

“Think about your regrets,” says Miller. “Chances are, you regret the things you didn’t go after—not the things you tried but failed at.”

Whether you ditch the corporate job you hate (even though it pays well), leave a toxic marriage, or survive a death-defying travel adventure, breaking out of your secure, comfortable shell takes courage—but the ensuing gifts are priceless.

Get Off the Corporate Treadmill

After losing a friend to a tragic rollerblading accident, Monica Bhide of Washington, D.C., began to question everything in her life. “I felt like I had not accomplished anything I wanted to, and if I died, I would leave no mark—my family, my kids, my friends would have nothing to remember me by.”

She desperately wanted to write full-time, but she couldn’t justify giving up her six-figure salary as an engineer to pursue what her mother called a silly pipe dream. Studies show that such regrets lead to depression, low self-esteem, shorter life, and a compromised immune system. “If you hate your life or hate your job, you have to be feeling chronic stress and that’s associated with all kinds of health problems,” says Irene Levine, PhD, professor of psychiatry at New York University School of Medicine and author of the forthcoming book *The Myth of Best Friends Forever* (Overlook Press, January 2009).

Still, with an engineering degree and two masters degrees—one in information systems technology and the other in industrial systems—Bhide certainly wasn’t groomed to be a writer. The trick, claim experts, is to offset the toxicity of regrets by setting goals and going after them—which is exactly what Bhide did.

She had passion, persistence, courage, and drive. And her friend’s death made her realize she had to try to live her dream. So she quit her day job and within two months began writing full-time.

“My husband was instrumental in my move,” says Bhide. “He kept saying ‘Do it. You can always go back to engineering—it will always be there.’” But Bhide never needed to return to her corporate job. Before she knew it, she was churning out copy for such prestigious publications as *The New York Times* and *Bon Appetit*, *Food & Wine*, *Cooking Light*, and *Health* magazines. Her first cookbook *The Spice Is Right: Easy Indian Cooking for Today* (Callawind Publications, 2001) received wide acclaim as did her second, *The Everything Indian Cookbook: 300 Tantalizing Recipes—From Sizzling Tandoori Chicken to Fiery Lamb Vindaloo* (Everything Series, 2004). And now Bhide is hard at work on her third book.

“Study after study shows that the biggest risks are always accompanied by the biggest rewards,” says Miller. “Authentic self-esteem is only created and fostered when we do things that are hard.”

Bhide was lucky her husband supported her journey. For some women, making a transformation actually requires expelling people from their lives.

Lose Toxic Friends

The key to success, claim experts, is surrounding yourself with people you admire and respect—especially when it comes to your inner circle. So when Theresa Miraglia of Seal Beach, California, decided to pursue her dream of designing baby clothes she ended up re-evaluating her relationships.

“Whether your friends have a proactive, positive mindset can spell the difference between indecision and success,” says Miller. “And friends who encourage you to replay your successes with them can help you prolong your happiness”—and that may motivate you to pursue your goals more vigorously.

Miraglia was pregnant with her daughter Violet when she decided to pour her energy into designing baby clothes. She was sick of the never-ending rows of froufrou baby bibs and blankets decorated with princesses—and wanted to create fashionable baby garb (think hip couture). The caveat: she had never sewn a stitch in her life.

At first, Miraglia’s husband Brian was supportive of her new venture and encouraged her to design for a big company. Her friends were also pushing her to go commercial. So, she took their advice and signed with a major clothing design company. Not only did the company change her designs, but she knew she couldn’t keep up with the demand and still have quality time with Violet.

“My goal for this business was always to build something that I could grow with my daughter—something that was all my own,” says Miraglia. And MiniManiacs was born.

Her new company blossomed and ultimately garnered celebrity attention (A-list clients include Gwen Stefani, Rosanna Arquette, and drummer Travis Barker from Blink-182). But the more successful she became and the more passionate she felt about her work, the more resentful, jealous, and insecure her husband felt. “He wasn’t proud of me,” says Miraglia. “He was threatened.” Eventually, the marriage dissolved and Miraglia forged new friendships with people who believed in her talent and designs.

“Toxic is toxic, whether it’s your husband or your neighbor,” says Miller. “You may have to separate physically from spending time with certain people or taking calls. Even brief encounters can temper your progress.”

Her advice: Talk with other women who have gone through similar dynamics and who can be your role models. And don’t listen to people who insist that you need to forgive harder, or say something to put the burden back on you. “The bitter truth is that there are a lot of people who are so unable to love and be happy that they will do anything to prevent those around them from succeeding,” she says.

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