

# Woulda, Shoulda, Coulda



## Overcoming Regret in Your Life

By Larina Kase PsyD, MBA

Do you suffer from a sense of regret about the past? Do you feel your present life has been profoundly shaped by actions you did or didn't take? Have you ever said to yourself, "I wish I would have..." "I really should have..." "If only I could have..."

We have all made mistakes. We have regretted a choice, gave up a dream, or had unfortunate things happen to us, and then later, experienced the nagging and draining feeling of regret.

Regret is a sense of loss, disappointment or dissatisfaction. It is a feeling of remorse for an act or omission. In general, if you live with regret, you always think of what you would have, should have, or could have done differently.

Regret is one of the most difficult of all emotions because it's based on self-blame. When you experience regret, you feel disappointed, unhappy, remorseful, guilty, or frustrated. The hallmark, though, is that you feel a sense of personal responsibility. We don't usually regret something that we feel we couldn't control. It's that sense of "blaming ourselves" that creates the sting of regret.

### 7 Common Causes of Regret:

1. Acts you committed, but wish you hadn't.
2. Acts you didn't commit, but wish you had.
3. Acts others committed, that in some way, you feel responsibility for.
4. Acts others didn't commit, that in some way, you feel responsibility for.
5. Acts of fate or circumstances, that in some way, you feel you could have changed.

6. Inevitable losses, that in some way, you feel you could have prevented.

7. Comparisons that you make, where you don't measure up.

Some of us let these negative self-blaming events overwhelm us to the point that we cannot move happily into our futures. The good news is that you can overcome regret. Recognizing and changing negative thought patterns will help rid you those crippling regrets.

### Take Action

People report that the #1 cause of regret is that they *didn't* go after something important to them. They regret not having tried. Examine the regrets you have and take action, where possible. If you regret not traveling when you were younger, then travel now. If something was important to you in the past, ask yourself, is it still important now? If not, let the old regret go. If so, take action. While you may find it necessary to modify your old dreams, based on your present reality, you may also find the new version of your dream is even better than before!

### Make Friends with Failure

Failures are a common cause of regret. Interpretation is everything. If you fail and then tell yourself, "I should never have done that," or "I could have done so much better," then you will experience regret. Instead, make friends with your failure, and see it as a stepping stone, rather than a dead end street. Visualize

your failure as a stepping stone and ask yourself what is the next step you should take in order to move forward. Ask yourself what lessons you can learn from the experience and how they can help you to become more successful.

### Train Your Brain

Regret is a choice. You can choose not to live in regret. The idea is to train your brain. From a young age, if you learned to feel guilty and regret your choices, you'll have to do some serious reprogramming of your thoughts and interpretations. This is like getting ready to run a marathon when you've never run a block. It is possible, but it will take effort, patience, and persistence.

### Don't "Should" On Yourself

One of the brain games you'll have to overcome is the "shoulding game." The word "should" is closely linked with regret, guilt, and sadness. The first step to stop "shoulding" on yourself is to catch yourself doing it. Every time you hear yourself say you "should" or "shouldn't" do something, write it down. Spend a week simply keeping track of the "shoulds". Once you're aware of your should-triggers, commit to changing them. Next time you give yourself the "shoulds", immediately challenge them. If you say, "I should have known that this would take longer than I thought," respond by saying to yourself, "Would I really have known that? Did I estimate the time based on something reasonable?"

Don't accept your "should" thought at face value; challenge it! Each time you question a "should" you become less susceptible to them. They lose their power over you and over time, you'll stop "shoulding" on yourself.

### Focus Forward

Focus on what you want, and what you can do in the current moment, rather than on past mistakes. When you experience regret, you are caught in the past. You're focused on what you should have done differently, and this is rarely helpful. The only way it is ever helpful is if you can learn from your mistakes and use them to propel yourself forward. To do this productively, write down the objective data you learned from the situation and alternative options or paths you can go down in the future. If you didn't achieve the outcome you wanted, don't let that stop you from continuing to focus on that desired outcome. Visualize success. See it and feel it as if it has already happened. This will focus your mind, energy, and behaviors on where you want to go rather than where you have been.

### No Second Guessing

A quick and easy way to overcome regret is to ask yourself, "Did I make the best decision given the information I had available to me at the time?" We all know that hindsight is 20/20, yet we continue to torture ourselves for not having better foresight at the time that we made the decision. Give yourself a break and recognize that you did not know then what you know now. One of my clients, a stock broker, told me that he constantly regretted his actions when he made the "wrong" banking decisions. I asked him, "Did you research the stocks before recommending them to your clients?" He responded, "Yes, of course." "Then what else could you have done?" "I guess nothing," he realized.

### Could You Really Have Done Better?

When we regret a situation, it's common to say to ourselves, "I could have done better." There are three ways to deal with that nasty "coulda" thought:

1. Recognize that the world is not perfect. Ask yourself if you could have done better, but only in a completely perfect and unrealistic world. Is it the type of situa-

tion where in a perfect world, when you've had three healthy meals and nine hours of sleep, and had all day to relax and prepare, you could have done better? In a perfect world maybe, but we don't live in a perfect world!

2. Learn to accept that you did the best you could, and that maybe you couldn't have done better. This approach is not to put you or your abilities down. Instead, it helps you recognize that many situations are beyond our control. Any time a situation involves other people, your control over the situation decreases considerably. Most interactions with others cannot be predicted or influenced. What you say and do at that moment, influences what the other person says and does, and vice-versa.

3. Determine whether it is true that you can do better, and if so, realistically, how can you get better prepared for next time? Do you need more information, improved skills, greater support, or other resources to help you advance?

How does this work, practically? Let's say that you were training for a marathon and wanted to break a certain time to qualify for the Boston Marathon. You finish 20 seconds shy of the time you needed. This is an extremely frustrating situation. It's ok to feel disappointed and upset. The problem comes in when you say, "I could have run just a few more times to be in better shape. I could have eaten better yesterday and gone to sleep before the evening news instead of after it! I could have trained on a few more hills...."


To use the first (perfect world) approach to reduce regret about the race

results, you first tell yourself, "Yes, if I could control every little variable including the speed of the wind and the cramp in my leg, I could have run faster, but it is not a perfect world and I finished with a fantastic time."

Using the second approach, you ask yourself whether or not it is really true that you could run better. If you stuck to your training schedule and ran better than you ever had before, then celebrate how great you did!

Using the third approach, assess the course and where you lost time. If running downhill was more difficult than you anticipated, you can add some more downhill runs to your training schedule.

Regrets are a part of life and everyone has them. It is time to drop the woulda, shoulda, coulda, and move forward. While it's good to learn from history, don't dwell on it. Focus on the present and the future. Worry only about things over which you have direct control. Live in a way to reduce regret. Accept your mistakes and use failures to your advantage. Most importantly, challenge any thoughts that lead to regret and disappointment.

Twenty years from now, you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do, than by the ones you did do... so go and explore, dream and discover without regret. 

**Larina Kase PsyD, MBA** helps professionals and executives to achieve their greatest goals so they can live and work with no regrets. For free resources to help you achieve success, visit [www.pascoaching.com](http://www.pascoaching.com)



**"It's okay to mix peas and corn,  
but don't call it 'porn'."**