Exploring Regret and How We Relate to It

We all carry moments we wish had gone differently: things we did not say, chances we did not take, or goals we were not able to meet. While we cannot rewrite the past, we *can* learn from it, grow through it, and use it to guide the choices we make next.

Regret is a multi-step cognitive process of mentally "time traveling" to compare a past decision with an alternative, often unlikely or even false possibility of a counterfactual outcome.

The Purpose of Regret

Rather than being a harmful emotion to avoid, regret is a universal and valuable human experience. By confronting regret, listening to its signals, and learning from the process, we can improve our emotional intelligence, decision-making, problem-solving, and negotiation skills.

The Process of Regret

1) **Telling a story about the past:** Recounting an actual event and the decisions made.
2) **Inventing a new story about an alternative past:** Imagining what could have happened if a different choice was made.
3) **Comparing the two stories:** Realizing that the alternative past would have yielded better results.

The Four Types of Regret

- **Foundation Regrets**
    - Regrets about small, cumulative decisions or actions (or inactions) made early in life that have negative consequences later, such as not saving enough money or neglecting one's health.
- **Boldness Regrets**
    - Regrets arising from missed opportunities, when individuals chose to play it safe instead of taking a chance.
- **Moral Regrets**
    - Regrets about making choices that were dishonorable or wrong.
- **Connection Regrets**
    - Regrets about the failure to build or maintain strong, meaningful relationships with others.

The Three-Step Process to Transform Regret Into a Tool for Growth

1) **Inward: Practice Self-Compassion**

   Kindness, Not Contempt: Start by treating yourself with the same warmth and understanding you would offer a friend. It is easy to criticize yourself for past mistakes. Recognize that regret is a normal human emotion, and self-compassion helps to neutralize the harsh self-judgment that often accompanies it.

2) **Outward: Talk or Write About It**

   Relieve the Burden: Put your regret into concrete words. By doing so, you make the feeling less overwhelming and easier to understand. According to research, this process of sharing your regret can build trust with others and deepen connections, even if you fear it might make you seem weak.

3) **Forward: Learn and Act**

   Extract a Specific Lesson: Ask yourself what you have learned from the experience, and more importantly, what you will do differently next time.

Potential Discussion Questions:

- How do you define regret, and what different forms can it take (according to Daniel H. Pink)?
- In what ways can regret shape how we understand our lives?
- Is there such a thing as *healthy* regret? What makes regret healthy or unhealthy?
- How can open conversations about regret make it less isolating or stigmatized?
- How do you accept regret or move forward?
- What role do perspective, self-compassion, and emotional intelligence (EQ) play in how we respond to regret?
- In what ways does regret differ from guilt, shame, or disappointment? How can EQ help us distinguish between them?
- How can we reframe regret from something heavy into something useful?

References:

1. Davis, Tchiki. How to Deal with Regret. Psychology Today.
2. Pink, Daniel H. *The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward*. Riverhead Books, 2022.
3. Suttie, Jill. How Regrets Can Help You Make Better Decisions. Greater Good Science Center.

Journal Prompt #1:
What is your biggest regret? Why do you regret it?

Journal Prompt #2:
What are the positive things that have occurred because of the decision(s) that led to your regret?

Journal Prompt #3:
If faced with the same or similar decision again, what would you do differently? Do you believe a different decision would lead you to be happier than you are today?