my sofa with too much time to think.

Then again, perhaps this fixation on 'what if' has nothing to do with my pregnancy and is just a symptom of ageing. I'm 39 and, although it's a cliché, it's also a truism that an existential crisis of some sort around the 40-year mark is not unusual.

'Insisting you have zero regrets can be a form of denial and a defence-mechanism - almost as if it is too frightening to look back with honesty'

I remember once reading that, until 40ish, most people assume that possibility and potential is unlimited. If one career doesn't work out, there's always time to retrain for another.

If a serious relationship ends, there are plenty more fish in the sea. If you have no savings or pension, it's not the end of the world. Likewise, there's time to learn that musical instrument, write that novel, become fluent in a foreign language, travel to all the places you've always longed to see, start that business.

But at 40ish, reality hits and those big dreams that sustained us suddenly seem a bit less achievable. The question is: is it better to deny the existence of regrets or is it healthier to acknowledge and face up to them?

In the past, the advice was to get over regrets and move on. But during the past decade-and-a-half psychologists have studied regrets - large and small, recent and distant - and how they affect people's well-being. They have found that people's self-perceptions - how good or bad they feel about themselves - are largely determined by how they feel about their past and what they anticipate for their future.

Studies have shown that ruminating on paths not taken is an emotionally corrosive exercise.

The common wisdom about regrets - that what hurts most is not what you did but what you didn't do - also appears to be true, at least in the long run. However, the research also shows that acknowledging regrets, though painful, can be a good thing and can serve an important motivational purpose.

Caroline Adams Miller is the author of *Creating Your Best Life* and a performance coach. She says it is normal, as one ages, for regrets to multiply for many people in many areas, from romances not pursued, regrets over not travelling more, having children young, or not speaking up for oneself.



© David Raymer/Corbis

No regrets? Pretending you're happy with every decision you've made could make you miserable (posed by model)

The important thing, she says, is whether a person uses their regrets to their advantage or ends up being consumed by them to their

detriment.

'We begin to create regrets around 19 or 20, according to the research,' she says. 'Because this is when we begin to choose things like professions and life partners.

'Making one choice means we could be giving up other options. We accrue regrets, large and small, as we age, but people handle them in different ways, which is where the toxicity comes in.

'If you pile up regrets about roads not taken, and you do nothing about it, you will age with less well-being than if you make a determined choice to set some goals and alter the course of your life.'

Although many of us tend to think that it is a waste of time to ponder our regrets, many experts believe avoidance can result in people carrying them as unconscious, but destructive, baggage.

So someone who has unacknowledged regrets about paths not taken may 'act out' - have an affair, for instance - in a futile attempt to improve their lives.

I know one woman who insists she has absolutely no regrets. Yet underneath her super-confident and self-assured facade is someone who has had numerous messy affairs and who often seems consumed with bitterness and anger.

Insisting you have zero regrets can be a form of denial and a defence-mechanism - almost as if it is too frightening to look back with honesty. I know this was certainly the case for me.

It was easier to tell myself I had no regrets and that everything happens for a reason, than it was to take responsibility for decisions and my life.

As Adams Miller says, she has never worked with, or known, anyone who didn't have some regrets about something.

She advises her clients to carry out a 'life review', assess regrets they are carrying and decide either to live with them and 'make meaning' of those choices with joy, or use the energy of the regrets to set goals with deadlines and accountability.

In the field of gerontology, which studies the social, psychological and biological aspects of ageing, researchers often ask people how they would reconstruct their lives if they could wave a magic wand.

But perhaps we shouldn't wait until we're picking up our pension to think about that question. Perhaps we should think about 'regrets in advance'.

WEDDED MISS

More than one in five married women say their greatest regret is marrying the wrong man

Pauline Kent, a PR director, says she has spoken to many women who worry about regretting the time they haven't spent with their children growing up and how it will make them feel later in life.

The mother-of-four says: 'I am beginning to regret I aspired to more than my parents. I had a lovely childhood and my parents are wonderful, supportive people. But my brother and I wanted to achieve more materially, and that comes at a price.

