

9 Most Common Regrets of the Living and Dying – and What to Do About Them

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Recently, I was combing around the Internet in search of trending news but ended up landing on a blog post written by an Australian palliative care nurse, Bronnie Ware. Its message was not in the least late breaking, but it will be forever timely, so I'm resurfacing it here.

In spending time with patients during the last three to 12 weeks of their lives, Ware gleaned vital insight into the concerns and regrets of those faced with imminent death.

Here are the **core regrets** as she describes them in her [Inspiration and Chai](#) blog.

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.

This was the most common regret of all. When people realize that their life is almost over and look back clearly on it, it is easy to see how many dreams have gone unfulfilled. Most people had not honored even a half of their dreams and had to die knowing that it was due to choices they had made, or not made.

It is very important to try and honor at least some of your dreams along the way. From the moment that you lose your health, it is too late. Health brings a freedom very few realize, until they no longer have it.

2. I wish I didn't work so hard.

This came from every male patient that I nursed. They missed their children's youth and their partner's companionship. Women also spoke of this regret. But as most were from an older generation, many of the female patients had not been breadwinners. All of the men I nursed deeply regretted spending so much of their lives on the treadmill of a work existence.

3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.

Many people suppressed their feelings in order to keep peace with others. As a result, they settled for a mediocre existence and never became who they were truly capable of becoming.

4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.

Often they would not truly realize the full benefits of old friends until their dying weeks and it was not always possible to track them down. Many had become so caught up in their own lives that they had let golden friendships slip by over the years. There were many deep regrets about not giving friendships the time and effort that they deserved. Everyone misses their friends when they are dying.

5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

This is a surprisingly common one. Many did not realize until the end that happiness is a choice. They had stayed stuck in old patterns and habits. The so-called "comfort" of familiarity overflowed into their emotions, as well as their physical lives. Fear of change had them pretending to others, and to their selves, that they were content. When deep within, they longed to laugh properly and have silliness in their life again.

Regrets of the Living

In a post for Psychology Today regarding [commonly held big regrets](#), Ilan Shrira, a social psychologist at Loyola University in Chicago, summarizes a review of a number of earlier studies in which participants were asked to describe their biggest life regret. Regrets were organized by category and these were the top ones:

1. Education. *These regrets came in one of two forms. People regretted either: a) not getting enough education, or b) not applying themselves more in school.*

2. Career. *As the second most common domain, people regretted that they didn't pursue the career they really loved. Instead, they chose a career path that was more practical, or one that would pay better. They knew early on what kind of work they felt passionate about, but it just seemed too risky to pursue.*

3. Romance. *These regrets took a variety of forms, such as marrying the "wrong" person, not putting more effort into their marriage, doing something to hurt their partner or letting someone special slip away.*

4. Parenting. *One of two kinds here: For the first, some parents wished they had spent more time with their children while the children were young. These parents felt they had put too much time and energy into other pursuits, like work.*

A second, very different kind of regret was that parents wished they'd postponed having their first child for just a few years longer — they regretted having children too early.

Shrira draws this important conclusion: "Regrets that loom larger often grow out of a series of behaviors (or lack of behaviors) over a long period of time. For example, continually neglecting to call the brother you're holding a grudge against; or the hundreds of times you could have spent with your children but didn't; or the thousands of times you put off schoolwork to do something else."

The writer reminds us that it's critical to "slow down and reassess what you're actually doing, to question whether your behavior isn't part of a larger pattern you'll someday regret."

10 Things I'm Going to Start Doing Now

Both Ware and Shirra suggest that we can make better choices now, before it's too late. Here's what I'm going to start doing today:

1. Sit less at my computer. Move more. Stand, walk, climb stairs. And if I'm smart, I'll get a device that helps count my daily steps.
2. Seek out the silver lining in all that impacts me and frequently give voice to my positive discoveries.
3. Speak less, listen more.
4. Spend more time with family. And not just in person — on the phone (calls and texts), Skype, email and Facebook.
5. Express more appreciation, love and respect — in actions and words.
6. Take notice of all aspects of my surroundings. To that end, hit "pause" more often and look deeply. Snap and send photos of interesting and lovely things to others, by email or text.

7. Eat far, far less. In a restaurant, ask for a take-out container and shift half of the food on the plate into it before I begin eating. Remind myself that get-togethers with friends and loved ones do not need to revolve around food.
8. Every time a worry pops into my head about something that hasn't yet materialized, dwell instead on what is presently going well.
9. Read more books, both old titles and new ones.
10. Trim a few dollars off each flexible category of expense in my budget, and expand the savings category by that amount.

What are your top regrets and what steps will you take to diminish or resolve them?

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