

R is for Regret



THE DOCTOR IS IN
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Maayan Hoffman's July 2 Magazine column, titled "G is for Guilty," grabbed my attention, as I definitely could relate.

In general, I try to encourage my clients to reframe guilt into regret whenever possible, because at the very least it's kinder and more forgiving of oneself when looking both back at a situation or forward to future events.

Guilt implies intentionality or purposeful behavior that results in pain or injury for someone else and often involves self-criticism. Regret is a result of something being done inadvertently or over which you had little control. It frequently causes distress or harm to someone else as well, but typically you wish you had done something about it to change it. Guilt is often more difficult to bear, tends to weigh you down, and is often accompanied by an inability to let go and move forward.

The article was subtitled "What it's really like to be a working mother." When we were blessed to have our first child, I essentially went off to the delivery room with my briefcase in hand and, as I waved goodbye to my boss, commented that I would be back in 12 weeks to my full-time work (our maternity policy at the time) as an academic in a teaching hospital/university and in private practice. He somehow seemed less convinced than I was that this would be the case.

As the time to return got closer, we agreed to an arrangement whereby I'd return to work earlier, at nine weeks, for three days each week, in order to extend my maternity leave.

When the time came, however, to end my leave, I could not imagine it and never returned officially to full-time work "outside the house." Nursing my baby until 19 months, I was grateful for a somewhat more flexible work schedule, years before it was in vogue. I brought work home under the delusion that I would have a child who slept and lots of quiet moments.

Even without working outside the house full-time, it was often hard to feel like I was on top of my game as either a clinical psychologist or as a mom. When in one place, I was aware of what I felt I might be "neglecting" at the other. It was a delicate balancing act that I never mastered well.

I decided that the image of a supermom who could have and do it all, in the manner in which I might have hoped – combining work and motherhood, successfully – was a myth. So I did what I could to make peace with lack of perfection and learned to appreciate that perfect just doesn't exist. It was indeed a challenge I would always need to work on. My respect for the stay-at-home parent or the mom who combined both nursing and work quadrupled.

In retrospect, I never regretted a thing, other than wishing that society offered more reasonable options. Our kids benefited from my working, and if my career advancement was impacted, that, too, was okay. One has to redefine for oneself what having it all really means.

AS AN adult child, I worked hard to change my guilt about the one real regret I had with my mom. Three years in a row, I turned down her wonderful invitation



I ESSENTIALLY went off to the delivery room with my briefcase in hand.
(ergonofis/Unsplash)

to go to a mother-daughter dinner and fashion show at her synagogue. I was either nine months pregnant or had sick kids at home. She then became unwell, and died the following year. Several years later, when I finally went with my daughter, the "asimon" dropped" and my pain was profound. My mom had wanted nothing more than to show off her daughter, as she was so proud, and in seeing it entirely from my perspective, I had deprived her of that moment.

I wish that things had been different and I could turn the clock back. In the 35 years we had together as mom and daughter, that was my one big regret.

I do believe that things happen for a reason, and I learned much from that moment. I hope that in the balancing act of life, the suggestions below are helpful for you.

1. We may not be able to change the event that happened, but we can change how we choose to see it and what we choose to do about it.

2. Don't put off for tomorrow what you can do today. You may just not get a second chance.

3. Ask yourself how you will feel in three or five years if you do or don't do "X". If there might be any regret about a decision, or if at a later time you may wish that you had thought about it differently, then think twice now. As an example: deciding whether to have a child.

4. In general, I believe that we usually regret only the things we don't do, and not what we do do.

I flew halfway across the world to be at a friend's wedding for 48 hours. We made aliyah. If I had weighed the pros and cons in these decisions logically, I may not have done either. I am so glad we did what we did.

Don't be afraid to act with your heart on some things. There is more to life than making a "rational" decision. Asking yourself whether you would make the same choice again is a good way to look back and appreciate what you did.

5. There are at least two sides to every story. Before you ascribe blame to someone else, give them the benefit of the doubt and try to cross the bridge into their world in order to see and hear it from their perspective.

This is not an easy thing to do when you may be hurting very deeply. However, you might be quite surprised to discover that from their vantage point the situation that you had imagined may be seen very differently.

While it may feel easier to carry around hurt and anger instead, it can be quite destructive for you and any relationship. By talking the situation through, you may be better able to let it go and move on in a healthier way. Never be afraid to say you are sorry.

6. Evaluate your life and your goals from time to time. How would you like others to see you? Are you able to be your own best friend? Can you change things that you have done that you regret? Can you make amends for your guilt?

7. Step outside your comfort zone and in doing so put someone else first. Comment on something you liked, ensure you wear your mask inside, check to see how someone is feeling and do things for others that you might not otherwise, and see how it feels. You might be surprised by where it takes you.

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