

A new study on the psychology of persistent regrets can teach you how to live now

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Lingering regrets, the kind you hang onto for years, can be great company, returning daily to keep some part of you living an alternate version of your life and career. They're the stuff of sublime tragic [novels](#) and [films](#). They can even be functional if they propel you forward, determined not to make the same mistakes again.

Intuitively, though, we know that left to fester, regrets can control your mood to ill effect and make you miserable.

The solution is not to repress the thoughts or take on some kind of delusional “no regrets” bravado, says Shai Davidai, a psychology professor at The New School and co-author of [a recent study on regret](#). Instead, he argues, we're better off digging into our oldest woes and becoming acquainted with their nature, and the nature of our response to them.

Davidai's latest study, conducted with Cornell psychologist Tom Gilovich, builds on a body of existing research about the types of regrets that have incredible staying power, namely those about what we *could have done*, not what we *did do* wrong. Although we experience both sorts, studies have found that across cultures and demographics, it's regrets about inactions that haunt more of us for long periods. So you're more likely to feel achy about never auditioning for that performing-arts school as a teenager, or never joining the Peace Corps, than you are to regret a bad real-estate move or a nightmare job that you took.