

‘No Regrets’ Is No Way to Live

February 02, 2022

“No Regrets.” It’s an alluring motto, a handy recipe for success and satisfaction. Reject the pain of looking backward, revel in the pleasure of dreaming forward, and the good life will ensue.

Little wonder that this simple maxim transcends political and cultural divides. The Rev. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale —Christian, conservative, mentor to Republican presidents—urged his followers to drop the very word “regret” from their vocabularies. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg —Jewish, liberal, appointee of Democratic presidents—concurred. “Waste no time on...regret,” she counseled in her 2016 book, “My Own Words.” Jazz legend Ella Fitzgerald recorded a song called “No Regrets” in 1968—as did country star Emmylou Harris in 1989 and rapper Eminem in 2020. Some people endorse this world view so deeply that they tattoo the two-word credo on their bodies.

Yet for all its intuitive appeal, the “No Regrets” approach is an unsustainable blueprint for living. At a time like ours—when teenagers are battling unprecedented mental-health challenges, adults are gripped by doubt over their financial future, and the cloud of an enduring pandemic casts uncertainty over all of our decisions—it is especially counterproductive.

For the last three years, I have examined several decades of research on the science of regret. At the same time, I have collected and analyzed more than 16,000 individual descriptions of regret from people in 105 countries who responded to my online survey invitation. One of them was Abby Henderson, a 30-year-old Arizonan, who wrote: “I regret not taking advantage of spending time with my grandparents as a child. I resented their presence in my home and their desire to connect with me, and now I’d do anything to get that time back.” Rather than shut out this regret or be hobbled by it, she altered her approach to her aging mother and father and began recording and compiling stories from their lives. “I don’t want to feel the way when my parents die that I felt about my grandparents of ‘What did I miss?’”

...