'It meant I had children in my 30s because I wanted a career and a nice house. Now I sometimes think I should down size, take the children to Disneyland and have more picnics in the park. I want to worry less and enjoy more. I also want my children to feel the way I do about my parents.'

This certainly chimes with me and I confess it was by considering 'regrets in advance' last year that I made some big changes.

Although I told myself I was relatively happy as a hard-working single woman, I fast-forwarded a few years into my mid-40s. I asked myself whether I thought I would regret not at least trying to settle down with a good man (rather than continuing to wait for the elusive Mr Perfect to turn up at my door) and have children.

The answer was a resounding yes. It wasn't quite the fairy tale I had spent my 20s and much of my 30s imagining, and I may be struggling with pregnancy. But despite those little regrets I mentioned earlier, I do find myself counting my blessings much more than I ever did before.

If I hadn't thought about 'possible future regrets in advance', I think I'd probably still be drifting along, waiting for fate to intervene, wave its magic wand and transform my life for me.

Adams Miller believes that carrying out a 'life review' and assessing regrets can act as a catalyst for people to change their lives. It can lead them to take control and to say: 'OK, from now on, I'm going to live my life in such a way that in five years' time I can look

back and not have any major regrets.'

In other words, it can be painful to face up to regrets. But the sooner they're acknowledged, the sooner you can make peace with them and endeavour to live the rest of life without regrets.

After all, the alternative could be lying on your death-bed, still ruminating on the 'what ifs' and 'if onlys'.

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I like stumbling across articles like this- very interesting. But do people really start looking for their life partners at 19 or 20?! Well written article and much food for thought.

- Angee, Coventry, 26/7/2010 09:48

Some of us didn't start looking at that age, but were lucky enough to come across them anyway!

- Kerry, Shipley, UK, 26/7/2010 21:08

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I am the same age as the writer and I totally understand what she is saying about regrets. Its normal though as long as you don't dwell on it. I try to be philosophical about it and live my life by the 'its in the past I cant change it' rule but sometimes it feels like a grieving process about certain events and choices made. Then weigh it all up and realise things aint half bad and you just got to get on with it!

- Elle, Belfast, 26/7/2010 18:33

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If I make the wrong decision once, I don't regret it. I mark it as a learning experience. If I make it twice over the same type of issue then I may feel regret but only over a lesson not learnt.

Regret stifles life. Realise that everyone makes mistakes and that they call it hindsight for a reason! Try to learn from the things you get wrong so that you get it right next time and yes, life does offer more than one opportunity to get things right.

It's learning to recognise an opportunity when you see it and not being so determined you've missed your only chance that you fail to see all the others life is persistently throwing in your direction!

I know this is easier said than done. I say it to remind myself as well as to share it.

- Ren, Birmingham, 26/7/2010 17:55

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. But do people really start looking for their life partners at 19 or 20?!

- Angee, Coventry, 26/7/2010 09:48

Yes, some of us do! I met my husband-to-be when I was 20, and I'm now 32.

- Sam, Burton, Staffs, 26/7/2010 13:20

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I believe that once you choose one path in life, in some way you are closing the door on another so inevitably one day you are going to start wondering where those other paths might have led. I'm 31 next week and already know that life isn't a fairytale and worry that in some ways I have already completely stuffed up my life by not always following my heart. I think there are things we'd all change in our lives if we could go back. But the good stuff I've done far outweighs the good stuff I might have done and I don't have any major regrets. Curiousities maybe but not regrets. Had I gone to university I wouldn't have all the fantastic jobs I've had & met those wonderful people; had I bought a house a few years ago or settled down with a partner I would probably have never gone travelling. I think if you truly make your life choices using your heart & gut feeling you'll end up with what you want.

- Lorraine, Manchester, 26/7/2010 12:18

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I like stumbling across articles like this- very interesting. But do people really start looking for their life partners at 19 or 20?! Well written article and much food for thought.

- Angee, Coventry, 26/7/2010 09:48

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